

**Matteo Pasquinelli**

**An Assault on Neurospace**  
(Misguided Directions for)



We are implicit, here, all of us, in a vast physical construct of artificially linked nervous systems. Invisible. We cannot touch it.

William Gibson, *In the visegrips of Dr. Satan*

## 1. A libidinal geology of media spaces

What is the field that media art and media activism are meant to occupy today? What is the place of the creative act? From the modern utopias to movie and television imagery into the cyberspace of digital technologies, different kinds of **media spaces** populate contemporary history and produce each their own characters, conflicts, aesthetics and narrations. Quoting Michel Serres<sup>1</sup> we can say today: "we inhabit a multiplicity of media spaces". The present paper sketches out a short history of material and immaterial, political and psychic media spaces, wondering with Jameson: "why should landscape be any less dramatic than the Event?"<sup>2</sup>. According to Henry Lefebvre (author of the seminal *The production of the space*<sup>3</sup>) space is never a neutral background, but always the product of a social conflict. In that sense we want to study its invisible architecture, how our desires are invested in it, how new spaces are opened by new technologies, languages and practices. We would like to apply to media spaces what Lefebvre wrote in 1974, not without being accused of fetishism: "Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space". Today's place of political and artistic action is but a stratification of previous spaces, and we need a sort of a **geology of the invisible** to write its history.

We are aware that the first social impact of a given technology is to modify the "sense of place" and generate its own collective dimension (see Joshua Meyrowitz's research<sup>4</sup>). Recent history has been dominated by continuous revolutions and colonizations of the human biosphere by new species of devices and therefore our attention will focus on technological media spaces and how the creative act inhabits them. Witnessing the exodus of radical and innovative energies that had populated cyberspace during the last decade, we wonder whether they are gathering somewhere else. The space issue can never be separated from the field of forces and conflicts generating it: we do not want to use an Euclidean-Cartesian (or better, crypto-scientific) approach as certain media culture does, adopting unconsciously some kind of techno-determinism. Space is always traversed by a vital force, by a desire.

According to PoMo philosophers the West is living its libidinal sunset: a continuous haemorrhage emptying bodies and cities and leaving but relics and anaemic simulacra behind it (think about the "End of Grand Narratives", but also the crisis of democratic institutions or the death of the artwork as we used to know it). And after the crash of the new economy, crisis of net culture, impasse of the no-war movement, whoever scouts around for new subverting strategies against the post-9/11 new world (dis)order is told by philosophers like Žižek that there is no escape out of the Code. We are all part of ***homo sucker***<sup>5</sup>: he/she who believes to be the one manipulating indeed is the one being manipulated, he/she who believes to laugh at the dominant Ideology indeed is strengthening its egemony on himself/herself. And so on, from one dialectical impasse to another, exactly like situationists saw no escape from the paranoia of Spectacle or postmodernists from the End of History. In PoMo dialectical toys, on one hand the libidinal energy seems to dissolve itself into the phantasmagoria of consumerism, on the other hand it is condemned to spin around itself in the vicious circles of radicalism. The existential and political crisis of the West, then, is not due to a haemorrhage of vital energies only, but even to their confinement into self-referential circuits and spaces. Therefore we wonder if the debate itself on the western art and politics crisis is a prisoner of categories already evacuated by the energies of history. We want to investigate the spaces where new energies are expressing their existential angst, suspecting that there are new spaces being populated out of the radar of academic philosophy, institutional politics and art criticism.

## 2. The becoming-net of space

Utopias and religious sagas have often been based on the evocation of spaces radically *other*. Religion, as an intimate semiotic device, works on the projection of an after-life or a Promise Land (and the idea itself of a Soul points to a non-directly reachable interior space). Modern political **utopias**, indeed, have often been linked by direct genealogy to the ultra-mundane spaces of religion. On the more pragmatic level of history, capitalism was born privatizing collective space into enclosures, while Marxism claimed the end of private property to establish a new space, the **Common**, that does not represent a way back to the nature-state but opens a new dimension. The United States, far from European idealism, based their political engine onto the myth of the Far West.

In modern times the mythical spaces of power and religion have been followed by the psychic spaces of discipline and biopower. As Foucault<sup>6</sup> pointed out, biopolitics was born from a new knowledge of the body, that described new **physical and anatomical spaces** and let new technologies of power apply to them. Modern sexuality, for instance, has been linked to the interior space *conceived* by the Christian confession as a space of instincts and sins. Afterwards, at the beginning of the 20th century psychoanalysis introduces a new **topology of the mind**, articulated into the spaces of Id, Ego and Super-Ego.

The mass media revolution enabled people to translate religious and popular mythologies into a factual imagery made out of a serial and

ubiquitous repetition of images. It is the genesis of contemporary **collective imagery**. Movie stars from the 50s start to get hybridized with consumer goods and they are codified by Debord into the concept of the **Spectacle**, a concept with hegelian and totalitarian tinges. At first, the term **mediascape** meant the impact of big billboards on landscapes and skylines. Afterwards, it has been used for the whole of the media landscape, from press to radio and television, where information and entertainment could merge in the emotional hybrid called *infotainment*.

The internet revolution, the most important cultural event behind us, was predicted in the 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, where Gibson introduced the image of **cyberspace**. The virtual space of the net has been the most powerful mediatic, emotional, political space of the 90s, before being colonised by business. Over the last years, technological innovation has stepped from **virtual reality** to **augmented reality**, from the simulation of fictitious spaces to a concrete reality more and more filled with digital devices. More recently, we have faced the arrival of **locative media**<sup>7</sup>, "location-aware devices" that produce a particular kind of space as they know their position and that of other surrounding *smart objects*. We have heard as well about an *Internet of Things*, in relation to domotics, or radio chips (RFID) being applied to goods and objects. A **mixed reality** traverses all these fields. Quoting Wikipedia:

Mixed Reality was defined by Paul Milgram as the "merging of real and virtual worlds somewhere along the 'virtuality continuum' which connects completely real environments to completely virtual ones." It is a sliding scale of complete virtuality on one end (Virtual Environments) to complete reality on the other (the real world). Along this *Mixed Reality Continuum*, fields such as *Augmented Reality*, *Augmented Virtuality*, *Ubiquitous Computing* and *Wearable Computing*, can be placed.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary philosophical thought as well developed new models of space to cover the information society: from Teilard de Chardin and Pierre Levy's **noosphere** to **cognitive capitalism**<sup>9</sup> by Italian and French post-workerist thinkers (*postoperaismo*), knowledge and collective intelligence shape a second biosphere surrounding the whole human being. Spaces of ideas and information are often described as interwoven with to the space of signs and brand hypertrophy. It is not a coincidence that, in the same years the term cyberspace was conceived, John Sherry<sup>10</sup> introduced the concept of **brandscape** as a cultural space where semiologists and advertisers can finally meet up (and do business).

At the end of this brief overview we want to introduce two generic concepts. We define **networked space** the hybridisation of the mass media space with the space produced by network technologies. In the same way, we call **networked imagery** the hybridisation of mass imagery with internet imagery, a phenomenon that is part of our daily experience (from Abu Ghraib pictures scandal to Paris Hilton's hard videos, both jumping the gulf between the net and mainstream media). The networked environment born out by internet colonization of offline spaces transcends the concept of *mixed reality* to engage not only devices but also images, signs, sounds, brands, goods, prostheses, bodies. We can then introduce our concept of **neurospace**.

### 3. Neurospace as an immanent plane of desire

Close to the notorious pair *cyberspace* and *mediascape*, there is another family of concepts trying to arrange a spatial paradigm with respect to the dimension of desire and psyche, also called by Bateson "**ecology of mind**"<sup>11</sup>. As we have shown above, the issue of space cannot be separated from the field of desires and conflicts producing it: on the contrary, many technology-based approaches still consider space as a neutral background, an implicit and unconscious *a priori*. Within the history of **emotional spaces** we cannot forget concepts such as situation, drift, **psycho geography** and Unified Urbanism conceived by the Situationists in the 50's. But the spatial evolution we are following, indeed, has extended beyond the urban and architectural fields to establish the immaterial spaces of **mindscape** and **psychosphere**. Guattari claimed that "an ecology of the virtual is just as pressing as ecologies of the visible world"<sup>12</sup>. It is thanks to such an awareness that today we talk of an "ecology of media", the *Adbusters* magazine claims to be a "journal of the mental environment", and new strategies of media activism and cultural jamming<sup>13</sup> have been developed.

Starting from the 50's such terms as *mediascape* and *mindscape* have been overlapping and showing the unconscious and instinctive background of our relationship with mass media and collective imagery. Ballard's *The atrocity exhibition* is the ideal description of the symbiosis between **mindscape**, **landscape**, **mediascape**.

Dr Nathan limped across the drainage culvert, peering at the huge figure of a dark-haired woman painted on the sloping walls of the blockhouse. The magnification was enormous. The wall on his right, the size of a tennis court, contained little more than the right eye and cheekbone. He recognized the woman from the billboards he had seen near the hospital - the screen actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Yet these designs were more than enormous replicas. They were equations that embodied the relationship between the film actress and the audience who were the distant reflections of her. The planes of their lives intersected at oblique angles, fragments of personal myths fusing with the commercial cosmologies. The presiding deity of their lives the film actress provided a set of operating formulae for their passage through consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Ballard's vision is not that hallucinatory after all: just think of the gigantic advertising hoardings that cover some of our city buildings with superhuman-size celebrity endorsements.

Even the original definition of **cyberspace** itself was deeply connected to a *neuro* dimension. First, according to Gibson *cyberspace* is not a virtual reality but a space of metadata: "A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system"<sup>15</sup>. Around that information space or **metaspace** a "consensual hallucination" rises up, i.e. something at the same time more abstract and more physical than a computer-simulated reality. *Cyberspace* is inserted into bodies and nervous systems of Gibson's characters: it is already a **neurospace** (in his novels altered states of mind caused by synthetic drugs cannot be distinguished from the experience of *cyberspace*). In his 2002 Vancouver talk *In the visegrips with Dr. Satan*, Gibson finds again the best words to shape a post-*cyberspace* age. *Cyberspace* is quite physical indeed:

The electrons streaming into a child's eye from the screen of the wooden television are as physical as anything else. As physical as the neurons subsequently moving along that child's optic nerves. As physical as the structures and chemicals those neurons will encounter in the human brain. We are implicit, here, all of us, in a vast physical construct of artificially linked nervous systems. Invisible. We cannot touch it.<sup>16</sup>

In last Gibson's books, cyberspace carries on its evolution crossing the boundaries of technological biosphere and engaging the **star system** in *Idoru*<sup>17</sup> (rock star Rez is meant to marry Rei Toei, the most popular musician in Japan, that doesn't exist, as she is an *idoru*, "an artificial celebrity creation of information software agents" designed to perform music in concerts) and the **brandscape** in *Pattern Recognition*<sup>18</sup> (Cayce Pollard is a coolhunter with an intuitive gift for telling whether any logo will be a commercial flop, the downside of her sensitivity is an allergic reaction to logo overexposure).

Contemporary criticism is persuaded that media spaces are based on the mirror model representation: Debord's Spectacle or Gibson's cyberspace would be but an iconic simulation of reality. On the contrary, we believe that the representative paradigm should be abandoned to consider media spaces as a direct extension of body (as McLuhan<sup>19</sup> already did). By the term **neurospace** we want to mean the evolution and integration of previous media into a **networked space** where collective and individual nervous systems are deeply linked each other through a high-density *connective tissue* made of devices, signs, images, objects, data, prostheses. The prefix *neuro* is for the connection of technological networks with the nervous system network, whose terminals can be devices, brands, goods, images, material or immaterial objects (as in the **schizophrenic body** Deleuze and Guattari depict in *Anti-Oedipus*<sup>20</sup>). The neurospace is the contemporary short-circuit between collective and individual mind: it is also the field of paranoid and identitarian investments, where individual desires gather and turn into power.

The neurospace shows up clearly when old media *mass* imagery merges new media *networked* imagery to shape a **connective imagery**. From Abu Ghraib pictures spread out on the net to amateur porn videos Paris Hilton uses to shape her stardom, we are entering a sort of *interactive collective imagery*. The net is extending its rhizomic roots and make a network of everything it meets: images, devices, goods, brands and so on. We refer to neurospace as an extension of traditional network into an augmented space: from internet to locative media to augmented reality, not only devices but also simulacra and brands become "partial objects"<sup>21</sup> of a networked environment. In this way, the neurospace stratifies the history of space seen above: cyberspace, augmented reality, locative media, infosphere and Spectacle (i.e. infotainment), noosphere and brandscape, mass and net imagery, and of course mediascape, mindscape, landscape. The neurospace is more a schizo-analytical than a technological space, embracing the semiotic dimension (information), the cognitive dimension (collective knowledge and intelligence), the prosthetic dimension (technology), the iconic dimension (media and spectacle), the biopolitical dimension (bodies and libidinal investments).

Neurospace is not a neologism, it is a common metaphor across neurosciences. Used for the first time by the artist Vladimir Muzhesky, Geert Lovink pointed it out to Peter Lamborn Wilson for his paper titled *Cybernetics and Entheogenics: From Cyberspace to Neurospace*<sup>22</sup>, a short history of psychedelic culture culminating in the neurospace as “a second psychedelic revolution, a dialectic of re-embodiment as opposed to the tendency toward false transcendence & disembodiment in cyberspace”. In the age of digital revolution we have been witnessing the eclipse of body and desire in favour of the exaltation of the cognitive experience. But now we face an exodus of the energies invested before in the digital realm. Where are they going to? The desire condensed on the net starts to colonise spaces out of the net. It’s the post-internet generation that applies the net brainframe to politics and art, to the off-line spaces, to previous analogic practices. It’s not an anti-technology attitude but a post-technology attitude. After the work of mourning for the cyberspace utopia, a new experience of space is rising.

#### **4. Forms of life in the neurospace: new political animals.**

Imagining a new space of action for art and activism means to trace new and probably wrong directions, because we don’t have a techno-determinism to trust under our feet. We head for the neurospace like Hunter Thompson<sup>23</sup> and Dr. Gonzo on their convertible towards Las Vegas with the boot full of psychedelics. *Gonzo-philosophy*. From that perspective the matrix of neurospace has not the appearance of digital geometry, nor of fashionable biopolitics, but of **zoopolitics**, that is not about the power on life but about *political animals* capable of independent existence. This time we are not interested in taking measures of power *dispositifs* but in watching how autonomous forms of life create their own vital room and reproduce themselves.

The neurospace is a **biosphere** populated by strange organisms. It is time again to consider mediascape as an extension of human biosphere and recognise its figures as embodiments of our animal instincts. The *neuro* prefix here does not mean ‘network’ but the nervous system of contemporary man immersed in a jungle of stimulations. The genetic engineering of advanced capitalism, indeed, has already populated the neurospace with its own Franksteins: movie stars becoming detergent brands, anthropomorphic goods climbing skyscrapers as a King Kong, anatomical details cannibalising tv screens more than a global war, robots replacing pets, TV actors doing politics and politicians playing in TV serials. Looking better we can distinguish zones of turbulence and resistance: radical pop stars built bottom-up and videogames used as (bio)political weapons. A method to map the neurospace is right that one of following experimentations by the most radical social avant-gardes. Space is renewed by conflict, Lefebvre remembers us. The new forms of media activism we want to introduce are pioneers in a space yet not explored by political theory, but well-known by capitalists, marketing and mass desire, that feed it since ever.

For instance, the movement of temp and precarious workers that every year organises the Euro May Day event ([www.euromayday.org](http://www.euromayday.org)) re-engineered the role of the leader and spokesman and created in Italy a new saint for the precariat: **San Precario** ([www.sanprecario.info](http://www.sanprecario.info)) is an open-source pop star that (as its forerunner Luther Blissett) merges archetypal figures of Italian collective imagery (saints) with the latest social figures (temp workers). After his triumph as the icon of the movement, San Precario generated in 2005 its anagram Serpica Naro, an Anglo-Japanese virtual stylist at the center of a historical hoax against Milano's Fashion Week, where she managed to get a catwalk and media coverage as a real stylist. **Serpica Naro** ([www.serpicanaro.com](http://www.serpicanaro.com)) was useful to condemn the conditions of precarious workers within Italian fashion industry, but especially to create an open meta-brand that any stylist from the "radical fashion" can use.

Serpica Naro is no Anglo-Japanese stylist officially listed for Milano's fashion week. Serpica Naro does not exist: everybody can be a stylist. Serpica Naro is the anagram for San Precario, radical patron of precarized temps. Serpica Naro is a metabrand. Serpica Naro is a generous version of the Trademark. Everyone who identifies with Serpica can be part of it. Serpica Naro is a place where alternative imagery, style and self-production, creativity and radicalism meet. Serpica Naro declares the end of the status and role of the fashionistas and their ideological creations. She asserts a social networking method and punctures a hole thru the fashion business by which you can express social production and conflict. Serpica Naro is an independent production of the senses, the opening of a public code opening, the collective liberation of skills and minds. Serpica Naro is a platform from building relationships, an open network constantly growing and thickening. Our grannies taught us how to knit without asking nothing for it in exchange. Serpica Naro is our new "collective granny" sharing her knowledge and experience on the needle trades. Serpica Naro is a website that expresses a precarious style lab, gathering selfmade production together so to enhance the sharing of work, knowledge and information. Existential instability and social precarity are turned into active resources are made part of a work in progress that pushes to us move and create new styles. Creativity and experimentation meet the agitation and representation of social conflict. Serpica Naro as metabrand of self-production is our way of declaring that the fashion week is over and the season of precarious conspiracy has started!<sup>24</sup>

Before Serpica Naro's masterstroke the Spanish collective **Yomango** ([www.yomango.net](http://www.yomango.net)) developed the concept and the idea of the *meta-brand*. They created the meta-brand Yomango (that in Spanish means "I steal") to hit the popular fashion chain Mango by shoplifting performances.

Yomango is a brand name whose goal is not the sale of products but lifestyles, just like with all the other big brands. However, in the case of Yomango, the lifestyle is based on shoplifting as a form of disobedience and direct action against multinational corporations. Just as the market captures desires, expectations and experiences and sells them back as products, the Yomango style promotes the "reappropriation" of what was once part of the commons.

In the field of brandscape as well we find **Guerriglia Marketing** ([www.guerrigliamarketing.it](http://www.guerrigliamarketing.it)), a Rome-based agency that follows the slogan "Fucking the market to enter it" rather than the moderate and social-democratic "Entering the market to fuck it". Guerriglia Marketing applies the media strategies developed by the global movement to marketing to create very unstable and radically uncorrect media hybrids. Such an agency was born to reclaim the innovation capital and the imagery produced by global movements that has been recuperating by corporation and big brands to upgrade their marketing strategies (see for instance the Diesel campaign after Genova G8). On the same level but by opposite means, the french collectives **antipub**<sup>25</sup> are active. They are anonymous and acephalous informal groups that jam billboards and any kind of outdoor advertising in french cities, as a form of protest and urban ecology for a new attention economy.

At the end of this short overview, among the media strategies of Euro May Day we put also **Molle Industria**<sup>26</sup> ([www.molleindustria.it](http://www.molleindustria.it)), a collective of game designers that produce "political games", where the typical shut'm'up narrativity, gender division and science fiction set of commercial games are deconstructed. For instance *Tamatipico* is a sort of Tamagotchi where the virtual pet is replaced by a temp worker. Instructions say: "Tamatipico Is Your virtual flexworker: He works, he rests and he has fun when you want him to! Raise his productivity but pay attention to his energy and his happyness because he could get injured or strike". The result is the videogame format as a brand new political language and the inscription of new social subjectivities and narrations into technology.

## 5. "People doing strange things with your nervous system"

San Precario moves into the space of popular imagery, Serpica Naro and Yomango into the fashion and shopping imagery, Molle Industria engages the Play Station generation, Guerriglia Marketing and the *antipub* assault brandspace and ad media. Well, are they really new forms of art and activism? Compared to american and european pre-internet counter-culture (from cultural jamming to neoism), those projects seem to be more network-oriented than performance-oriented. They are more keen into the public sphere, even if they look like more mainstream aesthetics. Such examples show a new generation of *post-internet* activism, where the net brainframe is applied to the production of new subjectivities, where tecnologies turn into semio-technologies. It's no more about a vertical assault on the Code, but about a reengineering operation into the horizontal net constituting reality. Activism, art, marketing share by now the same grammar and work on the same networks.

As Guattari noted, the role of media in general is about the **production of subjectivities**<sup>27</sup> (and that is the case of collective pop stars, meta-brands, games, but even new social figures such as the precarious worker). Political activism, indeed, has been always more worried about controlling content (*counter-information*), communication channels (*media activism*), communication technologies (*hacking*). In the neurospace activism turns into the production of subjectivities, of forms of life and life styles. We could call it **bioactivism**. After the

technological turn of media activism and net culture, we are facing now a biopolitical turn, that actually has been the natural condition of capitalistic production since decades (already in 1967 Ballard predicted the election of an actor named Ronald Reagan<sup>28</sup> at the head of United States, not to mention the last adventures into the political mediascape by celebrities of the likes of Berlusconi and Schwarzenegger). In other words, in neurospace we witness the "biopolitical production"<sup>29</sup> described by post-structuralist and post-workerist thought at work, and in particular those new strategies Hardt and Negri call generically "biopolitical weapons"<sup>30</sup>. What is emerging is a new subculture of artists of the neurospace, coders of neurobots, hackers of new semio-technologies, engineers of collective subjectivities. So far we have been familiar with "people doing strange things with electricity"<sup>31</sup>, now we believe that the nervous system is taking the place of the internet and that a new Ballardian generation is raising up, a generation of improbable *gonzobots*, whose motto could be "people doing strange things with your nervous system".

Matteo Pasquinelli  
(*mat* AT *rekombinant* DOT *org*)

Hackney, London  
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