

John Hill

**DON'T JUST SIT THERE
SHOUTING AT THE
TELEVISION, GET UP AND
CHANGE THE CHANNEL:
A NETWORKED MODEL OF
COMMUNICATION IN THE
CULTURAL POLITICS OF DEBT**

**APRJA Volume 6, Issue 1, 2017
ISSN 2245-7755**

CC license: 'Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike'.

In his closing remarks from the first episode of the 1972 television series *Ways of Seeing*, the writer and critic John Berger urges the viewer to consider what he has shown them – a visual essay arguing that reproduction has changed the way we see painting such that images have become a form of information – but to “be sceptical”. He tells viewers to be wary of their passive acceptance of the one-way broadcast medium and that only when access to television is “extended beyond its present narrow limits” can there be dialogue within modern communication media. Immediately following this a title card explains that many of the ideas in the programme are taken from Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.

This short section of the film contains at least three ideas of what communication is and can be. This essay will discuss these different models of communication — dialogue, broadcast and networked — and, following the work of cultural theorist Tiziana Terranova, show how they appear in and influence contemporary politics. In the final section it will build on the work of Maurizio Lazzarato and attempt to show how the networked model of communication, when applied to our understanding of debt relations, might help us think differently about the politics of debt and potential for political action within networked debt relations.

Dialogue, broadcast, network

The dialogue that Berger calls for is an example of what Terranova describes as the “traditional conception of the dialectical game” using “argument involving the interplay of truth and persuasion” (*Network Culture* 15).

In its production style, however, *Ways of Seeing* shows that Berger is acutely aware of the “means of reproduction” he is using. Far from being a conversation, the form of communication provided by television is more the type described by Claude Shannon’s “Mathematical Theory of Communication”.

Shannon is perhaps best known for his diagram of the communication process, comprising a “source, a transmitter, the message, the channel of communications and the receiver” (Terranova, *Network Culture* 14). The transmitter must encode the message in to a form that can be carried by the channel and then successfully decoded by the receiver. Developed to address the specific problems of how signals become distorted by their own physical properties — for example, the electrons carrying the current in a wire — Shannon’s innovation was to apply the statistical techniques used to model thermodynamics to the uncertainties of communication. With this he was able to formulate the maximum amount of information, of any kind, that could be sent down a channel (Shannon and Weaver 18). The mathematical model of communication did not concern itself with the reduction of noise or the amplification of signal, but instead sought to maximise the efficiency with which a channel could be used, concerning itself with what Terranova calls the “minimum condition of communication” (*Network Culture* 17).

Berger acknowledges, and plays with, the power that broadcast gives him, but that power is in part based on how the relationship of sender to receiver is conceived. As Terranova points out, in mathematical communication “interlocutors... are *assumed* to be on the same side” (*Network Culture* 15), and therefore broadcast is fundamentally reliant on a receptive audience, one already open to the message. In order for this to be achieved, and for the statistical properties of the message to be maintained, sender

and receiver must necessarily have an existing understanding of what the possible messages will be, allowing then to separate signal from noise.

It is this limitation of possible messages that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer critique in their essay *The Culture Industry*. Contrasting the liberal, dialogical, two way communication of the telephone, and the type of subjectivity that it could produce, they see broadcast as inherently limiting, turning participants into listeners and subjecting them to “programs that are all exactly the same” (Adorno and Horkheimer 121). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the power of the culture industry lay not simply in its control of mass media, but in its ability to define and construct the receiver, “classifying, organizing and labeling consumers” (123). Using statistical methods with the same roots as those used in thermodynamics and information theory (Terranova, *Network Culture* 28), consumers are corralled into categories that reflect the broadcaster’s pre-conceived ideas about who they are and what they want. The result, or at least the desired effect, is that responses become “semi-automatic” such that “no scope is left for the imagination” (Adorno and Horkheimer 127).

Berger’s call to open up broadcast media might be seen as a call for a return to liberal dialogue such as that offered by the telephone but his understanding of the informational quality of the reproduced image suggests another important aspect, or consequence, of information theory and its basis in statistics. Although, if properly encoded with an appropriate redundancy, a message can be accurately decoded with a high degree of probability, information theory does not guarantee being absolutely sure. Rather than being a reproduction or representation of the information source, the message received always has a probabilistic relationship to the message sent. It

is not possible to determine absolutely if a signal is decoded to the same message that was originally encoded. The audience may “receive images and meanings which are arranged” in the case of Berger, but they are able, and in this case encouraged, to interpret them differently, just as the programme examines not “the paintings themselves... but the way we now see them”. In this way Berger’s television series, and subsequent book, are examples of the shift, away from the primacy of transmission in understanding culture, to the importance of reception. While the Frankfurt School approach of Adorno and Horkheimer focused on the production of mass, broadcast culture, work done by the likes of Stuart Hall turned its attention to the possibilities that lay in the “difference between the encoding and the decoding” (Wark). Rather than facilitating the ‘minimum condition of communication’ here, information operates as a form of *disconnection* between the sender and receiver, allowing for positive creativity in the act of reception. The failure of television to become a dialogical media of the type Berger had called for — either through public access cable or the ‘algedonic’ viewer feedback systems of cybernetician Stafford Beer (Pickering 269) — meant that “resistance to media power had to be located in the viewer” (Terranova, “Systems and Networks” 117)

If Adorno and Horkheimer were more focused on the transmission of culture, and Hall’s cultural studies on its reception, more recent work by Terranova and others turns its attention to the systems that connect the two, the channel or channels and the information itself. Drawing on the work of Gilbert Simondon, she describes an *informational milieu* in which meaning is “increasingly inseparable from the wider informational processes that determine the spread of images and words, sounds and affects” (*Network Culture* 2). How, she asks, “can we still believe

that information simply flows from sender to receiver (or from producer to consumer) without any of the noise, indeterminacy, and uncertainty having any effect on the process at all at some level?" ("Communication beyond Meaning" 67) Instead of simply the connection of pre-existing sender/receiver nodes, Terranova sees communication as occurring between what Simondon identified as pre-individuals. Information acts as an individuating force, creating the nodes through the act of connection, but never fully defining or describing them, such that divergent and conflicting tendencies and potentials of the pre-individual remain. As a consequence, unlike the statistical stability of thermodynamic systems, all connections, including measurement of the state of the system, have effects that determine and delimit the things that are measured. Every measurement, being both within the system and itself probabilistic, has the perverse effect of multiplying indeterminacy; "the more knowledge is generated about the system, the more the uncertainty." (Terranova, "Systems and Networks" 124). In unstable systems like the milieu of networked communication, measurement of a channel's indeterminacy — its signal-to-noise ratio — is never enough to insure a signal's lossless transmission. Indeterminacy can never be fully accounted or compensated for.

For Terranova, however, information's disconnecting effect doesn't simply render it self-referential, socially constructed, without "anchorage to any social or bodily referent" ("Communication beyond Meaning" 62) and therefore without meaning. Unlike representation or signification, which find their meanings in relation to other images and signs, information's meaning exists in its relation to a material reality that can be both "observed and experimented with". Like the "assignifying machines" that Maurizio Lazzarato develops from the work of Félix Guattari, information is non-representational, creating "diagrams"

that act "directly on material flows... functioning whether they signify something for someone or not" (*Signs and Machines* 40). Although neither linear nor deterministic, the meaning of information lies in its function, its effects on the material world through the "chain of events by which it is set in motion and which it sets in motion" (Terranova, "Communication beyond Meaning" 66).

Suhail Malik's critique of what he calls the "statistical-quantitative model" (31) of information proposes a similar basis for meaning in a material reality. For him information's meaning must be "situated" — only meaningful within a system — and ceases to be information outside of it (35). Malik emphasises the necessity for a system's capacity for mutable memory in order to give information a meaningful context. It is not, however, that memory is the store of pre-defined possibilities that the information selects from, as with the mathematical model. Rather memory, at its most abstract level, is the organisation of the system itself, while information is the ongoing production of meaning through the alteration of the system's structure (Malik 46). Here we can see a connection to the autopoietic theories of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, not only in their emphasis on organisation over structure — the relations between components rather than the components themselves — but also on the role of the observer in the production of meaning (Maturana). In Malik's description the system's memory has the function of self-observation, allowing changes in structure to be meaningful in relation to a persistent organisation.

Both Terranova and Malik view information's interaction in unstable systems — its capacity to both reflect and affect, determine and individuate — as giving it the potential to produce new forms of organisation and new meaning, an "active power of invention" (Terranova, "Communication beyond

Meaning” 68). Meaning is both determining of and determined by the whole of the system, and necessarily situated within it. Thus what Terranova calls the “cultural politics of information” — the struggle over what it is that the systems of networked communication do — must be orientated not simply to the nodes of transmission and reception but to the entire network of communication. This necessitates a “questioning of the codes and channels that generate the distribution of probabilities” and requires “renewed and intense struggle around the definition of the limits and alternatives” (*Network Culture* 25)

Political communication

How communication is understood, how it is modelled, is one of the ways in which the distribution of possibilities is determined, and alternatives rendered more or less likely. Dialogical, broadcast and networked communication all open up and close down certain possibilities. Terranova describes the broadcast model of political communication as imagining a “circuit between the TV screen, the newspaper headline, and the ballot box” (“Communication beyond Meaning” 60) where the job of the ‘communications manager’ is to amplify the signal to drown out the noise. Political messages are reduced — compressed — to messages with a redundancy that fits the channel, for example Tony Blair’s insistence in his 1996 Labour Party conference speech that his priorities for government were “education, education and education”, a soundbite with meaning that would be hard to distort no matter how noisy the channel. The current leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, has been criticised for his media strategy (Greenslade; Freedman) but this might in fact be a result of a conception of communication as traditional

dialogue, communication intended for public meetings rather than televised speeches and interviews. His opponents in the Labour Party continue to follow a ‘Blairite’ media strategy, yet lacking a message beyond their opposition to Corbyn’s leadership they are reduced to producing noise, disruptive signals that fills up the media channels and blocks Corbyn’s ability to communicate anything (Rayner). The current British Foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2013, describes this disruptive strategy, quoting Conservative Party campaign strategist Lynton Crosby, as “throwing a dead cat on the table, mate”. No one is going to talk about anything except the cat.

While Terranova suggests that strategies like these show an understanding of information as networked — seeing it as passing not simply from sender to receiver but along a complex chain of connections, each of which might alter the message (“Communication beyond Meaning” 67–68) — they still operate with a focus on broadcast’s minimum conditions, establishing connection. Recent political events seem to suggest that the domination of politics by broadcast communication is no longer certain. Jeremy Corbyn was re-elected Labour Party leader, and Hilary Clinton, who ‘won’ each of her televised debates (Saad), was not able to secure enough electoral college votes to win the presidency. The circuit between TV screen and ballot box seems broken, or at least much less closed than in once was. One explanation for this lies in what the broadcast model is unable to account for: nonlinearity. In nonlinear network communication, Terranova identifies “non-proportionality... between input and output, a tendency of systems subjected to amplification to produce deviations and distortions”. Drowning out a competing message, with either signal or noise, can lead to “feedback or retroaction—cynicism and anger” that

can produce effects at the “biophysical processes of affection” (“Communication beyond Meaning” 60). To understand the erratic, nonlinear language used by Donald Trump as simply noise disrupting Clinton’s signal fails to grasp its function to connote an open, probabilistic relation to meaning that seeks not to transmit an undistorted, or undistortable, message but to create a distribution of possibilities that delimit alternatives (Prasse-Freeman). Trump’s statements may not be true, but the possibility of their truth becomes available, where previously it was excluded.

Understanding political communication using a networked model is not simply a case of opposing linear with nonlinear communication, of mainstream media with social media, or television with the internet. Rather it is about seeing the whole of the communication system as complex, unstable and indeterminate. Networked communication includes within it both broadcast and dialogue but does not separate them out. Each part of the system has the capacity to determine the potential of the other, with meaning a product of the change they effect on the system as a whole. Understanding broadcast as existing within a networked model reopens the potential for invention that the statistical model of information must foreclose in order to function. The politics of broadcast communication is necessarily hegemonic and, like the hegemony of Chantal Mouffe, “predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities” (Mouffe). The politics of the open network neither requires nor seeks hegemony, instead possessing “a material potential for dynamic transformations... that neither the liberal ethics of journalism, the cynicism of public relations officers, nor the theory of cultural hegemony can really address” (Terranova, “Communication beyond Meaning” 70)..

Diagrams of debt

In this final section I wish to consider another area where the cultural politics of information makes itself apparent and discuss how a networked model of communication might allow us not just to understand the contemporary cultural-political situation but act upon and affect it. Drawing on the recent work of Lazzarato — which emphasises the dual role of debt and machinic, asignifying systems in the management of populations — I wish to question how he constructs and uses models of communication and how an alternative conception of financialised debt might lead to a more open and active field of political action.

In *The Making of the Indebted Man* Lazzarato provides detail on how debt exploits “non-chronological time” — nonlinear and indeterminate — mutable by choice, decision and action. “Granting credit” he says, “requires one to estimate that which is inestimable — future behaviour and events — and to expose oneself to the uncertainty of time” (45). In order to do this profitably, the same statistical methods found in thermodynamics and information theory are applied to determine the creditworthiness of an individual. Financialisation, he says, is the mechanism for managing debt, and the debtor-creditor relationship, with finance “controlling the temporality of action” and locking up possibilities “within an established framework while at the same time projecting them into the future” (*The Making of the Indebted Man* 71). Much like the statistical delimiting of sender-receiver communication, he views finance as setting limits on the potential for a break in the linear relation of the present to the future. For him “debt simply neutralizes time, time as the creation of new possibilities... the raw material of all political, social, or esthetic change” (*The Making of the Indebted Man*

49), with this “foreclosure of alternatives, aggressively and subtly pursued at all levels by neoliberal governmentality”.

For Lazzarato debt plays a key role in the individuation of subjects, acting to balance the powerful desubjectivising forces of asignifying “machinic enslavement” (*Signs and Machines* 25). This enslavement draws on the ‘molecular’ pre-individual components of subjectivity and puts them to use as components of a larger systems. Debt’s role is then to reterritorialise ‘molar’ subjectivity that can be held accountable, for example in the form of the entrepreneurial subject of “human capital” impelled to take on “the risks and costs for which neither businesses nor the State are willing to pay” (*Signs and Machines* 53).

In a similar way to Lazzarato, Michel Feher sees debt relationships as being key to the formation of contemporary subjectivity — what he calls the neoliberal condition — but understands this as based in the drive to maximise our credibility, creditworthiness, or self-esteem. Rather than an entrepreneurial conception of human capital, this financialised subject aims to maximise their potential future value upon which credit can be given, never seeking to determine or realise that value in the present. For Feher, credit-seeking is also a process of individuation and subjectivisation, attempting to maximise self-worth in order to be seen as worthy of credit (*Thank You for Sharing*), but this is always based on a potential, rather than determined future.

Feher sees indeterminacy as an essential component of entrepreneurial capitalism, one that the neo-liberal project was trying to rescue from risk-averse, or risk-mitigating, social democracy (*Improve Your Credit*). While credit-scoring attempts to estimate a person’s future worth, and uncertainty of that future occurring, its function is not to limit risk but to price it; any risk can be taken as

long as it is quantified. Financial instruments, such as debt insurance and credit default swaps, re-sell the uncertainty that remains in the credit-debt relationship, with derivatives of a debt then used to mitigate, spread and often conceal risk (Simkovic) rather than eliminate it. While debt can operate in the way Lazzarato suggests, as a promise of the continuity of the future with the present (*Signs and Machines* 48), finance makes no promises, rather it is a machinic diagram, structuring the multiplicity of indeterminate futures to maintain profit, and power, whatever the outcome.

While Lazzarato and Feher are in agreement about the subjectivising effects of debt, there may be differences in their positions on quite what those effects are. Feher sees the indebted, or rather credit-seeking subject, as a “portfolio manager... of the self” where different parts of the self can be offered up for evaluation. Whereas, in his recent work on asignifying semiotics, Lazzarato describes how “the component parts of subjectivity function as inputs and outputs of the ‘television’ assemblage” (*Signs and Machines* 47) but sees debt’s function as the regrouping of these parts into an individual subject. Lazzarato’s reference point for communication is almost always broadcast. His earlier writing on television views it, just like debt, as an apparatus for neutralising political events and subjectivities (Toscano 84). While the machinic assemblage he describes in part resembles the network model of communication proposed by Terranova, its ‘television’ qualities remain in its structure of inputs and outputs. For Lazzarato debt is an input into the asignifying financial machine, where it is “torn to pieces” and reassembled as an output of capital (*Signs and Machines* 48). Seen in this way Lazzarato’s network assemblage is simply a complex channel to transmission, a component in what remains Shannon’s model of transmitter-channel-receiver.

If, as I have argued above in the case of political media, you reverse this model, to view linear transmission as a component of the network, then the debt relations appear much more like communication in the informational milieu than the linear transmission of broadcast. Debt remains subjectivising, acting like Simondon's communication to creating the nodes of the network, but there are no inputs or outputs. In this model the 'manager' of self described by Feher is not external to the network but already a part of it, individuating and subjectivising through the creation of connections between parts, entering into financialised debt relations by allowing more and more of those parts to be measured, evaluated and credit-scored.

In my view Lazzarato's modelling of debt as broadcast, establishing a connection between creditor to debtor, is no longer sufficient under debt's financialisation, based as it is on the instability of the present's connection to the future. Rather than its ability to foreclose possibilities, we should see the power of finance as its ability to shape the functioning and organisation of the network. Unlike the individual subjective qualities — "guilt, responsibility, loyalty, trust" (Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines* 48) — that give linear creditor-debtor relations their power, financialised debt's power, which is to say its *meaning*, is based in the memory, that is the organisation of the system itself. As Malik shows, all information, all connections that comprise and shape the network, are given their meaning by the organisation of the system as a whole. Power and meaning are not fixed or foreclosed, but altered with every new connection made.

Lazzarato's proposal to counter debt's restrictive effects on desire and action is a product of his model. He argues that political action must position itself on the edges of the system "between the molecular and the molar" (*Signs and Machines* 36) such that

we reconfigure the types of subjectivities without becoming a subjectless component in a system. Whereas Feher's suggestion is an embracing of our neoliberal condition and to use the capital we possess, even if its human rather than financial, for investee activism, demanding that neoliberalism's promises — "pleasure, a sense of accomplishment, recognition, experimentation with new forms of life" (*Signs and Machines* 53) — are fulfilled.

A network model of debt also suggests a way forward. Terranova's call for a renewed cultural politics of information that takes into account "dynamics of information diffusion" within the "crowded and uneven communication milieu" of the network ("Communication beyond Meaning" 53–54) reopens the possibilities for action and invention that broadcast debt shuts down. If the functioning of the network is not dependent on hegemony, all possibilities for action remain open. Imaginings and desires for a different future become information that affects the system as a whole. With a network diagram of debt, where the power and memory of a system is in its organisation, politics appears as the creation of connections between components of the network. All connections are information that by definition alter the network's structure and affect its organisation. Shifts in centrality — that is in the importance of a component to the functioning of the network as a whole — become the means by which power relations are altered. Repositioning the self away from being an input or output to instead take on an active role in the network allows for the possibility of 'nonproportional' effects on a nonlinear and indeterminate future. Not dependent on the linear power-law dynamics of broadcast, where alternatives can simply be drowned out and dismissed as noise, the network allows for different kinds of centrality, where small, peripheral acts can affect the organisation of the system as a whole. The

cultural politics of networked debt become not about avoidance, disconnection, or even resistance, but about how we change the network through its use.

Works cited

Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso, 1997. Print.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. BBC, 1972. www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk. Web.

Feher, Michel. *Improve Your Credit: What Human Capital Wants*. 2014. <https://vimeo.com/86138288>. Web.

—. *Thank You for Sharing: The Social Life of Human Capital*. 2015. www.gold.ac.uk/visual-cultures/life/guest-lectures/. Web.

—. *The Neoliberal Condition and Its Predecessors: Redemption, Fulfillment, Appreciation*. 2013. <https://vimeo.com/80882516>. Web.

Freedman, Des. "Jeremy Corbyn's Media Strategy Is Smarter than His Critics Realise." *The New Statesman*, Aug. 2016. www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/08/jeremy-corbyns-media-strategy-smarter-his-critics-realise. Web.

Greenslade, Roy. "Does Jeremy Corbyn Have a Media Strategy? Apparently Not." *The Guardian*, 14 Sept. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/sep/14/does-jeremy-corbyn-have-a-media-strategy-apparently-not>. Web.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014. Print.

—. *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012. Print.

Malik, Suhail. "Information and Knowledge." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, Feb. (2005): 29–49. Print.

Maturana, Humbert R. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979. Print.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." *ART&RESEARCH*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer (2007). www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html. Web.

Pickering, Andrew. *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print.

Prasse-Freeman, Elliott. "Why Elites Lose at Trump's Language Game." *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/02/why-elites-lose-at-trumps-language-game>. Web.

Rayner, Gordon. "Labour Meltdown (Continued): 47 Resignations, but Jeremy Corbyn Fights on." *The Telegraph*, 27 June (2016). www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/labour-meltdown-continued-44-resignations-but-jeremy-corbyn-figh/. Web.

Saad, Lydia. "Clinton Wins Third Debate, Gains Ground as 'Presidential'." *Gallup*, 24 Oct. (2016). Web www.gallup.com/poll/196643/clinton-wins-third-debate-gains-ground-presidential.aspx. Web.

Wark, McKenzie. "#Theory21c (Part 1)." *Public Seminar*, 17 Feb. (2015). www.publicseminar.org/2015/02/theory21c-part-1/. Web.

Shannon, Claude E., and Warren Weaver. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1949. Print.

Simkovic, Michael. "Secret Liens and the Financial Crisis of 2008." SSRN Scholarly Paper, ID 1323190, *Social Science Research Network*, 4 Jan. (2009). [papers.ssrn.com. https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1323190](https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1323190). Web.

Terranova, Tiziana. "Communication beyond Meaning: On the Cultural Politics of Information." *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2004): 51–73. Print.

—. "Debt and Autonomy: Lazzarato and the Constituent Powers of the Social." *The New Reader*, no. 1, (2014). thenewreader.org/Issues/1/DebtAndAutonomy. Web.

—. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 2004. Print.

—. "Of Systems and Networks: Digital Regeneration and the Pragmatics of Postmodern Knowledge." *Cultural Capitalism. Politics After New Labour*, edited by Timothy Bewes and Jeremy Gilbert. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2000, 117–133. Print.

Toscano, Alberto. "Vital Strategies: Maurizio Lazzarato and the Metaphysics of Contemporary Capitalism." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, no. 6, Nov. (2007): 71–91. Print.