

« **Collapsonauts Need Medianarchists** » Agnès Villette in conversation with Yves Citton,
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Yves Citton
Collapsonauts Need Medianarchists

Agnès Villette – *I am always interested to figure out where writers come from (linguistically, culturally, intellectually....). As a theorist and essayist writing on Media Culture, Media Archeology, your original background is in literature. What was the journey? And how does literature seep into your approach, teaching, writing, theorising....?*

Yves Citton – Literary studies are broadly (although unofficially and sometimes unconsciously) perceived as a dying discipline in the university. The imperative of “professionalization” addressed to the academia is killing them. Literary studies, as well as the Humanities at large, are not seen as necessary to train competitive businessmen, nor do they mass-produce ready-to-hire employees. What they do—in my view—is help us understand and play with the dynamics of mediation. They invite and train us to adopt a very particular form of attention, which produces two displacements. It is often repeated that when the wise man points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger that points, rather than at what is pointed to. Literary attention teaches us to look at the moon, because it is a beautiful thing, but it calls upon us simultaneously to study the finger and the wise man (Why is he pointing? How? When?)—first displacement—and to keep an eye on the background of the constellation which surrounds the moon and the finger and the wise man and the viewer—second displacement. While my book *Mediarchy* does not talk about literature, it performs this double displacement which is constitutive of literary attention. It calls upon us to look at the media, which direct our collective and individual attentions towards certain aspects of our world rather than towards other aspects, and it hopes to help us see the media as a *milieu* (a constellation, a universe, a background) more than as a mere channel (a finger that points at other things).

A. V. – *In the constant pace of events, information, technology that defines our current era, an essay as Mediarchy solidifies and frames the media system, in its historical continuum since its birth a couple of centuries ago to the latest technical apparatus being developed and their immediate and multilayered social, political and artistic implications. There is a dialogical form of address and progress at work in the essay, as you reference, introduce, build on, oppose various media theories and theorists, often coming from various fields of research and artistic practices. How does this dialogical dynamic inform the thinking and the writing?*

I conceived the book as a general overview of what I thought was most interesting and most useful in Media Theory, as it has unfolded over the last 50 years, from Marshall

McLuhan and Vilém Flusser to Jussi Parikka and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. The premise of the book is that we are all conditioned by the regimes of perceptions—which are simultaneously regimes of power—set in place by the overlaying of the numerous systems of mediality developed, accumulated and sedimented over the last millennia. It is this overall regime of conditioning that I call “mediarchy”—without putting any pejorative connotation to this term: being conditioned is our condition, not our curse.

As a literary scholar, my job is to try to make sense of this complex entanglement of texts, arguments, images, tropes, claims, anxieties, devices, relations, institutions, strategies, agencies that simultaneously structure, enact, represent, criticize, instrumentalise our mediarchies. I try to unfold these entanglements within a linear journey in four stages. In the first part, I explore the overall definitions of what media *are*, based on what media *do*. In part two, I inquire on the specificity of the dynamics through which *mass media inform publics*. Part three attempts to complement our traditional media history with a *media archaeology*. And finally, part four is devoted to the huge novelty brought by *our digital and computational mediality*.

Like a number of theorists I quote in the book, I am convinced that we are unable to understand what (digital) media do to us, because our understanding of mediarchy is itself a function of mediarchy. I cannot see my own gaze. What I can do, however, is use mirrors, microscopes, telescopes, photographs, cameras, satellites—to look as rationally as possible at what conditions my gaze. My book attempts to collect some of the panoramic views that can help us understand how our mediarchies condition our attentions.

A. V. – *The inclusions of numerous artists, hackers, creative movements who innovate, create and disrupt the media technological flow we live in, generate a line of inquiry which claims an entomological take on media culture. Can you say more why artists are relevant to the present time?*

Y. C. – Claiming once again my literary background, I approach this question, in the last part of the book, by playing with the (French) words we use to account for the emergence of digital mediality. We are told that we live in a world of “data” (*des données*, things that are *given*). The first step back consists in understanding that all these generously given data often result from predatory and/or clumsy apparatuses of capture: they have been “capta” (*des prises*, things that have been *taken, prehensions*), before being served to us as data—and they are often exploited to captivate our attentions within other people’s agendas and interests. One could brutally summarize and contrast the last thirty years in a first phase (1990-2005), when the internet was perceived as a marvellous provider of free data, followed by a second phase (2008-2020), when it has been perceived as a Machiavellian mega-machine of capture and control. All through these decades, however, artists have been constantly *over-taking* whatever attempt was made to take and capture us by the means of what was given to us. Artistic practices bring *sur-prises* to the deeply intertwined dynamics of give-and-take (*données* and *prises*) constitutive of our digital mediality.

A. V. – *The hauntological dimension running through the whole book converges, in the 21st century, towards the growing opacity and complexity of technological operations. The more machinic we become, the more useful the concept of hauntology. How do you approach the symbolic, magic, or even spiritual, dimensions of media technology?*

Y. C. – Artists provide us with ways to “over-take” the grasps and the grips that media necessarily have on us insofar as they inform and constitute the worlds within which we live. The third part of the book looks at the mediumnicity that inescapably haunts all mediality. A “medium” is both a *means* of communication (a device or a channel) and a *milieu* of communication (an entangled environment, a universe of discourse). The medium as milieu is bound to be more powerful than the parts we may intentionally play within it. This excess of power has been experienced by humans in the guise of the magic, the shamanic, the ghostly, the supernatural. Our communicative devices gather our individual and conscious strengths into common assemblages, which are unfathomably more powerful than what we are able to conceive and even imagine. Mediarchy is the power of this commonality borne out of our communication devices, and a great deal of this power is still alien to us: we experience it as a form of witchcraft, mystery, fascination, or (more broadly nowadays) conspiracy.

A. V. – *Even if it just came out in English translation, your book was published in 2017. Time moves swiftly those days, especially in media culture. Where would you say we are at now?*

Y. C. – While what one usually refers to as “the media” has always been denounced and discredited as biased, deceptive, misleading and conspirational, we are currently experiencing one more of these deep waves of media-phobia. I read it as a mere symptom of a much deeper disease. If most of us tend to distrust “the media”, it is certainly due to the current economic infrastructure of the mediarchy, that commodifies and sells to the highest bidder our most precious resource (our attention). We therefore desperately need a momentous overhaul of the way we conceive of the economics and politics of mediality, of the way we fund it, we legislate upon it, and we refer to it. My book invites the reader to a journey through mediarchy in order to lead her to demand such a political, economic and judicial overhaul.

Our current distrust and disarray, however, has deeper roots, I am afraid. We don’t believe the media because *our world itself has become unbelievable*. Every day, one more scientific study tells us how unsustainable our modes of consumption, of production, of living are towards the planet we share (with so many other vegetals and animals) as our only home. One ought to be crazy to continue undermining and destroying our very conditions of living, as we currently do in the West. And yet, most of us continue our business as usual. Our media appear as increasingly untrustworthy because we know that we ourselves are not to be trusted to see and do what should be seen and done in our own good.

The French media has been overwhelmed since the summer of 2018 by a dramatic increase in the coverage of collapsology. Dozens of journals, books, talk-radio, TV shows, on mainstream channels and in primetime, have staged the most frightening predictions about the looming collapse of our most basic infrastructures: an ex-Minister of the Environment, Yves

Cochet, just published an essay announcing that before the end of the 2020s, a major financial, economic and energetic collapse will leave our banks empty of currency, our gas station empty of fuel, our grocery stores empty of food, our calls to the police or the hospital unanswered. Only a half of mankind will survive by the 2040s, so goes his prediction, after which social life will restart on very small scales, based on animal traction, and remembering the Internet as a cherished memory from a golden past...

My friend Jacopo Rasmi and I have just finished a book about this collapsologist media craze, which is no crazier than the common madness of our unsustainable ways of life. Since Jacopo is in his twenties while I am entering my sixties, we called it *Collapsonaut Generations*. The main idea is that we are largely delusional in the ways we fantasize our looming collapse, but that a series of collapses (of various kinds) is actually already happening, and will most probably worsen. Therefore, what we ought to do is not so much ask if or when it will happen, but rather try and understand *how best to navigate* the turbulences ahead. We are “collapsonauts”...

A. V. – *Does the prominent space recently granted to collapsology in the French mainstream media mean that it is co-opted as the latest fad? Has it already lost its disruptive potential? Can it still wake us up from our business-as-usual slumber?*

Y. C. – To us, collapsology sounds at the same time like a wake-up call, like a worst nightmare, and like the newest avatar of an old dream of Great Revolution. It clearly questions the insanity of limitless capitalist growth, but it also ties together, in a very original knot, both the hope for radical social transformation and the hopelessness of seizing political power. The “good news” announced by collapsologists is that we don’t even have to organize political resistance in order to overcome capitalism: the system will come down under its own weight. We are free to focus our attentions on how to navigate in its ruins, after its demise. This is at the same time the greatest appeal of collapsology, and its greatest danger. It is simultaneously a factor of existential mobilization and of political demobilization. It forces us the re-think mobilization and politics under another perspective.

The journal *Multitudes* just published an issue which tries to understand these new forms of (de)mobilisation. Instead of assessing whether collapsology is radical or reactionary, it attempted to observe what collapsonauts actually do, once they come to the realization that our infrastructural logistics is bound to fail us in the very near future. It is commonly held that such a realisation brings mostly despair and anxiety, which is certainly true. But it turns out that, in the age of social networks, people tend to come together to seek solace and solutions to this apparently desperate situation. Laurence Allard, who co-directed this issue of *Multitudes*, spends a lot of time on a collective entitled *Adopt-a-Collapso*, where new forms of socialisation take shape under the threat of collapse. There is a fertile activity of crossing references, sharing ideas, communising affects that is taking shape in a very horizontal manner.

This interests me particularly in view of the evolution of the mediarchy. The Friday-for-Future movements that bring millions of teenagers to the streets, worldwide, ought to be understood both as a classical mass-media phenomenon (it is talked about in the news, Greta

Thunberg is invited to speak at the UN, in national parliaments), and as a fresh form of mediactivism, where what is talked about in mainstream media is secondary to what is actually organised at the level of individuals and social groups. A lot of information circulates, a lot of ideas spring up, a lot of relations are woven, at a very endemic level, about the unsustainability of our dominant standards of living, and about what can and what ought to be done radically to transform them.

A. V. – *There is another way in which Collapsology meets Mediarchy: the hockey-stick curves used to map the Great Acceleration that is leading to a fatal Collapse can only be produced by computerised algorithms able to analyse vast amount of information. Greta Thunberg needs the mediation of the IPCC calculations (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) to advocate her school-strikes. What does that tell us about media, belief, power and agency?*

Y. C. – That is what is so interesting and disturbing about our historical moment. For the teenagers who are taking to the streets on Fridays, the most common and immediate affects of anxiety result from the most complex collection and processing of data ever attempted by the collective forces of scientific investigation, mediated by a few highly visible public figures (Al Gore, Michael Ruppert, Greta Thunberg), but taken over by millions of humble budding activists-researchers-artists, linked together through various types of social networks.

Even if many collapsologists tell us that the internet will be short-lived, as it is pushed by capitalist consumerism towards wasting an ever-increasing amount of energetic resources, we should pay greater attention to what is actually happening at this moment within the global mediasphere. The traditional binary oppositions between the local and the global, immediate experience and technical mediations, reality and delusion, expertise and ignorance, agency and powerlessness, are becoming so entangled that we truly need a new vocabulary to make sense of such entanglements. What has already collapsed is, first and foremost, our ability to orientate ourselves. We need to trust, at the same time, our most immediate affects and the most remote conclusions of the most improbable forms of computation. And we need to distrust them simultaneously.

What is so often lamented and derided as an overall rejection of the media or as “post-truth politics” is in fact a most problematic, but also a most lucid, awareness of this state of disorientation: we don’t know whom to trust because we don’t have a set of trustable values to orient ourselves in the hypercomplexity of the world we have entangled ourselves into. The rapidly evolving over-layering of techno-social strata of our mediarchy has led to a new form of *medianarchy*: the power of the media is undermined by the power of the media. Instead of lamenting this evolution, we need better to understand it, in order to provide ourselves with new modes of reorientation.

A. V. – *The vertical imaginary of collapsology (downfall, downward curves, economic patterns of production and growth suddenly packing in) is counterbalanced by the ability of*

collapsonauts to negotiate their complicated era and to develop navigating abilities, a way to horizontally inhabit the flow. Can you say something on our required abilities?

Y. C. – What strikes me the most, in this emerging age of medianarchy, is the attitude I find in the young people who are loosely linked together in the Friday-for-Future strike movements, or Extinction Rebellion, or Ende Gelände. No matter the age, the perspective of collapse transforms us all into *students*: people whose most urgent task consists in studying what is actually happening, what it means, what ought to be done about it.

Jacopo Rasmi and I have recently discovered the wonderful book written by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, entitled *The Undercommons. Black Study and Fugitive Planning*. The notion of “study” is contrasted against a certain professionalization and institutionalisation of “research” in the university. “Study” happens as soon as a bunch of people share their thoughts, fears and desires about something that truly matters to them. Unfortunately, the current evolution of universities, pressurized by a double imperative of professionalization and industrialisation, tends to prevent study, instead of favouring it. It seems to us that the most lively forms of study are to be located, not so much in the universities, but rather in the Friday movements that invents a new form of worldwide horizontal youth organisation calling for radical social changes.

In our book, Jacopo and I describe the collapsonauts’ attitude as a *politics in 3-D*, which threatens our very definition of what we consider to be political. These 3-D politics need to be de-colonial, de-competitive, de-polemical. But more generally, what is emerging is a need for a new attentional attitude, which better understands both the virtues and the dangers of the drives that have animated modernity and pushed it to the brink.

First D: our attention is extractivist in nature: we constantly scan our environments in order to extract resources and affordances from them. And yet, we have to learn that extractivism—i.e. our tendency to exploit resources without caring for their renewal, nor for the remote consequences of this exploitation—is the main cause of our looming demise. Hence the need to de-colonise our relationship to our milieu, by developing non-extractivist forms of attention.

Second D: a dominant reading of Darwinian biology tells us that (natural as well as social) life is all about competition. One of the dominant arguments that condones the continuation of business-as-usual is that we cannot afford to implement the drastic measures needed to protect our future from catastrophic destructions, because such measures are not economically viable in the context of international commercial competition. We need better to understand how damaging the imperative of competitiveness really is, in order to neutralize its terribly pernicious effects.

Third D: a widely shared view of politics models it as a form of war. One would need to name an enemy, to fight and defeat him in order to make the world a better place. While resistance and struggles are clearly required in certain situations, we nevertheless need to de-polemise our vision of social relations. The perspective of collapse should teach us very soon that, in such a situation, the worst thing we can do to ourselves (individually and collectively) is to see each other as competitors and enemies, instead of bringing each other to cooperate towards our common survival.

A. V. – *On this point, how can the wake up situation we are in, resist against, on one side, the neo-fascist and religious survivalist movements, active in the USA for a number of decades, and on the other side, the opportunistic Capitalist scenario of transhumanist geo-engineering?*

Y. C. – One of the main problems is that I am not at all certain that we, as collapsonauts, will manage to be as de-colonial, de-competitive and de-polemical as we would need to... This is a huge challenge. We have to do our best, but so far the odds seem against us. So I really cannot pretend to know and tell you how we will do it...

All I can say is that your question points towards two symmetrical dangers. First, the continuation of business-as-usual under the false promise of techno-fix (geo-engineering, hydrogen as a substitute for carbon fossil fuels, etc.) We should not underestimate human ingenuity: I do not consider it impossible that some unexpected techno-scientific discovery may significantly reconfigure our perspectives for the future. In a way, I want to hope it may be the case. But it would be irresponsible, foolish and damning to trust it miraculously to undo the damage we have already done to our environments and to ourselves. Placing all our bets on a techno-fix will only make the collapse more criminally painful.

The survivalist attitude is the second, symmetrical, form of blind faith—or rather, in this case, blind distrust—we should avoid. Techno-fix advocates bet too much on our collective power, mediated through science and industry. Survivalists bet too little on our common strengths. You can build all the bunkers you want, pile up cans of food, weaponry and ammunition, your life can only be miserable if you can't count on your neighbours' cooperation. The most popular French collapsoologists, Pablo Servigne, Gauthier Chapelle and Raphaël Stevens have published two highly successful books entitled *How Everything can Collapse?* and *Another End of the World is Possible*, but in between these best-sellers, they wrote another book devoted to solidarity (*Entraide*, literally: “mutual help”). It can be read as a manifesto for de-competivism, showing how Darwin has been misread by sociologists and political ideologues, and studying how people actually managed to survive in collapse situations like the New Orleans flood triggered by hurricane Katrina. One of the major stakes for collapsonauts is to literally *dis-arm* the survivalist reflexes that have been instigated into us by decades of (neo-)liberal individualism. The French brand of collapsoology is very original—and promising—precisely because of its commitment to the values of cooperation, solidarity and the commons.

I see a third form of blind faith that can be very dangerous for our common future exposed to the risks (and opportunities) of a collapse from our extractivist modes of life. Apart from techno-fix ideology and militarised survivalism, I am worried about an irrational hope in the virtue of revolutionary spontaneism. Among those who look forward to the downfall of capitalism under its own weight, many seem to trust us collectively to build a new world of immediacy, after the demise of our hypercomplex financial and logistical infrastructures. Hoping that we don't need a Revolution because capitalism will be vanquished by its very triumph does spare us rehashed and vain debates about hypothetical “revolutionary strategies”, that the Left is not capable to implement anyway. So collapsoology

does indeed open new domains of imagination, thought and agency. But, in my view, the risk of this spontaneist attitude rests in trusting humans can cooperate without taking stock and without taking care of the mediations that provide the necessary conditions of their cooperation and solidarity.

Collapsology meets mediarchy once again. The medianarchy I promote is not defined by an *absence* of power and mediation, as it could be mistakenly read by interpreting the Greek prefix *an-* as a negation (*an-archy* as *no-power*). My whole effort consists in advocating for a deeper *analysis* of the power of mediation, in conformity with the Greek prefix *ana-* which invites us to raise our understanding of phenomena by elucidating their most elemental components. Spontaneist attitudes expect post-collapse social relations naturally to fall into place, once Capitalism has been crushed by its own ecocidal acceleration. I believe we need to investigate, theorise, prepare and reconfigure the many ways in which our structures of mediation condition our agency—before, during and after the disruptive (and probably violent) events our common imaginaries associate with collapse.

In the book I published between *Mediarchy* and *Collapsonaut Generations*, which was entitled *Political Counter-Currents*, I proposed a dozen of emerging polarities designed to help us re-orient ourselves in a rapidly changing political field. The first polarity opposed “Automobilists” to “Medialists”. I wrote and published the book a few months before the *Gilets Jaunes* movement (Yellow Jackets) started, so it was not in any way an attempt to reduce this movement to its sole component of reaction against hikes in gas tax or speed limits.

Much more generally, it seems to me that “Automobilism” is our prevalent ideology: we, rich and poor in the affluent North, have been conditioned to see ourselves as being the (free) agents and the (autonomous) engines of our own motions. This could be emblematised by the millions of cars driven by a lone driver, insulated from his environment within his phono-sphere (car radio), weather-sphere (air conditioning) and spatio-sphere (GPS). When I drive my car, the others are potential dangers (source of accidents), obstacles (causing traffic jams), rivals (taking the last parking space just ahead of me) or enemies (screaming insults from behind their windshield). The common collaborative infrastructures that make it possible for me to drive my car are systematically obfuscated (except in the case of roadwork): nowhere I am faced to the extractivist activities that dig the oil or grow the biofuels, the car making industry or the mega-tankers. The hypercomplex and ecocidal logistics of my comfortable driving remain our social, technological and environmental collective unconscious.

I contrast Automobilism, as an ideology, to “Medialism”, which can be defined by its effort to understand, make sustainable, and care for, the mediations through which we can live our lives. What used to be called “the Left”, in its red as well as in its green variations, was and still is Medialist: it pushes us to account for, and render justice towards, the people who work with and for us (socialism), as well as the non-human entities who compose the rich entanglements of our living milieus (ecology). Our future is doomed if we fail to mutate from a domination of Automobilism towards a widespread acceptance of Medialism.

In order to navigate the ecopolitical turbulences ahead, we need to redirect our attentions towards the collective, environmental and elemental realities that allow us to

reproduce our worlds (with ceaseless minute variations) through constant and multifarious forms of communications. We need better to understand the power of media as a keystone of our infrastructures of mediation, we need to analyse, rethink and reconfigure this power better to adapt it to our future constraints and desires. Collapsonauts need to become medianarchists.