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Review of “An Aesthesis of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Technology, by Anna Munster.”

Tommaso Venturini

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In the last few years, modern societies seem to have grown increasingly fond of networks. Not only have the Internet and the Web progressively infiltrated all sectors of our collective life, but networks have also been established as one of the dominant metaphors of our scientific and popular cultures. Recently, everything seems to have turned into a network. Ecosystems have turned into graphs of interacting species. Finance has turned into flows of transactions binding actors and markets. We see our friends and relatives as a social network. Our cities have become webs of transportation systems. Thinking becomes a maze of neural connections.

Images of networks are everywhere. They decorate buildings and objects; they are printed on t-shirts and posters; they colonise the desktop of our computers and the walls of our airports. Networks have become the emblem of modernity, the very form of its imagination.

And yet, as Anna Munster observes, the more that networks spread through our collective life and the less we understand them. Instead of helping us grasp the intricacy of our social existence, the overexposure to networks has progressively anesthetised us to the complexity of the modern world:

A network image can be rendered for just about every aspect of day-to-day life for which data exist, including financial information, organizational data, mapping systems of every variety, social networks, and technical ecologies of all kinds. But such images have become uniform, dominated by links and nodes, visualized as direct lines connecting dots. The very sameness of this rendering, operating across all and any networks, creates the idea of the network as infinitely transposable, in spite of what might be specifically visualized... Here networks mirrors networks, in a pervasive mimesis barely concealing a visual and conceptual slide into what I call network anesthesia – a numbing of our perception that turns us away from their unevenness and from the varying qualities of their relationality. (2013, 2-3)

In her book *An Aesthesis of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Technology*, Anna Munster proposes a most welcome attempt to challenge the visual and conceptual habits that have made our representation of networks trivial and inconsequential. Networks are not geometric patterns decorating the wallpaper of a collective existence. They are dynamic processes, lines of force and engines of transformation. This is the most important message of Munster’s book: networks are powerful representations, not because they resemble the phenomena that they denote, but because they are inhabited by the same rhythmic tensions:

A diagram of a network, then, does not look like a network but maintain the same qualities of relations – proximities, degrees of separation, and so forth – that a network also requires in order to form. Resemblance should here be considered a resonating rather than a hierarchy (a form) that arranges signifiers and signified within a sign. (2013, 24)

But in order to be sensitive again to the dynamism of networks, we have to escape most of the visual and conceptual habits that we have internalised about networks; this is the purpose of *An Aesthesis of Networks*.

To help us break free from the common places of network culture, Munster forces us to retrace the history of digital networks, discussing in detail the first diagrams of the Internet designed by Paul Baran (chapter 1); the development of Page Rank and Google Earth (chapter 2); the invention of the relational database (chapter 3); the phenomenon of viral YouTube video (chapter 4); and the analogies between neural and digital networks (chapter 5).

All of these technological innovations are compared and discussed against the practices of the new generation of digital and net artists. The detour through art is crucial in Munster's reasoning. It helps us to question bias and receive ideas, and forces us to recognise what we would otherwise take for granted:

A poetics of data *undermining* as a contemporary approach to diagramming an aesthesis of networks can be detected in the ways in which artists deploy browser extensions, aggregators and pug-ins in their humorous, absurdist unraveling of current data logics. There is also a poetic generated when such artistic endeavors create networked spaces where alternative congregations and gatherings of sociality might be invented. Such spaces cut across the predefined arenas for online interactions that the bulk of social media platforms have become.

Munster reconnects the daily practices of our networked existence to a tradition of philosophical reflections on the notions of perception, communication, and interactions. She does this by drawing on the notion of "experience" by William James, of "diagram" by Charles Sanders Peirce, of "dispositive" by Michel Foucault, of "refrain" by Félix Guattari, as well as many others.

An Aesthesis of Networks is a difficult book, but one that allows us to take a step back from our everyday experiences and reconsider them in the light of the larger design that networks reveal about our individual and collective lives. It slows down our rush through digital networks and helps us to disentangle our reflection from the many technological and conceptual webs that, while extending our thinking, also risk constraining it.