

Feedback: Media Parasites and the Circuits of Communication (Dada and Burroughs)

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Abstract:

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The twentieth century saw a tremendous change in modes of mass communication. The circuits of social exchange were predominantly enhanced and amplified through the new circuitry that electrical engineering provided—from the invention of spark transmission up to modern computer chips. It was the genius of the disputed British-Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi, who took the mostly theoretical work in electromagnetism of the nineteenth century and turned it into a simple device: the radio.¹ From that point on, the hegemonies of communication shifted from writing and aurality to the ether of electromagnetic transmission, where messages did not only become transmittable over vast distances, but where they also could be modified and amplified. The key technology that should even increase the dominance of electromagnetic transmission, the vacuum tube, did not only improve the transmission and reception technologies of the radio, but also enabled the construction of unique sonic events as well as the amplification through feedback, where a signal became repeatedly fed back into the circuit that it produced in the first place.²

In the age of feedback, messages do not have to be an original product, but they have to resonate infinitely through the echo chambers of discourse—even modern advertising strategies like viral marketing attempt to do exactly that. This nature of modern means of communication brings us directly to the topic of the parasite. The French theorist and historian of science Michel Serres points out in his book *The Parasite* that the parasite engages in a particular form of economy that is not based on a dialectical exchange: the parasite constantly takes from the host without giving anything in return (Serres 1982: 7). While this understanding of the parasite coincides largely with its biological meaning, Serres emphasizes that parasitism is also a foundational social and communicative strategy. Throughout his book he rehearses this idea by applying the notion of a parasitical economy to a diverse array of topics from myths and fables to electrical engineering and communication theory. For my present discussion I would like to point out that Serres also identified feedback as a parasitical structure; it does not create an own performance but takes its own mirror image as a place of departure (Serres 1982: 63).

In this article I will discuss based on two examples from the twentieth century avant-garde how such a feedback is employed as an aesthetic strategy for social manipulation.³ At first I will outline

the parasitical strategies of Dada performances in the early twentieth century and at second I will focus on the project of a subversive media tactics as suggested by the famous experimental writer William S. Burroughs in his text *The Electronic Revolution*.⁴ Central to my discussion is a distinction from electrical engineering. Electrical engineers differentiate between negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback decreases the disorder in a system while positive feedback amplifies everything and thus creates ample options for unpredictable noise and disturbances.⁵ It is exactly this double nature of feedback that Dada artists discovered and which Burroughs used in order to suggest a hybrid bio-technological feedback system for social manipulation.

Dada Feedback

The Dada movement emerged in 1916 in Zurich where a random gang of emigrants tried to entertain the Swizz bourgeoisie with a new form of art that challenged their hermeneutic patience with all kinds of noises and nonsense. Richard Huelsenbeck, himself part of the Dada movement and its first chronicler, explained the noise aesthetic of the movement as follows:

The problem of the soul is volcanic in nature. Every movement naturally produces noise. While number, and consequently melody, are symbols presupposing a faculty for abstraction, noise is a direct call to action. Music of whatever nature is harmonious, artistic, an activity of reason—but bruitism is life itself, it cannot be judged like a book, but rather it is part of our personality, which attacks us, pursues us and tears us to pieces. Bruitism is a view of life, which, strange as it may seem at first, compels men to make an ultimate decision. There are only bruitists, and others. While we are speaking of music, Wagner had shown all the hypocrisy inherent in a pathetic faculty of abstraction—the screeching of a brake, on the other hand, could at least give you a toothache (Motherwell 1979: 26).

Huelsenbeck adored an art of noise (“bruitism”) and presents an understanding of noise that reaches back to the acoustics of the nineteenth century. The famous physicist Hermann von Helmholtz had established in his groundbreaking work *On the Sensation of Tone* that musical sounds consist of regular sonic vibrations, while noise represents a chaotic intermingling of frequencies (Helmholtz 1954: 8). The avant-garde movements attacked early on this understanding of noise, most famously the Futurist composer Luigi Russolo, who developed an own Art of Noise that focused on the noisy timbre of sonic devices as a central element, but also the Dadaists intended to end this chauvinism against noise (Russolo 1982).

As the quote above shows, Huelsenbeck understood noise as a parasitic element that hung on every development. “Life in motion” was always connected to noise that emerged from change. Noise provokes an escalating dynamic that comes from the side effects of life and cannot simply be stopped. It is an invasive, transgressive, and productive phenomenon that is on the base of transformation, and thus the ideal stimulus for avant-garde art. Accordingly, noise is not a clearly structured semiotic element like a musical note—it is a physical event caused by a process in the world. This concrete reality of noise has an immediate physical effect on the perceiving subjects: loud engines do not simply refer to a car but also hurt the ears. By attesting that the noise of a brake may have the power to cause toothaches, Huelsenbeck clearly recognized this invasive character of noise. For Huelsenbeck noise was a phenomenon able to engage the audience immediately. Accordingly, the use of noise in the Dada performance integrates a powerful physical

trigger: The spectators were immediately attacked by disturbances and reacted on their side with an outburst that sometimes brought down the theater.

Thus, a stimulus created through Dada noise initiated a feedback loop; the provocations on stage aggressively engaged the audience, who projected them back onto the stage. This dynamic started a circle that amplified the force and complexity of the Dada performance by including a multitude of new performers, namely the spectators. They no longer acted as a contemplating theater audience, but rather included themselves—as an angry mob—in the performance or, in more technical terms, constructed an amplifier system based on feedback.

An article from the *Basler Nachrichten* about a “scandalous soirée” in 1919 exemplifies the parasitic nature of these Dada performances more clearly. The report highlighted the calm and relaxed attitude of the Dadaist Walter Serner: “It was whistled, screamed, small coins, orange peels and cuss words were thrown on the stage and one stamped with feet and chairs. One has, nonetheless to admire the tranquility of the speaker, who remained seated within this hail of objects and noises” (Watts 2004: 49). The reaction of the other Dadaist, Tristan Tzara, was similar: “Already after the first stanza the tumult started again. Herr Tzara, however, read as long undisturbed as he was booed out. In spite of the rain of coins and cigarettes, he remained bravely on the stage” (Watts 2004: 49). This engagement with the audience is highly parasitical: both artists sent out only a minor stimulus (nothing or some lines of a Dada poem) into the communication channel. More precisely, this stimulus was not even a meaningful sign but merely an irritating impulse. This provocation, however, demanded a reaction from the audience, and this response was significantly stronger than the initial provocation. After Tzara and Serner began their minimal performance, they just leaned back and observed how the tumult emerged. Without adding anything substantial, they created and amplified a chaotic chain reaction. Thus, the often acknowledged Dadaist destruction of borders in the theatrical realm was not done by the Dadaists alone, but also constituted through a feedback of the audience. To provoke such a dynamic was one of the major aims of Dada art, not solely as an attempt to challenge established aesthetic values but also to amplify the Dada noise on a very literal and that means technical level—that is, to make it louder. This was done in a parasitic way by abusing the audience, because the Dadaists would have not been able to create such massive energies on their own.

The technology enthusiast and leading head of the Dada movement in Berlin, Raoul Hausmann, apparently recognized the importance of amplification for the avant-garde on an even more technical level. From the early twenties on he became highly interested in all kinds of media technologies, which would lead to the construction of a calculation device in the early thirties.⁶ Taking Dada performances into consideration, it is telling that one of his first technical designs was an amplification system for the gramophone. This amplification system was mechanical and very simple in its nature. It just consisted of several arrays of sound horns (not just one bell mouth as with ordinary gramophones) that were supposed to amplify the sound through sheer number.⁷ However, Hausmann became quickly aware of the fact that this design was hopelessly outdated, because the first electrified gramophones had already solved much of the problems that he tackled. However, Hausmann had a sense that new forms of amplification would become dominant and acknowledged in a 1931 text “The Overbred Arts” that the future of music would be based on the vacuum tube, because this technology did not only enable to produce a wide range of artificial sounds, but also to eliminate unwanted noises through a negative feedback (Hausmann 1982: 143). This opening up towards negative feedback transgresses the parasitic possibilities of Dada, something that the experimental writer William S. Burroughs should embrace in the second half of the twentieth century.

Burroughs' Viral Feedback

Already Dada alluded to structures that suggest that in the twentieth century electronics constructs the discursive network in which also social communication emerges. Another avant-garde text that discusses the escalating logic of communication under the paradigm of electronic communication systems is William S. Burroughs' *The Electronic Revolution*. This text, influenced by the aftermaths of Watergate,⁸ draws up an evolutionary theory of language and suggests a form of social activism that consists of on a strategic abuse of media. This abuse is based on Burroughs' own cut-up method that in its use of randomly assembled fragments reminds of Dada writing.⁹ However, this text does not provide a clearly articulated theory of new media, but rather presents to the reader a diverse and grotesque image of the genealogy of our media society that departs from primates and ends in the contemporary scandal surrounding Watergate. This almost chaotic structure is also present on the formal level, because this text constantly irritates the reading process with its partly fragmentary language and apparently unedited passages, containing errors and repetitions; this, however, is not only an irritation for the reader but constitutes a first feedback loop. This text demonstrates through its disturbing features a similarity to Burroughs' own cut-up method and simultaneously proclaims the use of these cut-ups for social subversion. This social subversion should be done by creating tape recordings that splice together political speeches and pornographic recordings. This reference to tape recorders further alludes to another media loop, namely the media technological a priori of Watergate itself. This media a priori was the tape recorder, employed by Nixon in the White House as a ubiquitous surveillance system.¹⁰

The text, however, does not stop with a critique and diagnosis of the political dilemmas in the early seventies, but creates a theory of media and communication that is based on a biological paradigm. Here, it is not an amplifier circuit that stands in for a manipulation of communication and which creates a positive feedback, but an unholy alliance of magnetic tape recorders and viral infection. For Burroughs, feedback is a technical feature as well as a biological event.

The central importance of "Feedback" in Burroughs' enigmatic essay is indicated by the first line or heading of the text: "FEEDBACK FROM WATERGATE TO THE GARDEN OF EDEN" (Burroughs 1971: 4) Feedback is here, however, not a simple amplification technique—as it was in the Dada performances—but a complex biological system that is rooted in parasitism. As Burroughs claims, the word/language is a virus and viruses are parasites. Something that he takes from a text entitled "Virus Adaptability and Host Resistance":

Viruses are obligatory cellular parasites and are thus wholly dependant upon the integrity of the cellular system they parasitize for their survival in an active state. It is something of a paradox that many viruses ultimately destroy the cells in which they are living ...
(Burroughs 1971: 5)

In the following, Burroughs entertains the notion that viruses can hide and live infinitively within their host when they do not disturb this organism, i.e. when they form a perfect symbiosis. Accordingly, the ideal virus does not create disorder, but aims at a balance and creates an order. Although this suggests some level of harmony, Burroughs draws a dark picture of the beginning of language:

Doktor Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz has put forth an interesting theory as to the origins and history of this word virus. He postulates that the word was a virus of what he calls biologic mutation effecting the biologic change in its host which was then genetically conveyed. One reason that apes can't talk is because the structure of their inner throats is simply not designed to formulate words. He postulates that alteration in inner throat structure were occasioned by virus illness... And not occasion...

This illness may well have had a high rate of mortality but some female apes must have survived to give birth to the wunder kindern. The illness perhaps assumed a more malignant form in the male because of his more developed and rigid muscular structure causing death through strangulation and vertebral fracture. Since the virus in both male and female precipitates sexual frenzy through irritation of sex centers in the brain the males impregnated the females in their death spasms and the altered throat structure was genetically conveyed.

Having effected alterations in the host's structure that resulted in a new species specially designed to accomodate the virus the virus can now replicate without disturbing the metabolism and without being recognized a virus. A symbiotic relationship has now been established and the virus is now built into the host which sees the virus as a useful part of itself. This successful virus can now sneer at gangster viruses like small pox and turn them in to The Pasteur Institute. Ach jungen what a scene is here... the apes are moulting fur steaming off them females whimpering and slobbering over dying males like cows with aftosa and so a stink musky sweet rotten metal stink of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden... (Burroughs 1971: 5-6)

This theory, outlined by the probably fictitious scientist Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz, describes a biological feedback structure. The virus feeds back its own bodily modifications into the offspring of the next generation, so that these "wunder kinder" become more resistant or better hosts for the virus. Burroughs establishes the idea of a negative feedback, in which the virus creates over generations a stable symbiosis with its host, i.e. eliminates noise. The word is no longer a mutilating virus, but the precondition of cultural techniques. The initial sex-death orgy is transformed into an equilibrium, where the existence of a virus/parasite can hardly be detected. Burroughs fantasizes in the following about the possibility to unleash the power of the virus again. He relates it to the catastrophic images of the nuclear age, but more importantly to the discursive network of Watergate with the magnetic tape recorder as its media technological a priori. Here, he inverts the negative feedback of the original monkey scene and displays the creation of a positive feedback that causes public outrage through the manipulative use of tape recordings—the symbiosis between parasite and host breaks down and an unpredictable tumult is initiated.

So now with the tape recorders of Watergate and the fall out from atomic testing the virus stirs uneasy in all your white throats. It was a killer virus once. It could become a killer virus again and rage through cities of the world like a topping forest fire (Burroughs 1971, 7).

The astonishing feature of this theory is the continuation between the biological and the media technological, and the even more astonishing consequence of this theory is that while biology tames the virus, media technology initiates feedback loops that unleash the chaotic and destructive power of the word virus.

I have said that the real scandal of watergate is the use made of recordings. And what is this use? Having made the recordings as described what then do they do with them?
ANSWER: THEY PLAY THEM BACK ON LOCATION [...] PLAYBACK is the essential ingredient (Burroughs 1971, 9).

Burroughs suggests here a subversive tactic of media guerilla, where he applies his cut-up method to tape recordings. This aesthetic manipulation is a mere amplification of an effect that a decontextualized playback will evoke: "ANY RECORDINGS PLAYED BACK ON LOCATION IN THE MANNER I WILL NOW DESCRIBE CAN PRODUCE EFFECTS" (Burroughs 1971: 10). However, unleashing the word virus through modern media technology will not end in a nuclear holocaust—as I have pointed out, Burroughs likes to link to this field of imagination—but becomes a liberating tactic to cut through the surveillance circuits that use the very same technology, i.e. feedback: "Millions of people could nullify the control system which those who are behind watergate and Nixon are attempting to impose. Like all control systems it depends in maintaining a monopoly position" (Burroughs 1971, 12) Again, the figure of feedback is identified as a parasitic strategy. This time we see an abuse of media technologies in order to break through its controlling power in form of a parasitic intervention or re-use. The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler has described the abuse of military equipment as the central moment of the development of media technologies—he quotes the transmission of music for entertainment purposes to military radio equipment in the trenches of the First World War by the engineer Hans Bredow as such an initial scene of media abuse and transformation (Kittler 1994: 94-105). Although Burroughs does not focus as explicit on the industrial-military complex as Kittler, but rather identifies the tape recorder as a tool for political (and not military) control, he also attests that a misuse of this technology will erode and subvert exactly these systems of control. What Kittler and Burroughs have in common is that both establish a parasitic hacker ethic that sees in subversive feedback loops a transformative quality.

Feedback and Parasitic Resistance

The avant-garde strategies of Dada and cut-up coincide in the sense that both use feedback as a central dynamic to engage the society with their art. The Dada activists employed their nonsense in order to stimulate their audience to create similar noises and thereby engaged them in an escalating, noisy dynamic that could not be contained easily. This, however, only focused on a positive feedback, in which everything was amplified and where no distinction between noise and signal was possible.

The difference between Dada and Burroughs' later adaptation of these techniques is that he constructed a delicate dialectics between positive and negative feedback. According to Burroughs, a viral parasite can hide in an organism; through recursive infections it can create a state of homeostasis, where the parasite, virus, or intruder cannot be detected. The recursive injection of the same thereby minimizes the noise and the struggle until harmony is reached. The uncanny consequence that Burroughs points out is that this state can easily be altered and the virus/parasite can be reactivated. Burroughs is not an avant-garde artist who believes in an education of society,

but an avant-garde activist who believes that the Dionysian struggle implied in avant-garde art is at the basis of culture and lies just dormant as a vicious parasite.

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Endnotes

1 For a cultural history of the early radio see: Campbell 2006. For a comprehensive history of early radio technologies see: Hong 2001. [▶](#)

2 Most significantly, the American inventor Lee de Forest patented in 1907 the *Audion* vacuum tube, which constituted the basis for more mobile radio receivers and transmitters as well as for the development of electronic oscillators that could produce a wide range of frequencies electronically. The US-engineer Edward Howard Armstrong constructed in 1912 the first circuit that amplified an electrical signal through a feedback loop fed through a vacuum tube (Hong 2001: 186). [▶](#)

3 For a longer discussion of the importance of noise and parasitism in Futurism and Dada see my monograph *Media Parasites in the Early Avant-Garde* (Niebisch 2012). [▶](#)

4 I will quote the Ubu Web edition of the text: http://www.ubu.com/historical/burroughs/electronic_revolution.pdf (accessed February 18, 2013) [▶](#)

5 For a discussion of feedback and the distinction between negative and positive feedback in social science and cybernetics see: Ramaprasad 1983: 4-13. [▶](#)

6 For a detailed overview of Hausmann's technical work see: Hausmann 2013. [▶](#)

7 The patent design can be found in Hausmann 2013: 214-218. [▶](#)

8 Burroughs' text presents a disturbing particularity: while the publication date is indicated as 1970, this cannot be correct, because Burroughs refers to the Watergate scandal and other events taking place throughout the seventies. [▶](#)

9 Burroughs openly asserts this connection to Dada in a concise description of his method: Burroughs 1963: 345-348. [▶](#)

10 From 1971 on, Richard Nixon installed throughout the White House a system of voice activated tape recorders. The recordings produced by this surveillance system became important evidence in the Watergate hearings. Transcripts of tapes related to Watergate can be found at: <http://whitehousetapes.net/transcript/nixon/watergate>. (accessed February 18, 2013) [▶](#)

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