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SUPERHUMANITY CONVERSATIONS: JON GOODBUN RESPONDS TO DANIEL BIRNBAUM AND SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN, "SPATIAL THOUGHT"

The Labyrinth of the Immaterials

Jon Goodbun

Gordon Matta-Clarke, *Conical Intersect 6* (1975)

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and why did they come to inhabit a labyrinth on the fifth floor of the Pompidou Centre for a number of months during 1985? What did they do in there? And what did they say? What was the meaning of their occupation of *that* building, in *that* city?

In seeking to answer the questions above, we must consider the primary artefacts and texts through which the Immaterials emerge. In "**Spatial Thought**," Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein suggest that the project of *Les Immatériaux* has two main components: the exhibition itself and an essay by Lyotard published concurrently, entitled "The Sublime and the Avant-garde." However, as soon as these two components are engaged with, a network of other documents, records and artefacts emerge. In addition to the exhibition catalogue texts, there is an experimental interactive text inspired by the work of British cybernetic artist Roy Ascot entitled "Les Immatériaux—Epreuves d'écriture" in which twenty six intellectuals (including Jaques Derrida and Isabelle Stengers) recursively riffed upon fifty keywords given by Lyotard. Furthermore, there are a series of commentaries by Lyotard and others given before, during and after the exhibition, all of which become fascinatingly complicated when considered together with any attempt to critically comprehend the building and institution within which they take shape.

In this brief response I will argue that a specifically abstract spatial analysis is necessary to grasp what is at stake in Lyotard's conception of *Les Immatériaux* and why we need to study their host structure to fully understand the double interiority of their nature. More than thirty years after their occupation and on the fortieth anniversary of their architecture, the questions that arise from Jean-François Lyotard's spatial thought continue to be, as Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein suggest, *superhuman*.

Writing in 1977, Alan Colquhoun reminds us via Raymond Williams that the development of "culture" has, following the industrial revolution, become a task of the bourgeois state. In his essay ″Plateau Beaubourg,″ Colquhoun notes that the Pompidou was the product of "a government intellectually honest enough to admit the reality of political power and vigorous enough to act upon it."[1] He argues that the briefing documents of the Pompidou constituted a distinct political project that attempted to give both spatial and urban form to the production of a modern mass culture and voice to "aspirations, still latent" of "the people." Reflecting upon this problematic reassertion of principles from the historic avant-garde as a means of producing a new mass culture, Colquhoun writes: "we are presented with a conception of functionalist

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had happened in the intervening forty years." Importantly, for Colquhoun, this means that the Pompidou was formed around a double contradiction. Firstly, it was an institution performing the cultural tasks of the historical bourgeois beaux-art that adopted the avant-garde and populist stance. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, within the conception of the avant-garde itself was an unresolved contradiction in its desire to create a new human subject by giving form to forces—of modernization—that destroy the possibility of an autonomous human subject.

In the essay, Colquhoun demonstrates how the unique design proposal developed by Richard Rodgers and Renzo Piano further figures and intensifies these issues in ways that are important for our understanding of the Immaterials. Notably, he argues that by organizing the building around a paradoxically functionalist conception of radical flexibility and transparency, the architects suggest that it is not possible to give direct formal expression or mediation to any conception of culture. This left only the building services and movement of people as material for architectural expression, and "according to the schematic plan, human circulation and the movement of mechanical systems belong to the same category." In the same gesture, it's noted that the production of an interior landscape of flexibility demands "the invention of a new kind of bureaucrat—the programmer." Reflecting at various points upon what all of this means with respect to the possibility of architecture to give form to, and to assert the "positive values" of modernization, Colquhoun concludes that we are confronted with a building determined by:

> two fundamental decisions: that the building should be conceived of as a well-serviced shed and that its symbolism should be concerned with its mechanical support systems. The first has resulted in too schematic an interpretation of the brief … the second has resulted in a building which idealizes process to the exclusion of any idea of what this 'process' should be aimed. Both decisions presuppose that 'culture' is an absolute which cannot be mediated by any final form and that its achievement must be indefinitely postponed. If this were true, all language, not only that of architecture, would be impossible.

What then, is meant by "the immaterial" in Lyotard's exhibition, associated texts and ideas? We must start by stating that the immaterial is *not* the non-material, the virtual or the abstract, or at least not in any simple sense. In fact, if we are to use single terms from the binary pairs of western enlightenment thought—where matter is found

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non-pattern or *post-form*. But even this does not entirely capture what is in play, for it is the *experience of the end* of this entire "modern" world view constructed out of binary oppositions—such as pattern/matter, form/substance, nature/culture, art/science, abstract/concrete, energy/matter—that is at stake. In the exhibition catalogue, Lyotard states:

> In the tradition of modernity, the relation of the human with materials is fixed by the Cartesian program: to become master and possessor of nature. A free will imposes its ends to the given sense data to divert them away from their natural sense. It will determine their end with the help of language which allows it to articulate what is possible (a project) and to impose it upon what is real (matter).[2]

This "relation of the human with materials" has been transformed through the cybernetic transformation of production in the post-war period, bringing about "new modes of perception, representation and symbolization, corresponding to new means of decision, conception and production." While it was not that our binary perception was wrong as such, we do *experience* the insights of a cybernetic or ecological *perception* as a more truthful or accurate account of our world. Yet as the one thing we cannot easily see is ourselves looking, we are only dimly aware that the systemic complexity of matter revealed by contemporary practices is not in any simple sense more "accurate," but also a labor; a condition of the ever more ecologically extended and technical *metabolism of capitalism in nature*.

If the project of *Les Immatériaux* is to move beyond the various modern dualisms, it is not a simple negation where immaterial equals non-material, but rather an enfolding, where the immaterial stands for a conception of the *immanent-material* or *immanenterial*. It is in this sense that the immaterial or *immanenterial*, as immanently patterned or informed matter, is one way of conceiving what we mean by *information* (in-formed-matter); a hylo-semiotic ecology of mind.

In this way, the Cartesian worldview becomes enfolded within a more complex recursive model. And this more complex model is our mode of perception insofar as it is the *form* of our contemporary mode of production (of nature, of ourselves...) Thus the insights of (radical, second-order) cybernetics have a double character: firstly, in the post-war period, they technically facilitated the total reorganization of the "three ecologies" (personal, social, environmental), and secondly, they allowed us to see the

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played out the program of the avant-garde. Thus for Lyotard, "The insecurity, the loss of identity, the crisis is not expressed only in economy and the social, but also in the domains of the sensibility, of the knowledge and the power of man (futility, life, death), the modes of life (in relation to work, to habits, to food … etc.)."

So, how did Lyotard attempt to bring this complex condition into popular experience? First of all, initially entitled *Création et matériaux nouveaux*, the exhibition was first conceived as a collaboration between the different departments of the Centre Pompidou (specifically the CCI (Centre de Creation Industriel) and the MNAM (Museé National D'Art Moderne and IRCAM) long before Lyotard came to be involved. Lyotard's re-imagining of the exhibition as *Les Immatériaux* was thus achieved by two primary moves: firstly, the adoption of a labyrinthine and distinctly urban form for the *experiential* organization of the exhibition, and secondly, the adoption of a hylo-cybernetic communication model as the structuring principle of the labyrinth's *semiotic* organization.

The exhibition was organized according to the cybernetic communication theory diagram developed by Claude Shannon and Norbert Weiner from Harold Lasswell (and later adopted by Roman Jackobson): "who/says what/in which channel/to whom/with what effect." This model was deployed alongside a pseudo-etymological conflation of five words, all with an Indo-European root "Mat," meaning to make by hand, to build, to measure: *matériau* (medium), *materiel* (receiver), *maternité* (emitter), *matière* (referent), and *matrice* (code).[3]
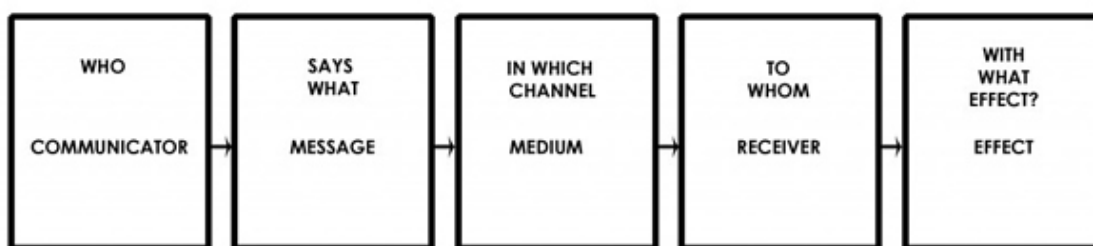
Harold D Lasswell's Model Of Communcation (1948)

While the adoption of a message structure from communication theory might seem to risk being far too static and "first order" for the job at hand—for example by not recognizing the effects of feedback and recursion, that a message at one level of

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Immaterials was be generated by its metropolitan and labyrinthine spatialization.

At the same time as the Pompidou's briefs were being formulated with the the avant-garde problematic that Colquhoun outlined above, Manfredo Tafuri was in Venice reflecting upon the same crisis facing architecture and urbanism under "postmodern" conditions:

> Modern urbanism—inasmuch as it is a Utopian attempt to preserve a form for the city, or, rather, to preserve a principle of form within the dynamics of urban structures—has not been able to realize its models. And yet within urban structures the whole contribution of the historical avant-garde lives on with a particular pregnancy. The city as an advertising and self-advertising structure, as an ensemble of channels of communication, becomes a sort of machine emitting incessant messages: indeterminacy itself is given specific form, and offered as the only determinateness possible for the city as a whole. In this way form is given to the attempt to make the language of development live, to make it a concrete experience of everyday life.[4]

Les Immatériaux captures the indeterminacy identified by Tafuri, and in a sense completes what Colquhoun identified as the impossible avant-garde brief of the Pompidou, by conjuring a city of double internality within the fifth floor of the building (doubly internalized: inside the city, and within the Beaubourg as a certain model of the city). The labyrinth then, becomes not just the symbol of a rhizomatic ecology of mind, but specifically makes a claim for urban experience as the recursive form and content of the immaterial, and of language in general (a point being made contemporaneously by architectural thinkers such as Bernard Tschumi and Tafuri again). But perhaps the labyrinth itself can do even more work for us. The labyrinth is, in fact, a word of unknown etymology, so perhaps today we can suggest our own pseudo-etymological connection between labor (*labyr*) and labyrinth, together with an unorthodox reading of Lazzarato. The labyrinth of the Immaterials is then both a spatialized mediation of immaterial labor and a future avant-garde laboratory of general intellect. "Once the privileged domain of the bourgeoisie and its children, these activities have since the end of the 1970s become the domain of what we have come to define as 'mass intellectuality.'"[5]

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² Jean Francois Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux* catalogue, *Album* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1985), 16.

³ While the root of "matter" contains a gendering impulse (as it is also the root of "maternal"), and in the classic Cartesian pairing of matter/pattern we find the paternal figure giving form to the matrix, Lyotard reflected on the transsexuality of Immaterials. See Lyotard's extensive quoting from Catherine Millot's book *Horsexe: Essays on Transexuality* in Jean Francois Lyotard, ″After Six Months of Work…″ (1984) in *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, and Theory*, eds. Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann (Milton Keynes: Meson Press, 2016), 42–44.

⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia – Design and capitalist Development* (Cambridge: MIT, 1976), p.166–169.

⁵ See →

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