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Ecomentia, from Televised Catastrophe to Performative Assembly: Collapsonaut Attention in a House on Fire

Introduction

“Our house is on fire, and we look the other way.” So (in)famously spoke a French President at the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002 (without doing much about it when he returned to Paris) (Kokabi 2019). How does one communicate in a burning house? How does one think? We are (earth)bound to be haunted by such questions. They tie a daunting knot between *ecocultures* (what perceptions, representations, values, arguments should circulate among us?), *ecomedia* (how can we mobilize our extractivist smartphones in a struggle against extractivism?), *eco-affects* (how to keep insanity at bay?).

The question of knowing how properly to mediate our attention to our surround, and especially to its dangers, is anything but new, of course. The (relative) novelty of our situation comes from the fact that those of us comfortable enough to consume more than our sustainable share of resources play simultaneously the double role of firefighters and arsonists. Our mediality is doublebound: our devices are shooting flames and burning oil by the same breath as we are shouting fire.

In such a situation, *media ecology* can be understood both in the sense of minimizing the environmental impact of our collective use, production and waste of media devices, and in the sense of retooling (mass) media in order to speed up the ecological mutations of our social organizations (at a planetary scale). Both aspirations may seem out of reach: how can we, with our limited means, understand, let alone reign in, the hyper-complex and often terribly dirty (environmentally and socially) supply chains that provide us with our smartphone? Similarly, how can we, at our modest scale, deflect, let alone repurpose, the powerful media institutions and the hegemonic platforms whose interest and infrastructures shape our public debates?

No wonder many of us find it increasingly hard to resist to the sirens of eco-anxiety, solastalgia (Albrecht 2007) or collapsology (Servigne & Stevens 2020). Neither a civilizational disease nor a private insanity, the distress we experiment within our burning house deserves to be identified as a form of dementia—an “ecomentia”, i.e., *a collective state of mind resulting from the attentional ecology of our mediated relations to our collapsing ecological milieus*. Some studies and theories can help us analyze, if not come to terms with, the medial determinants of this collective state of mind.

Mapping the mediarchy

Before his untimely death in 1992, French philosopher Félix Guattari (1989) invited his readers simultaneously to consider three ecologies in tight co-evolution: the natural ecology of our bio-physical surround, the political ecology of our social organizations, and the mental ecology of our subjectivities. There is no “purely” psychological distress: our nervous systems react to imbalances in our social relations, which are conditioned by (and condition in return)

the state of our bio-physical environment. In his foundational book *Understanding the Media*, Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) had already pushed us to consider “media”—later broadly defined by German media archaeologist Friedrich Kittler (1986) as whatever transmits, records and/or treats data—as extensions of our nervous system. Through the infrastructures of the printing press, the gramophone, the telephone, the radio, the television, the portable video, the personal computer and the Internet, our sensibility has expanded so as to reach finer data ever faster and further in space and time.

A few years later, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (1998) analyzed how the “primary retentions” (i.e., perceptions) selected by our attention in the sensory data that immediately surround us were ceaselessly interpreted and reconsidered in the light of the “secondary retentions” (memories) remembered in our nervous system, as well as of the “tertiary retentions” recorded for us on the external supports of various media. Simultaneously, German philosopher Niklas Luhmann (1996) portrayed mass media as regulating systems that provide our societies (more or less satisfactorily) with the amount and type of information they need to reproduce their social ordering. A couple of decades later, media and design theorist Benjamin Bratton (2015, 8) conceptualized the “accidental mega-structure” of the Internet as a vertical *Stack* of diffracted sovereignties composed of six strata: *Earth* (our biophysical environments and resources), *Cloud* (the interconnected network of servers powered by these resources), *City* (the logistical nodes that allow human bodies to live, gather and communicate), *Address* (the new form of human and non-human identity relevant for the Internet), *Interface* (our predesigned formats of interaction through digital devices) and *User* (as much a function and a target of the mega-structure as its punctual activator).

All in all, in half a century of cybernetic imagination, these (mostly white male) theorists have provided us with a powerful depiction of the ways in which our (supposedly personal) sensations and thoughts are never really “our own”. We do not live in “democracies”, as free-willed individuals merely “informed” (or misinformed) by the media. We live in “mediarchies” (Citton 2017): our individual nervous systems appear as the “wetware” moment in a global circulation of information/electricity which is largely preformatted and predetermined by the software and hardware ever more tightly integrated within the global Stack. Ecomedia and ecomentia are one and the same: the evolutions of our personal psyches follow the magnetic fields powered by our medial environment. Our thoughts cannot be separated from their magnetization and modulation through the flows of discourses, sounds and images that are carried by electricity through cables, satellites, waves, screens and headphones. Our media are neither a superstructure (in the old Marxist sense), nor merely an infrastructure (in the ecomedia sense), but more properly an *intrastructure*. They structure and substantiate our minds as they feed them. Hence our disarray: the house is burning, but the house is us!

The disconnection of affects and the displacement of saliences

Of course, such totalizing and universalizing discourses ought to be considered with the greatest suspicion. As we all know by now, the “Anthropocene” is a lure: not *all* humans are equally responsible for setting our common house on fire (“Eurocene”, “Capitalocene”, “Plantationocene” are more accurate labels for our age). Similarly, “we” are not equally responsible for the structure and the contents of the mediarchy. It is important to identify *specific features* of our current digitalized mediarchy that need to be held more particularly responsible for our ecomentia (Zuboff 2019, Joler 2020, Chun 2021, Crawford 2021)—as a brilliant collection of essays has just done, whose title strikingly aligns our computing machines with our planet and our brains: *Your Computer Is on Fire!* (Mullaney *et al* 2021).

It is increasingly clear that our current ecology of media is intrastructured first and foremost through the commodification of our attentions. Most of the techno-institutional vectors that fuel our nervous systems with stimuli are organized along the competitive rules that originated in the 1830s, simultaneously in France, England and the USA, when innovative press barons started to sell their daily newspaper half-price of their production costs, making up for the difference by selling ad space to advertisers (Wu 2016). What they were actually selling was their readers' attention, which became from then on a traded commodity. Two centuries later, the commodification of our attentions has become the hegemonic economic base of "neuropower" (Neidich 2013) within our mediarchies.

Since economic survival in our current mediarchies is indexed upon the agent's capacity to attract (and monetize) attention, our communicational environment pushes emitters of messages towards the use of *saliences*, i.e., signals that cannot remain unnoticed by our nervous system. These saliencies are partly "absolute", when they trigger a response from any able-bodied person (fire alarms, flashing lights, etc.), partly "targeted", when online platforms analyze our personal data flows in order to predict which artist, brand, word, notification will hit one of our personal soft spots. The overall result of this captological arms' race is that discourses, images and sounds flow among us, not mostly on the basis of their personal and collective relevance or empowering promises, but first and foremost on the basis of their potential to attract, capture and sell our attentions—with the frequent result of distracting and alienating us from more urgent or more emancipating concerns (Citton 2014).

This is why we look the other way while our house is on fire. But it is not written that we should continue to do so. To the contrary. The mere existence of an *Ecomedia Handbook* is only one among the many symptoms of a recalibration of our collective attentional focuses—an evolution of our ecomentia, an increasing awareness that our media are on fire. Our attentions cannot be directly commanded by what philosophers identify as our "reason": they are much more tightly linked to our "affects" (our emotions, passions, desires, hopes and fears). "Affects" should less be conceived as ego-centered "feelings", experienced "inside" our mind or heart, than as the inner manifestations of *an outer relation* which attaches us to some aspect of our (human or other-than-human) surround (Manning 2013). We become (subjectively) aware of a certain feeling when we "are affected" by a certain transformation in one of our (material) relations with our environment. And yet, this apparently passive affection by our surroundings generates in us an affect that can sometimes unleash a tremendously active and powerful reaction.

The increasingly insistent association between references to climate change and scenes of destruction (hurricanes, floods, megafires) is another symptom of the same recalibration of our attentional focuses fueled by our affective experiences. The extension of our sensory apparatus through the development of printed and electronic media that has happened over the past centuries has not managed to keep pace with the parallel extensions of our collective agencies and affectabilities, which have reached a planetary scale since at least the 1850s. We (relatively affluent members of the Western middle class) have lived on borrowed time, in a bubble disconnected from its actual environmental conditions, for more than 150 years. Most of us have not been (directly) "affected" by the remote consequences of our shopping sprees. Our media have failed to adjust our (personal) affectability to our (collective) agency. Our ecomentia has been schizophrenic: split by a technological power disconnected from its social and environmental response-ability (Haraway 2016).

The intensified commodification of our attentions precipitated by digital media only exacerbates this schizophrenic ecomentia—and it is certainly at the root of a great deal of our feelings of powerlessness, solastagia and collapsologist anxieties. The bad news is that catastrophies are multiplying (and it is already too late to completely reverse their course). The mixed news is that they are hitting closer to the homes of the Westernized middle classes

who are the main culprits of our environmental degradations. The good news is that stronger affects command stronger attention. We are witnessing (too late and too slowly) the beginning of painful realignment of medial images towards the actual implications of our individual and collective behaviors. Through shocking and highly salient mediatized scenes of destructions, our affects are starting to displace our attentions—causing yet another form of schizophrenia, since part of us is led to rejoice in the broadcasting of our affliction.

The Great Disconnection between impacts and affects that has allowed the West to ravage our planetary living milieus over the past 150 years is starting to be mended by a simultaneously frightening and salutary Great Displacement of traumatizing saliences closer to “home”, favoring an ecomedial reconnection between our behaviors and their visible consequences. Other people’s houses—in the colonies as well as in disenfranchised neighborhoods—have been burning for decades, and mainstream media have mostly looked the other way (see for instance Vergès 2017; Ferdinand 2021). Now that “our” house is burning, will we spontaneously look “our” way? That may be simultaneously too cynical and too hopeful...

Ecomedial counter-activism: from sovereign individuals to undercommon assemblies

Traumatic events rarely prompt reasonable reactions. In a burning house, some may prefer to weaponize their door rather than putting out the neighbor’s fire. There is a long way from cursing a hurricane to deconstructing the Capitalocene. Fantasies of a megamachine rob us of any agency—leading to disturbingly rational conspiracy theories which trap us in reactionary forms of activism. Similarly, televised catastrophes won’t put out our fire by the sole virtue of their screen scares. If we hope to coexist peacefully in our common hothouse, we need collectively to restructure our ecomentia (as well as our ecomedia, since they are but two sides of the same coin).

Such a restructuration calls for a number of caveats, which can be read as a set of conditions for ecomedial activism. The following five points do not pretend to be anything else than a very preliminary and unsatisfactory fridge list.

1) *Power is rarely surrendered.* The vectorialist class (Wark 2004) which currently benefits from the commodification (and distraction) of our attentions is likely to hold on to its power and privileges. Displacements of saliences and reconnections of affects will have to overcome mighty resistances. These struggles will require much tactical mediactivism (Lovink 1997).

2) *Sovereign individualism may be a deeper (inner) enemy than the resistance of the vectorialist class.* Capitalist extractivism certainly needs to be opposed and defeated as an organizational form and as a business model, taught in MBA programs and rewarded by financial revenues. But as Sylvia Wynter (2015) and other radical thinkers have taught us, extractivism is anthropologically rooted in a certain conception, and in a certain practice, of what it means to be human. *Homo mediaticus* will not put out the fire of his current ecomentia if he doesn’t shed the skin of *homo oeconomicus*. This calls for the greatest suspicion towards the ubiquitous ideology of sovereign individualism which permeates the current debates about platform sociality, visibility, privacy and surveillance. In most of them, the assertion, discussion, exaltation or accusation of individual performances monopolize most of our attention. Not only does “the semiotics of celebrity bodies” overheats our server farms (Bratton 2019, 41). The tyranny of the self-possessed subject—imagined in an original position of transparent self-sufficiency before he enters in “interactions” with “others” (supposed to be exterior to him)—remains firmly in place in our dominant view of communication, in spite of its imposture denounced by race theorists like Denise Ferreira da

Silva (2007). Our house is burning, in great part, because every sovereign individual is encouraged to attract as much light as possible on his overheating self. How soon will we reach what M.C. Abbott, María Buey González and Carl Olsson (2021) have termed “peak face”—the historical turning point after which our infatuation with our face and our self-possessive conception of identity will start its decrease? The praxis of being human without claiming the status of sovereign subject starts (and ends) with the “consent not to be a single being” (Moten 2017, quoting Édouard Glissant), i.e., with an acceptance to share one’s incompleteness (Robinson 1980). This theme, so powerfully developed by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *All Incomplete* (2021), provides in a nutshell all the lessons one needs to know about ecomedia. Instead of an extractivist mediarchy of self-possessive individuals competing against each other to attract visibility/attention/revenue, the sharing of our incompleteness opens up modes of communication where a pre-individual solidarity and a mutual participation in each other always precede and underpin any form of interaction with each other. Guattari’s three ecologies are thus recast in their ecomental entanglement: my individual affective and mental state is part and parcel of my social (and political) relations, whose materialities are themselves weaved thru and thru into the fabric of our environments. After having been accustomed to surf on the reassuring illusion of one’s subjective sovereignty, however, learning to relate with each other on the basis of incompleteness is a major challenge. It calls for a new ethics, a new politics, a new rhetoric, a new pedagogy, a new epistemology—no less. “Ecomedia” could be the proper name for such a challenge—a radical mutation from our current ecomentia.

3) *Black study may serve as our ecomedial indiscipline in exploring the challenges of shared incompleteness.* In their book and discussions devoted to the *Undercommons* (2013), Harney and Moten offer and practice “black study” which, in their minimal definition, is “what you do with other people” on the basis of a sharing of our incompleteness (Harney & Moten 2013, 110). It provides an ecomedial environment devoid of any central authoritative point of reference, where ordinary people become extraordinary accomplices through their common activity of studying *with* and *for*: “studying with people rather than teaching them”, and “studying with people in service of a project” chosen together (which could simply be “more study”) (147-148). Of course, practices of study can also be more narrowly focused, as in the case of the counter-captology workshops whereby people share skills and sensing devices, in order to document obfuscated environmental damages (Gabrys 2019). Most importantly, if we are to recover from the collective pathologies of sovereign individualism and appropriative self-possession inherent to the very definition of *homo oeconomicus*, black study appears as a pagan, heretic and scandalous form of black magic, explicitly experienced as “a kind of dispossession of what you might otherwise have been holding onto, [...] where you allow yourself to be possessed by others as they do something” (Harney & Moten 2013, 109).

4) *Black Studies and media theory ought to ally forces in order to rethink what media are and what media do in times of (Western man’s) collapse.* Armond R. Towns’ important book *On Black Media Philosophy* (2022) delineates several ways in which the “reactionary intercommunalism” implicit in (white) media theory illustrated by Marshall McLuhan’s global village can be reformulated towards a “revolutionary intercommunalism” illustrated by Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton’s 1970s reflections on media (83). The countless medial inventions imagined by fugitives in their escape from slavery, during the initial, “unorganized”, phase of the Underground Railroad, transformed wood sticks, rivers, rocks, clothes and constellations into Improvised Emancipatory Devices which “continue to plot out new worlds than what Western man could ever fully comprehend—they create radical, alternative conceptions of Black life [...] where media and Black liberation collide outside of the limitations of white, Western epistemic imaginations” (66). The “Black futurities” (63)

brought to life by such improvised media may inspire and flesh out our best common collapsonaut hopes.

5) *The practices of performative assembly are crucial, both to re-anchor our mediated communications in the social solidarities and in the living materialities of our surround, and to provide them with powerful mediatic rebounds.* The more extended our nervous systems (through media networks now extending to a planetary scale), the more exposed we are to selected distant realities, and the more we need physically to assemble in the co-presence of the here & now. Practices of study, necessarily restricted to a small number of participants, gain to be complemented by practices of assembly, gathering larger crowds around a broader political purpose. Marches, demonstrations, occupations: the various forms of what Judith Butler has named “performative assemblies” share five common features that allow them uniquely to bridge the gap between proximate community-building in the undercommons and broadcast mediactivism at a planetary scale (as illustrated by the Black Lives Matter movement). a) They are a peculiar form of pre-expressive communication, since “forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make” (Butler 2015, 8). b) Insofar as they are motivated by a resistance against precarity, they make possible minority coalitions by “bringing together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities” (58). c) They operate as factories of coexistence and cohabitation since, “when we arrive, we do not know who else is arriving, which means that we accept a kind of unchosen dimension to our solidarity with others” (152). d) In the best case scenario, they may establish a quasi-symbiotic relation with the media which “constitute the scene in a time and place that includes and exceeds its local instantiation”: “the media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as those bodies on the street require the media to exist in a global arena” (91-94). e) Here again, some form of magic takes place, since the same virtue of presence-in-numbers that makes the bodies expressive, even if they remain silent, makes them qualitatively meaningful, even if they remain quantitatively insignificant: “they perform *as if they were a majority*, even though they are factually a minority” (Staal 2017, 8-10).

Conclusion: collapsonaut attention

We could certainly use a little magic to lighten up our ecomentia—and an assemblist Black media approach to ecomedia may be a good candidate to jump start our eco-political struggles. But we clearly need more than mumbo jumbo to put out the fire burning our common house. Over the past decade, the perspective of a dramatic collapse of “Western man’s empire” (Towns 2022) has been increasingly discussed in the French public sphere, including mainstream media, all the way to a former Prime Minister (Édouard Philippe), who confessed the anxiety kept him up at night. Collapsologists attempt to elaborate a scientific discourse to anticipate the institutional collapse of our thermo-industrial civilization (Servigne & Stevens 2020). Collapsonauts, by contrast, attempt to gather forces and wits to navigate, as ethically and effectively as possible, on the crumbling expectations raised by Western profligacy (Citton & Rasmi 2020). In analyzing our societies as mediarchies rather than democracies, they direct our attentions towards the intrastructural fragilities of ecomedia.

Collapsonaut attention is desperately needed to correct the excesses and negligence of our dominant extractivist attention. Capitalism identifies resources, it extracts, exploits and exhausts them, indifferent to questions of unsustainability or collateral damage. Collapsonaut attention is first and foremost household keeping—in line with the Greek etymology of the prefix *eco-* (from οἶκος: “home” and “household”). More concretely, collapsonaut attention urges us to shift our focus from the figures (GDP) to the background (the environment), from growth to maintenance and care, from the networks to the common forms of cooperation that

look after them. As Benjamin Peters reminds us, “networks do not resemble their designs as they take after the organizational collaborations and vices that tried to build them” (Mullaney et al 2021, 87; Peters 2016).

Our house is threatened because our dominant extractivist attention fails to account for its (un)natural crumbling. Whether in mapping the intrastructures of our mediarchies, in practicing black studies, or in performing assemblies, collapsonaut attention helps us maintain our common house and care for each other—sticking with the trouble of cohabitation (Haraway 2016), while sharing the thrills of commonly imagined alternative futurities (Gumbs 2019).

Further readings

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