

2005

Beta-Utopian Order

Teodor E. Mitew
University of Wollongong, tmitew@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mitew, Teodor E., Beta-Utopian Order 2005.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/1129>

Beta-Utopian Order

- [Teodor Mitew](#)
- [Respond to this Article](#)

Volume 7 | Issue 6 | Jan. 2005

1

Whenever a people can be mediatized, they are.
Paul Virilio

² In one of its most popular works – *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) outlines what it views as a major power shift characterizing the present, namely, the traditional public space – the street, has turned into ‘dead capital’. Borrowing from Guy Debord’s ideas on spectacular society, CAE theorizes that the spectacle has appropriated all, while power has mutated into a nomadic form of pure absence – ‘power itself cannot be seen; only its representation appears.’

³ To counter this, the activist movement must of course appropriate the same tactics of nomadic absence – eluding mediatization by the virtual power, staying below the radar and yet creating and altering the spectacle by poetic/symbolic acts of absence that will (hopefully) open cracks in the edifice of the monolith. Another strategy would be to perpetuate standard tactics of public space occupation where the _public_ is dispensed with, in favor of a virtual counterpart – the ‘controlled deployment of information’. In this Marxist scenario, the activist gains power by attaining control of the means of production of an elusive and virtual ‘semiotic power’ (16).

⁴ Thus, where Umberto Eco’s semiological guerilla warfare aimed to win the battle ‘not where the communication originates, but where it arrives’ (142), CAE argues that ‘no power base benefits from listening to an alternative message’(17), in effect abolishing the basic tool for communicating public dissent – the channeling of an alternative vision through some sort of public media. The reason for this is, according to CAE, twofold. First, when brought to its extreme, its power analysis leads it to believe that the capitalist means of production are nowadays virtual, and moreover, still worth seizing. Second, the spectacle inevitably appropriates all alternative public messages for its own uses, thus rendering oppositional movements powerless – ‘since mass media allegiance is skewed toward the status quo... there is no way that activist groups can outdo them’ (15).

⁵ As a consequence of this order, CAE argues for the subversive and the covert while preaching ‘abhorrence of public space as a theatre of action’ (25). A quasi-ontological beta-utopian order emerges, marked by the homogenous essence of all actors, including history, and their dissolution into power-bases interested in self perpetuation. The activist avant-garde is the only actor able to ‘maintain at all times a multi-dimensional persona’, thus not losing its own identity to a mediatized image. The avant-garde fights for the rights of the oppressed but is not and cannot be known to them – a force *ex nihilo*, an alter ego to the elusive power. The avant-garde of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD) is moreover predestined to be the eternal *significant other* of power. CAE’s vision of this struggle insists that ‘authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted’, therefore creating a dialectical condition of ever-shifting nomadic identities of resistance and oppression.

⁶ A more or less similar beta-utopian order is framed by Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey) in *A Network of Castles* – a quintessential text expanding on his earlier ideas of the Tong and the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) with regard to the virtual condition. Starting with the TAZ, Hakim Bey claimed its existence as utopia somewhere, preferably here and now, appearing and disappearing, a paradoxical identity without image, beyond the spectacle yet spectacular – in effect virtual. Similar to the ECD, the TAZ is built around the concept of staying below the radar of power and countering nomadic capital with nomadic dissent. The activist “nomadic war machine” conquers without being noticed and moves on before the map can be adjusted.’

⁷ The Tong in turn – a term borrowed from Chinese secret societies – is similar to the ECD’s avant-garde – an invisible-virtual activist force, united by a dissenting identity and ‘devoted not to one project but to an on-going “cause”’. Here beta-utopia is seen as a necessary edifice, what Bey calls ‘the legend of the Tong’, which creates meaning through its paradoxical absence/presence – it is not (as in *does not exist as an image*) but it *could* and *must* be taken as physically present.

The purpose of the Tong, like ECD's avant-garde, is to escape mediatization and thus sublimate a perfect identity free from desire: 'it will call a world into being – even if only for a few moments – in which our desires are not only articulated but satisfied.'

⁸ The virtual Tong can be implemented through a *Network of Castles* – existing on the border between the real and the virtual, inaccessible to power, 'rooted partly in the imaginaire...in the image of mysterious inaccessibility and danger.' In what presents itself as the synthesis of the TAZ and Tong, the *Network of Castles* is both physical utopia here and now, and a construct of perfectly fluid virtual identity, by nature inaccessible to mediatization. The Net is to elevate the TAZ and the Tong into a potent possibility to escape mediatization and thus be *real* again. The *Network of Castles* is the answer to the problem of virtual identity and real action. As Bey puts it – 'the tactical problem consists of the need (or desire) to stay ahead of representation – not just to escape it, but to attain through mobilization a relative invulnerability to representation.'

⁹ In effect, Bey sublimates from the virtual a physical reality without mediated desire. In this beta-utopian order of fluid (dis)appearance, the icon of the image is abolished, public space is exorcised from mediated desire and the void left by the spectacle presents itself as a fulfilled identity. Thus framed, the activist struggle against oppression looms as a utopian quest for the perfect self – a symbolic and aesthetic paradoxical order.

¹⁰ I consider the *ECD* and the *Network of Castles* to represent a desire for *beta-utopian* order, where *beta* stands for the discourse of an unfinished project, the pre-release that will test the waters for the real thing. A resolution to this order is by definition not supposed to come; utopia is now, in an eternal pre-release form, demanding eternal debugging. Utopian order is seen here as a virtual meta-narrative, thriving around an obfuscated central absence. This order can be also reconstructed as, paraphrasing Mark Dery, a modified 'ejector seat' condition, where instead of the utopian task of Cartesian mind escaping matter, virtual identity escapes desire. The imagined order of an unmediated space constantly re-created by unmediated acts is an expression of the need for an identity that is *real in itself*, beyond history. For, is it not that 'the fantasy of a social world free from mass media of any kind, ancient or modern, is really a fantasy about being free from desire, by being free from the fantasy space mass media create for collective desire'? (Wark 324).

¹¹ Isaiah Berlin outlines three pillars of utopian belief: that the central problems of humans are the same throughout history; that they are in principle soluble; and that the solutions form a harmonious whole (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty: 84). CAE's and Bey's beta-utopian order characteristically fulfills the first and the third condition, but drops the second. The clash with the oppressive spectacle is universal – in that sense history is homogenous. This clash however will never be solved and this condition precisely enables the harmonious existence of a fluid identity – the pure and eternal virtual dissent.

¹² In their *beta-utopian* order CAE and Bey create and obfuscate an *other*, their projects thrive around a central absence – the fleeing virtual capital, the hollow body of the State, the overwhelming spectacle. In this, they are inescapably modernist, struggling to escape the historical and touch the unperturbed *real*. 'The Modernist narrative establishes a process of liberation at the heart of history which requires at its base a pre-social, foundational, individual identity. The individual is posted as outside of and prior to history, only later becoming ensnared in externally imposed chains. The insistence on the freedom of the subject, the compulsive, repetitive inscription into discourse of the sign of the resisting agent, functions to restrict the shape of identity to its modern form' (Poster: 213-14). Indeed, history is viewed as a layer of oppressive power representations, ensnaring a primordial and foundational identity, which the dissenting activist, the TAZ and the ECD aim to rediscover. History is perceived to have turned into 'nothing more than a homogeneous construct that continuously replays capitalist victories' (17). The *real*, in contrast, is perceived to be marked by the titanic struggle of a liberation movement in opposition to power.

¹³ However, if the modernist project can be considered as an obfuscation of a central absence, the postmodern by comparison, exposes the arbitrary character of the object and its created, rather than found, relation to the subject. Postmodernism 'consists not in demonstrating that the game works without an object, that the play is set in motion by a central absence, but rather in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character.' (Wright: 41)

References

- Bey, Hakim. *A Network of Castles*. 1997. Available: <http://www.hermetic.com/bey/>. 21 June 2004.
———. "Temporary Autonomous Zones." 1992. *Autonopedia*. Available: <http://www.hermetic.com/bey/>. 21 June 2004.
———. *Tong Aesthetics*. 1997. Available: <http://www.hermetic.com/bey/>. 21 June 2004.

CAE. "Digital Resistance." 2001. *Autonopedia*. Available: <http://www.critical-art.net/books/>. 21 June 2004.

———. "Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas." 1996. *Autonopedia*. Available: <http://www.critical-art.net/books/>. 21 June 2004.

Dery, Mark. *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

Eco, Umberto. "Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare." *Travels in Hyperreality*. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Picador, 1987. 135-44.

Poster, Mark. "Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere." *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*. Ed. David Holmes. London: Sage, 1997. 212-25.

Rothstein, E., H. Muschamp, and M. Marty. *Visions of Utopia*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Wark, McKenzie. *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace*. Pluto Press, 1999.

Wright, Elizabeth. *The Zizek Reader*. Blackwell, 1999.

Citation reference for this article

MLA Style

Mitew, Teodor. "Beta-Utopian Order." *M/C Journal* 7.6 (2005). 29 Jun. 2011 <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0501/04-mitew.php>>.

APA Style

Mitew, T. (Jan. 2005) "Beta-Utopian Order," *M/C Journal*, 7(6). Retrieved 29 Jun. 2011 from <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0501/04-mitew.php>>.