

Putting the critique back into *Critique of Information*: refusing to follow the Order

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Abstract

This paper argues that Scott Lash's *Critique of Information* is one of the most important works of the new informational order: the *Order*. However, despite its comprehensive and insightful analysis, it illustrates a common trend amongst theorists whereby the inherent pessimism of their arguments' logic tends to be replaced by an unwarranted optimism of their conclusions. This criticism is applied to Lash's critique which is further supplemented by a rejection of Lash's argument that the transcendent perspective necessary for critical theory has been supplanted in the information age by an immanent all-at-onceness. The much more negative perceptions of the social and cultural effects of the Order to be found within literature and cultural history are defended as valuable sources of critical perspectives that may still help to aid theory as it struggles to keep up with the Order's discombobulating flows.

Keywords

Critique, Lash, Musil, Order, pattern recognition.

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Introduction

Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. (Benjamin 2003 [1940]: 391)

This paper proposes that Scott Lash's *Critique of Information* (2002) represents one of the most significant contributions of recent years to our understanding of contemporary informational society and it worthily sits alongside other defining works of a new informational order (henceforth referred to as the *Order*) such as Mark Poster's *The Mode of Information* (1990). It also argues, however, that despite its title, Lash's work suffers from an essential lack of critique and risks becoming, as in Benjamin's above admonitory quotation, part of the conformist problem of uncritical acceptance of media-driven exigencies. From the perspective of Critical Theory, this is a strong trend amongst academics who, in various works sympathetic to cultural populism, tend to confuse any interpretive activity within the masses as critical activity *per se*. We will see in the following sections how Lash arguably partakes of this trend as it applies to the mass information society. This is despite the fact that there is plenty of material from his own analysis that should cause deep concern about the serious political and social consequences of our rapid informationalization. However, this omission of a critical perspective is at least consistent with a central premise of Lash's argument, namely, that the traditional ground for Critical Theorists has been undercut from their feet by the advent of the Order: the position from which a transcendent, critical perspective can be taken simply does not exist any more. Having dismissed traditional modes of critical thought, however, Lash fails to replace it. This would not be such a problem were it not for the fact that the book and its title are devoted to presenting alternative grounds for proactive engagement/critique with the Order's flows. The *informationcritique* he does offer up acts more as a vehicle for an implicit (albeit denied) media determinism than the basis of substantive social critique. Lash's account nevertheless remains important because his failure to produce an adequate alternative is not itself evidence that his analysis is wrong, it merely suggests that the

acuity of his diagnosis is stronger than the feasibility/political desirability of his somewhat Panglossian prescriptions. I write from the perspective of a researcher who has spent the majority of his career sympathetically analysing the strategies of those groups who have embraced the informational immanence Lash describes. But contra Lash, I argue that the enthusiasm of a call to accommodate to the requirements of the Order should not displace a more realistic and unabashedly critical assessment of the ultimate political potency of such accommodations.

This paper engages with Lash's critique in two main ways. Firstly, and most conventionally, it seeks to defend the continued importance of a critical theory Lash claims has (ironically) become transcended by its anachronistic reliance upon transcendence. Secondly, and more in keeping with Lash's argument that such causally-based theory needs to be replaced by non-linear concepts more sensitive to the new, more mosaic, technological life-world represented by the Order, the paper uses material from literature and cultural analysis to question the ultimate wisdom of following Lash's precepts. This paper's borrowing of insights from literature to supplement the alleged inadequacies of Critical Theory is in further keeping with Lash's own assessment that 'The supplement, not the representation is at issue as we move from mechanical-age linearity to information-age discontinuity' (ibid: 180) Elsewhere (Taylor 2001) I have argued at length for the importance of the artistic imagination as a resource with which to understand better the informational zeitgeist. It is a view shared by several key theorists of the Order including Kittler (1997 & 1999) and McLuhan (1964). Whilst Lash highlights McLuhan and the like-minded Baudrillard as important, he does not consider Kittler. It is nevertheless worth drawing attention in this context to Kittler's belief that within a technological episteme such as the Order, understanding media (which provided the title of McLuhan's seminal work) is an oxymoron. It is only when one has left a technological life-world for the next that one can fully appreciate its nature (see Taylor & Harris 2005: 70). McLuhan (1964) made a similar point when he compared analysing technology to driving a car whilst only being able to look through the rear view mirror and his observation that the sound barrier is only visible on the end of a plane's wings when it is being broken and left behind. So for all those who would wish to theorize the Order, there are intrinsic difficulties - theory would

only seem to take one so far.

Rather than theory, as a result of its difficulties, needing to meekly capitulate to an Order (paradoxically constituted from the disorder of an environment dominated by emergent processes) this paper suggests that it simply needs to be more sensitive to, and realistic about, its natural limits and capabilities. Acceptance of theory's limitations does not, however, equate with Lash's stronger claim that 'theory itself is swept up in this logic of communication'. (Lash 2002: viii) Apart from the risk that the claim, by Lash the theorist, that theory is inadequate smacks of the similar contradictory canard of the post-modern theorist authoritatively declaring as a meta-narrative the death of meta-narratives, there is an additional, significant contradiction in Lash's project. Thus, he states that: 'A major aim of this book is to explore the contours of an emergent informational regime of power. (Lash 2002: vii) yet simultaneously he denies theory the transcendent, elevated perspective needed for the act of mapping that contours, by their very nature, intrinsically require. Deepening the contradiction later in the book, Lash distances himself from his own major aim by arguing 'Networks unlike roads are discontinuous. They are "topological", as Latour (1993) stresses, not "topographical" '. (Lash 2002: 180) In opposition to Lash and Latour, this paper defends theory's right to maintain the elevated perspective, but it also takes them at their word. It pursues the topological, in keeping with Benjamin's description of how the flâneur goes 'botanizing on the asphalt' (Benjamin 1983 [1938]: 36), by exploring literary representations of the social nature (flora) of the Order and tracing the continuities that exist with its precursor - the nascent urbanity of early modernity.

The original precedent for this literary approach resides in Baudelaire's focus upon the French realist illustrator Constantin Guys. This *Painter of Modern Day Life* (2003 [1859]) attempted to give comprehensible form to modernity's earliest manifestations: 'Observer, philosopher, *flâneur* - call him what you will; ... Sometimes he is a poet; more often than not he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains'. (cited in Gilloch 2002: 213) Lash shares with other academics a reluctance to confront the pessimism of outlook that can result from the combined

application of theoretical and literary analysis. For example, there is precious little optimism to be found in Baudelaire's perception of modernity's early flows: 'Lost in this base world, jostled by the crowd, I am like a weary man whose eye, looking backward into the depths of years, sees only disillusion and bitterness, and looking ahead sees only a tempest which contains nothing new, neither instruction nor pain'. (cited in Benjamin 2003 [1939]: 343) Theory may not have any practical solutions to offer the various profound social problems to be associated with the Order that has speeded up Baudelaire's world still further, but like Adorno's concept of resignation (Adorno 2001[1978]), it is sometimes necessary to defend pessimism's analytical credentials in the face of unwarranted optimism.

The new sociality - play and spatial materialism

Too many analysts limit themselves to enthusing over expanding post-industrial horizons of innovation and choice. (Lash 2002: vii)

What is needed instead is a more *situated* semiotics, *grounded* especially in forms of sociality. (ibid: ix [emphasis mine])

I will propose sociality as an alternative mode of critique. (ibid: 80)

The fact that Lash's *informationcritique* does not over-emphasize innovation and choice as great social benefits of the Order is a double-edged sword. This is because, in the absence of such a strong emphasis, and despite Lash's enthusiasm for a practical phenomenology with which to make sense of the technological life-world, the Order's contours remain just that, rather vague contours that lack a fuller sense of their actual lived-in nature. Lash does mention the opportunities opened up for new social forms based upon innovation such as design studios and science laboratories (and their increasingly similar modes of operation) but beyond these commerce-based social forms the improved opportunities for critical consciousness seem limited. For Lash this is because prior forms of Critical Theory consisted of either 'aporetics' or 'dialectics'. Both involved a transcendental perspective to the empirical that is no longer viable since the defining feature of the Order is its conflation of the transcendental and the empirical within the immanent. To engage properly in the Order: Lash seeks to ground such 'situated semiotics' and explore new forms of sociality and power with a technological phenomenology that draws upon an array of thinkers including Lefebvre, McLuhan, Haraway and Garfinkel. These and other theorists are chosen to the extent that Lash can use them to deal with the new-found dominance of the interface as a social mode. This dominance is such that previous modes of discourse and narrative have been supplanted by the new 'axial principle of culture': the communication. Reliant as they are upon a transcendent perspective, previous forms of critical theory are swept away by this pervasive new logic of communication. Critical theory is not the only thing that is swept away: 'society - or the social - is being displaced by the rise of the cultural.' (ibid: 79) Whilst recognising that the logic of commodification is contained within the rise of this networked culture, for Lash the rise of the interface means that representational modes of discourse have collapsed, a la McLuhan and Baudrillard's media-induced

implosion of 'reversibility', to be replaced potentially by two new modes of proactive engagement with informational flows: the *spatial materialism* of Lefebvre and the mode of *play*. It is worth assessing the possibilities that both these concepts offer to the generation of Lash's new sociality.

In terms of Lefebvrian spatial materialism, various writers have explored the potential for radical engagement with, and re-engineering of, informational flows. For example, in a similar fashion to Lash's citation of Lefebvre's proposal for a spider-like utilisation of space that combines the technicity of the network with the organicity of social webs, Klein approvingly cites the case of American students who identify themselves as 'Spiders' and she suggests that; 'Activists are now free to swing off this web of logos like spy/spiders (Klein 2001: xx) a theme that I have also dealt with in depth (see Jordan & Taylor 2004, and Taylor 2005). The problem for critique based upon such spatially materialist practices, is the limited nature of the empowerment they promise. Detailed studies of hacktivist initiatives and the underlying political philosophy of engagement in a technological environment (e.g. Latour 1988, Hardt & Negri 2000 & 2005) would seem to suggest that a difficult task faces those seeking to get ahead of power's curve whether that power be perceived in terms of *Empire* (Hardt & Negri) or *The Prince* (Latour). Hardt & Negri's analysis of the potential that resides in what they term *the multitude* illustrates well the tension involved in Lash's desire to set up a 'situated semiotics' that can be used in the lifted out, dis-embedded space of the Order yet which is still somehow 'grounded':

We should recognize from the outset the extent of capital's domain. Capital no longer rules merely over limited sites in society. As the impersonal rule of capital extends throughout society well beyond the factory walls and geographically throughout the globe, capitalist command tends to become a "non-place" or, really, an "every place". There is no longer an outside to capital, nor is there an outside to the logics of biopower ... capital and biopower function intimately together. (Hardt & Negri 2005: 101-2)

Hardt & Negri's assertion that 'there is no longer an outside to capital' mirrors Lash's claims for the lack of an outside from which theory can critique the Order. This shared belief in the loss of the outside/inside distinction is what lies behind both the notion of biopower and Lash's similar argument that the social has been superseded by the cultural. The subsequent challenge for such an

argument is to resolve the imbalance between capital's reliance upon lifted-out non-space and the fact that as Hardt & Negri themselves admit 'The places of exploitation, by contrast, are always determinate and concrete.' (ibid: 102)

Lash presents play as a cultural mode in which this exploitation can be resisted in equally concrete ways. The agonistic replaces the utilitarian, unlike outmoded critical theory: 'play gives us the empirical without the transcendent.' (Lash 2002: 161) The weakness of such an argument is evident from a closer look at this empirical nature of play within the Order. People's experience of the agon in North America, for example, is dominated by professional sports coverage which in turn is dominated by its saturation with statistical frameworks, a situation that does little to successfully move us on from Adorno's claim that the culture of the culture industry is merely to keep the workers in a receptive frame of mind to the needs of industry proper. Elsewhere, subversive strategies of play may well occur with GameBoys but it is difficult to see how capital is significantly undermined by consumption of more consoles and DVDs. Unperturbed, Lash claims, 'The player is in the global information order with Nike.' (ibid: 161) but this sounds disturbingly like the bio-political merging of the theorist himself with the advertising slogan 'Just do it'. Similarly, the playful elements of hacking (see Taylor 1998 & 1999) were easily recuperated by either the Games industry or Microsoft. Such real world recuperation was consistently prefigured in the plots of numerous cyberpunk novels where instead of offering potential sites of critique, technological innovation is tolerated as a necessary sand pit for the mavericks capitalism depends upon, as Gibson puts it: 'Night City wasn't there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground' (Gibson 1984: 18). I recognize the biopolitical potential of initiatives such as Open Source programming (see Taylor & Harris 2005 and Harris & Taylor 2005) but I also recognize that its influence in the Order's broader scheme of things may be disappointingly slight.

Notwithstanding his assertion that commodification is also subordinate to the interface, the contours of the Order's new regime of power that Lash proceeds to explore are disproportionately based upon commodified cultural products: 'this all-at-once mosaic is iterated again and again and again and again. Always new. Yet always repeated. As ephemeral, as useless, as yesterday's papers.

But then there are today's papers. There is today's big match. The next number one hit. There is this summer's blockbuster movie. (Lash 2002: 185) Again, the critique here seems suspiciously akin to the enthusiastically uncritical acceptance of the culture industry's output. The political problem of insubstantial products, exclusively driven by the needs of marketing, is celebrated as a solution. Lash's repeated attempts to provide more authentic examples of non-commodified cultural empowerment invariably fail. For example, there seems little distinction between his expression of the sporting imagination at its freest and soccer at its most commodified: 'We play in disguise, in for example the replica kit of Arsenal or Real Madrid.' (Lash 2002: 157) Apparently, even imagination has to pay its dues at the souvenir shop - a fact that entrepreneurs of the Order such as Malcom Glazer have been quick to realize (in both senses of the word) in their rejection of Lash's precept that in playing 'you are immediately in the world with things and people: you use neither as instrument, neither for benefit maximising.' (ibid: 156). In a similar vein, it would not appear unduly cynical to question whether the Olympic ideal illustrates the vulnerability of the cultural to the branded non-space. The success of the London bid for the Games of 2012 is at the under-reported social and environmental cost of such vibrant local arenas of play as Hackney marshes. True inter-racial and inter-generational agon is forced to make way for play defined as the Olympic brand (see Beard 2005 & Kelso 2005).

Pattern recognition in *The Man without Qualities*

There is no escaping from the information order, thus the critique of information will have to come from inside the information itself. (Lash 2002: vii)

The point that this book has tried to make is that we can no longer step outside of the global communications flows to find a solid fulcrum for critique. There is no more outside. The critique of information is in the information itself. (ibid: 220)

Critique of Information is bookended by the above two quotations. The first sentence ends the very first paragraph whilst the second constitutes the book's final sentence and the point is re-emphasized in various other sections. It is therefore clear from both the prominence of their positions and, separated by the length of the book, their consistency of theme, that they represent a succinct summary of Lash's key concern that the information Order is both inescapably enframing and irredeemably unsolid. The fluid instability Lash describes pre-dates the Order. Baudelaire defines modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent' (Baudelaire 2003 [1859]: 12) He approvingly cites Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd* (1845) who 'hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng' (ibid: 7). For the flâneur, 'The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd ... it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.' (ibid: 9) and, using imagery extremely prescient of the later cyberpunk's urge to dive into the Matrix, 'the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy.' (ibid: 9-10) Like Baudelaire, Lash consistently highlights the manner in which the information age creates an immanent plane of flows and communicational pulsions. Similarly, also following McLuhan he argues this creates a cultural environment pervaded by a sense of 'instant all-at-onceness' (Lash 2002: 185) and 'deep participation' (ibid 184).

In this context of immersive speed, reading and traditional lineal forms of discourse, are replaced by an accommodative ability to sense patterns: *pattern recognition*. Whilst Gibson's fictional *Neuromancer* trilogy is famous for popularising the notion of cyberspace as a working

concept within the Order, such influence works in both directions so that Gibson's later work fleshes out the cultural implications of this theoretical concept:

Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile ... We have only risk management. The spinning of the given moment's scenario's. *Pattern recognition*. (Gibson 2003: 57 [emphasis mine])

The roots of pattern recognition and a succinct summary of Lash's argument can be seen in McLuhan where, '... community is based in pattern recognition ... Central here is not the citizen, but the communicant. McLuhan's nomads are bad citizens.' (Lash 2002: 185). In this context, McLuhan cites Margaret Mead to argue: 'There are too many complaints about society having to move too fast too keep up with the machine. There is great advantage in moving fast if you move completely, if social, educational, and recreational changes keep pace. *You must change the whole pattern at once* and the whole group together and the people themselves must decide to move.' (cited in McLuhan 1964 [emphasis mine]). In addition to the sense of reactive media determinism implied by this keeping pace with the machine, cultural analysis of the social consequences of an Order with 'bad citizens' does not provide an inspiring basis for critique.

From the imaginative extreme of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) to Mark Seltzer's panoptic account, *Serial Killers* (1998), excessive immersion within the Orders 'field of impulses' would seem to lead pathological forms of sociality. Less threatening, but still similarly indicative of the anomic disposition of those best adapted to the the Order's life-world is Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004). Resonant of the earlier recorder of flows, Guy Constantine, Kunzru gives us the aptly named protagonist Guy Swift: 'On the far side, legs ostentatiously crossed, lounged a man who appeared to be less of a human being than a a communications medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages.' (Kunzru 2004: 8). Where Gibson depicts the near-future urban settings of Chiba and Night City, Kunzru gives us Noida and for another of his protagonist's aspiring to become part of the global Order, 'lost in his inner retail space' (ibid 11), there is little room for a critical response to the pervasive *Chokerlebnis* (shock

effect) of its speeded-up atmosphere: 'All the action of Noida fizzed through Arjun's sensorium without leaving a trace.' (ibid: 13). Swift would seem to fit well with Lash's call to learn to deal with the deep immersive flows of the Order: 'he had experienced a personal epiphany, the realization ... that his future lay in the science of "deep branding", the great quest to harness what ... he termed the "emotional magma" that wells from the core of planet brand'. (ibid: 20) But from the literary perspective, the new forms of sociality Lash seeks from the Order promise slim pickings. In both *Pattern Recognition* and *Transmission*, a competitive advantage to others is created by a hypersensitivity to the informational zeitgeist that, for the individual, is rich in the buzz from the 'biz', but much less amenable to the cultivation of wider social interactions. This explains the continued tension between the physical and the abstract that exists in analyses of both early modernity and the Order.

We can see in the previously cited excerpts from Baudelaire that the 'flesh of the crowd' is juxtaposed with the same crowd seen as an 'immense reservoir of electrical energy'. In cyberpunk, the portrayal of crowds and urban environments also reflect this im/material ambivalence so that such urban physicality (in this case Ninsei) merges with the individual's irrational enjoyment of accessing abstract flows of data:

He felt a stab of elation, the octagons and adrenaline mixing with something else. You're enjoying this, he thought; you're crazy. Because in some weird and very approximate way it was like a run in the matrix ... it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data ... Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, *data made flesh* in the mazes of the black market. (Gibson 1984: 26 [emphasis mine])

This juxtaposition of data and flesh is often described in terms that nevertheless reflect a certain distaste with the corporeal. Two particularly vivid examples in Neil Stephenson's *Snowcrash* (1992) are where moving through a crowd at a rock concert is compared to walking across a room full of puppies wearing crampons and the sound of a bullet hitting a bullet-proof vest is described as like that of a wren hitting a patio door. In cyberpunk, the social environment is downgraded to the husk left over from the cumulative effects of individuals enjoying the Order's flux, so that amidst the hi-

tech surroundings social dystopia reigns to the extent that tramps can be found roasting a dog over an open spit and neighbourhoods have been replaced by private franchised "communities" of 'burblaves'.

Lash talks in terms of areas within global capitalism that due to the lightness or heaviness of their communicational flows and stability of their identity qualify as 'live' or 'dead' zones, 'tame' or 'wild' zones, and combinations thereof. (see Lash 2002: 28-30). Again, language rich with physicality is used within fiction to describe the social alienation that accompanies such a society disproportionately built upon informational flows. Randal, the lead character of *Spare* describes, using a much more negative perception of a spider's web than either Klein or Lefebvre, the consequences for communities of membership of a live or dead zone:

I saw America itself as one big matrix: bright, dangerous cities crammed with sharp and needy people, interconnected by a spider's web of highways and toll roads and bordered at the edges by the slow coasts peppered with perambulating old people. And in between, in the gaps, a sagging mass of flatline towns which hadn't made it into the twenty second century - alive and technically equal to everyone else, but actually breaking up, losing their cohesion like skin on the face of someone very ill for a long time. The nose might still look sharp, the eyes bright, the cheekbones in place; but the flesh in between falls loosely between the peaks. (Smith 1996: 184)

These examples from cyberpunk provide a more up-to-date, relevant to the Order, version of what Benjamin termed, 'the gaze of the alienated person. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of living still bestowed a conciliatory gleam over the growing destitution of human beings in the metropolis.' (cited in Frisby 1986: 228). They describe the price paid in terms of lost sociality for the solipsistic, individually-internalised enjoyment of flows for their own sake. Kunzru describes this paradoxical over-identification with impersonal forces felt at a very personal level. He describes, 'Guy Swifts' personal relationship to the future ... he felt it was physically connected to him, as if through some unexplained mechanism futurity was feeding back into his body: an alien fibrillation, a flutter of potential.' (Kunzru 2004: 20). As with the flâneur who liked to feel *in* the crowd but not *of* the crowd, being part of the Order tends to make others merely backdrop-filling extras for the lifted-out generic non-space Lash recognises as the Order's milieu: 'Surrounded by

people on their way to other places, he would feel cocooned in the even light and neutral colours of a present that seemed to be declaring its own provisionality, its status as non-destination space.' (ibid: 20) Living in the future like Guy Swift means that you are 'Unlike the package tourists, the high-street shoppers and all the other yearners and strivers, your existence is extreme.' (ibid: 21). For Swift, 'The thrills are tremendous, but they come at a price' (ibid: 21). This 'price' is two-fold. Firstly, it takes the form of a different form of immersion to that envisaged by Lash, Swift (the arch-communicant), 'knew that the tiniest lapse of concentration, the smallest failure of response would send him tumbling down towards the place of discount clothing outlets, woodchip wallpaper and economy chicken pieces.' (ibid: 21) Despite Lash claim that there are no longer transcendent perspectives, Swift fears the failure of being re-immersed in the masses that definitely are below his current social standing. Secondly, since, 'Sometimes at night his twitching took on a regular myoclonic rhythm, a constant cycle of fall and recovery. Boom and bust' (ibid: 21), this 'natural attitude' of the technological phenomenology sought by Lash seems a disturbingly invasive one.

The vestigial manifestations of modern processes of urban spatialization initially provided the flâneur with fodder for his curiosity and entertainment (see Tester et al 1994) but the onward march of capitalist modernity proved too rapid for the survival of the idly strolling dandy. As the nineteenth century progressed, the flâneur increasingly lost his aura of detached superiority and care-free flippancy. In Balzac's portrayal, for example, the flâneur is said to become: 'a truly hapless soul, whom the city overwhelms rather than fascinates. Far from empowering the walker in the street, the altered urban context disables the individual. Distance and inactivity no longer connote superiority to the milieu, but suggest quite the opposite - estrangement, alienation, anomie.' (Ferguson in Tester 1994: 33). In this context, Guy Swift is merely the latest in a long line of literary figures who symbolise the essential emptiness at the heart of the Order. Perhaps the most symbolic of these figures is contained in Robert Von Musil's novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man without Qualities). The following is part of his description of the apparent death of a pedestrian (his ultimate fate is never revealed), knocked down by a lorry in the rapidly urbanizing city of Vienna:

Motor-cars came shooting out of deep, narrow streets into the shallows of bright squares. Dark patches of pedestrian bustle formed into cloudy streams. Where stronger lines of speed transected their loose-woven hurrying, they clotted up - only to trickle on all the faster then and after a few ripples regain their regular pulse-beat ... the general movement pulsed through the streets ... Like all big cities, it consisted of irregularity, change, sliding forward, not keeping in step, collision of things and affairs, and fathomless points of silence in between, of paved ways and wilderness, of one great rhythmic throb and the perpetual discord and dislocation of all opposing rhythms, and as a whole resembled a seething, bubbling fluid in a vessel consisting of the solid material of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions. (Musil 1979 [1930]: 3 & 4)

Musil's scene neatly represents the point at which the flâneur becomes overwhelmed rather than fascinated. He counterposes the human and biological (like blood the crowd 'clotted up' and has a 'regular pulse-beat') with the technological and its inhuman movement of increasing abstraction. Like the geometric lattices of light used by Gibson to portray the Matrix, in Musil 'stronger lines of speed' transect the more organic movements of the crowd to create a bubbling vessel that resonates with Marx's description of capitalism's effects as 'all that's solid melts into air'. (Marx & Engels 1977 [1848]: 38)) Musil's description thus represents more than just the literary death of the flâneur. It is a vivid portrayal of the fatal implications the 'lines of speed' have for non-capitalist life-worlds, whether they come in the form of a lorry or a fiber-optic cable.

Memory & Mourning

... the empirical world of technology and shock experience and speed has levelled Being and Reason into a wasteland, but in which *the transcendental moment is preserved as memory and mourning.*' (Lash 2002: ix [emphasis mine])

This stuff is simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile (sic) Row ... But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. (Gibson 2003: 18)

In contrast to Lash's generally go-to attitude, his rather more negative Benjamin-inspired notion that memory and mourning provide Being and Reason's best hopes of dealing with the pervasive Chokerlebnis of the Order, actually fits better with the logic of his general argument in which he otherwise fails to make clear how sociality can be built within a cultural environment that appears to have most of the characteristics of a speeded-up version of Lukács's theory of social reification (Lukács 1968 [1922]). Lash offers up Lefebvre's work as a valuable theoretical framework with which to create the situated semiotics needed to make social sense of this situation. He argues that it provides a radical materialist critique with which to deal effectively with the complex admixture of the abstract and material in the spaces produced (not reproduced - because reproduction based upon the previous mechanical, manufacturing order has collapsed) in the new global Order: 'It is the imminent impossibility of reproduction, in whose stead all we have is production: incessant production; the production of flux. Of flow. At stake are both psychic and social systems.' (ibid: 214) This recognition in the last few pages of *Critique of Information* is resonant of McLuhan and his claim that electronic technologies represent the 'outring' of the human sensorium into the world at large. Lash devotes a significant amount of space to McLuhan's mediology but underestimates the extent to which McLuhan was wary of the potentially catastrophic nature of this psychic and social stake. A closer reading of McLuhan's work suggests he had more ambivalent feelings about media effects than he is normally allowed. Because of McLuhan's posthumous re-adoption by the techno-evangelists, who have brought him out "from behind a potted palm again" (Moos 1997: xvi) we tend to forget that whilst 'McLuhan predicted

packages would be obsolete, he himself was being packaged in a manner which ensured that the implications of what he was saying would be deflected, diffused, and deferred, filed with playful bewilderment'. (Moos 1997:140) In *Understanding Media*, he hints at the possible scale of the psychic stake by suggesting that belief in the essential neutrality of the media we use, 'is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.' (McLuhan 1995 [1964]: 18), and similarly suggestive of dark consequences: 'The threat of Stalin or Hitler was external. The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed'.(ibid: 18)

Memory and mourning are all that is left in the face of *Chokerlebnis* because, along with the conditions from which one can create a transcendental critique, Lash seems to have removed the basis upon which he could be critical of the technological life forms' tendency to remove particularity from the grounded. He therefore uncritically describes technological forms of life as 'disembedded', and again uncritically, asserts that this 'lifted out space of placelessness is a generic space' (Lash 2002: 21). Notwithstanding his assertion that commodification is subordinate to the mode of the interface, the contours of the Order's new regime of power (the cultural space that has supplanted the social) are disproportionately commodified because as Lash himself points out, commerce has a pre-existing suitability for these new modes of space since, 'Brand environments are lifted out, generic spaces.' (ibid: 23) The resulting wasteland for Being and Reason is manifested in such extreme forms as Disney, with Baudrillard (1983) suggesting that Disney's excesses merely prevent us from realizing how much the Western world is already fundamentally Disney-like. The hyperreality of "Mousewitz" and "Duckau" threatens to become the template for already increasingly thematised urban centres where past manufacturing activities are re-packaged for tourist consumption:

Disney invokes an urbanism without producing a city. Rather, it produces a kind of aura-stripped hypercity, a city with billions of citizens (all who would consume) but no residents. Physicalized yet conceptual, it's the utopia of transience, a place where everyone is just passing through. This is its message for the city to be, a place everywhere and nowhere,

assembled only through constant motion. (Sorkin 1992: 231)

There is indeed literary evidence of the role played by memory and mourning but again it is not inspiring. Despite attempts to escape them, ('Memories are nothing more than a book you've read and lost, not a bible for the rest of your life'. [Marshall Smith 1996: 301]) there remains, amidst the flux and flows of the Order, a wistful presence of anachronistically simple objects valued for their ability to halt, even if only momentarily, the inexorable flows of the Order: 'I passed a couple of Children's trikes laid casually on the path, but a nudge with my foot proved what I already knew. They were welded to the path. Show trikes, for atmosphere. Nobody here was letting their kids just ride around the neighbourhood. (ibid: 100) Such nostalgia is dealt with in a more thematically substantial manner in Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986) where the character Marly discovers a rather old-fashioned robot akin to those presently used in car-assembly work. It is called the 'box-maker' and its purpose is to produce antiquated pieces of art in which that consist of an odd collection of family objects.

Gibson neatly summarises the significance of these apparently anachronistic objects produced by the box-maker in terms of a 'slow-motion hurricane of lost things' (Gibson cited in Cavallaro 2000: 62). The oxymoronic choice of words is instructive. Set against the overwhelming pace of change around them, such objects achieve a compensatory power through their very stillness. In *Pattern Recognition* (2003) this power is something that Cayce clings on to in an attempt to make sense of another form of unreal slow-motion hurricane: the 9-11 tragedy. At the time of the crash, Cayce was in a street nearby and when the first plane to hit the Twin Towers passes over her very low, with a hint of the internal/external blurring of reality she assumes that 'They must be making a film'. In a novel whose key focus is the surface level and essential insubstantiality of commodities in the Order, it is once again significant that an emphasis is placed upon antiques so that we read how:

She had watched a single petal fall, from a dead rose, in the tiny display window of an eccentric Spring Street dealer in antiques ... The dead roses, arranged in an off-white Fiestaaware vase, appeared to have been there for several months. They would have been

white, when fresh, but now looked like parchment ... the objects in the window seemed to change in accordance with some peculiar poetry of their own, and she was in the habit, usually, of pausing to look when she passed this way. The fall of the petal, and somewhere a crash, taken perhaps as some impact of large trucks, one of those unexplained events in the sonic backdrop of lower Manhattan. Leaving her sole witness to this minute fall. Perhaps there is a siren then or sirens, but there are always sirens, in New York. (Gibson 2003: 135-136)

Later, on her way up to a friend's apartment and before they both witness the impact of the second plane: 'As the elevator doors close behind her, she closes her eyes and see the dry petal falling. The loneliness of objects. Their secret lives.' (ibid: 136) When Roquentin, Sartre's protagonist in *Nausea* (1983 [1938]), is overcome by the sheer facticity of a chestnut tree, the experience takes place in the domesticated nature of a city park. By contrast, Gibson gives Cayce an exclusively urban existential moment. Encased in glass, nature's entombed particularity is presented as a minute particle of the surrounding urban maelstrom a point adumbrated further by the backdrop of the disembodied, haunting wail of sirens. The apparent autonomy of the window objects which 'seemed to change in accordance with some peculiar poetry of their own' seems to appear as a nostalgically manageable counterpoint to the rest of the novel's (and by extension Gibson's extended oeuvre) focus upon Marx's description of the topsy-turvy nature of a society built upon flows in which people begin to circulate in the world of objects/technologies rather than vice versa. Despite Lash's claims for the novel implications of the Order, at least the novel itself has not departed far from Benjamin's mournful understanding of a modernity as 'a world of dead objects' (Lash 2002: 61) surrounded by the crashes of lorries in Vienna and New York at the turn of different centuries.

Conclusion - Adorno in the living room

In an age of generalized informational indifference, the critic can make a difference. (Lash 2002: xii)

... for the last ten minutes, watch in hand, he had been counting the cars, carriages, and trams, and the pedestrians' faces, blurred by distance, all of which filled the network of his gaze with a whirl of hurrying forms. He was estimating the speed, the angle, the dynamic force of masses being propelled past, which drew the eye after them swift as lightning, holding it, letting it go, forcing the attention - for an infinitesimal instant of time - to resist them, to snap off, and then to jump to the next and rush after that ... "It doesn't matter what one does," the Man Without Qualities said to himself, shrugging his shoulders. "In a tangle of forces like this it doesn't make a scrap of difference." (Musil 1979 [1930]: 7 - 8)

This paper has argued that the problem with the Order is not so much the death of critical theory as the death of the grounded life-world represented in the fate of the Viennese pedestrian and the dessicated rose petal. This is what makes the new sociality desired by Lash part of the problem and not the solution. The desire to live in a truly immanent Order perhaps requires greater sensitivity to the continuities this Order has with the 'dead zones' of a world where *Living on Thin Air* (Leadbetter 2000) is a death-dealing reality rather than merely a title for New Age corporate techno-porn. Lash's above claim that the critic can still make a difference, is a view diametrically opposed in Musil's narrative from the transcendent perspective of a man in the upper story living room of a miniature chateau that overlooks the death of the pedestrian. The man pointedly described as *The Man Without Qualities*, is presented to us in terms of a time-and-motion Taylorist functionary measuring with a stop-watch the impersonal vectors and implicit matrices lying behind the frenetic social pace of modernity he looks down upon. Like Lash he recognises the social primacy circulation has assumed in which people are reduced to constituting 'a whirl of hurrying forms' and its enframing quality in the way that flow 'filled the network of his gaze'. Unlike Lash, and perhaps more like Adorno the oft-charged elitist, Musil's critic reserves his right to an elevated perspective and refuses to fall into the trap of immersing himself in the deterministic 'tangle of forces' - impervious as they are to interference and redirection.

Lash approvingly cites, with respect to the Order, Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati* (the embracement of fate). Nietzsche, echoing the previously cited notion of activists as spiders, also called for:

The madly thoughtless shattering and dismantling of all foundations, their dissolution into a continual evolving that flows ceaselessly away, the tireless unspinning and historicising of all there has ever been by modern man, the great cross-spider at the node of the cosmic web - all this may concern and dismay moralists, artists, the pious, even statesmen; we shall for once let it cheer us ... (Nietzsche, cited in Frisby, 1986: 28 [emphasis in original])

Such amor fati is problematic for two reasons. Past experience of the corporate recuperation of hackers who had previously voiced similar sentiments (e.g. Chip Tango in Taylor 1999: 170) would seem to mitigate against the concept on a pragmatic level, whilst more symbolically, in Musil one can see an early warning of the danger to be found in the Order's fathomless points of silence. Lash's analysis is strongest when it dares to pose more questions about the Order than answers: 'What happens when meaning is not successfully transmitted over generations, when signifiers refuse to signify? What happens when death, previously on the outside and constituting the existential meaning of life, is now on the inside and all amongst us?' (Lash 2002: 215) Despite Lash's best efforts, the essential political question remains. Whither critique when, like a Viennese pedestrian, it has been hit by an informational juggernaut? Then again, perhaps Lash and other theorists of the Order, distracted by the beeps of its global positioning system, are driving the lorry?

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