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Medianatures¹

Jussi Parikka

MEDIA IS HARDLY JUST ABOUT MEDIA. Furthermore, nature is not merely nature either but embedded in the cultural understanding of life. This is not to say that nature—to use the shorthand to refer to the biosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere, and also atmosphere—is merely a representation or defined by cultural meanings. It is just to point out that the nature and animals have been understood and operationalized as a resource² and by way of techno-scientific frameworks that define it through its chemistry and other sorts of analytics. This does not exhaust the intensity of nature as a living formation but it does for sure force us to consider it as part of a feedback loop that involves much more than just nature.³ Hence to talk of *medianatures*—a term that is a useful neologism—is a way to try to grasp the intensive co-determination and co-emergence of the two spheres of natural dynamics and media cultural epistemologies, of the onto-epistemological situation that defines our technical modernity. Media are in and of nature in ways that expand any talk of the environment into a virtual ecology of social, political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions.⁴

Medianatures is a concept that owes its existence to Donna Haraway's notion of *naturecultures*.⁵ Naturecultures is a key term that features in many of Haraway's examples and discussions of companion species. It is a concept that troubles separations of nature from culture, and in general, addresses the problematic categories by way of the microinteractions that define for example animal-human relations. Hence, when addressing companion species, Haraway speaks of the shared co-

¹ This text was first published in: Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (eds.): *Posthuman Glossary*, New York 2018.

² As Martin Heidegger and others argued, including Rosi Braidotti: *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge 2006, p. 98.

³ Cf. Jussi Parikka: *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology*, Minneapolis 2010.

⁴ Braidotti: *Transpositions* (as note 1), p. 123; see also Félix Guattari: *The Three Ecologies* (1989), translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London/New Brunswick, NJ 2000; Matthew Fuller: *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*, Cambridge, MA 2005.

⁵ Cf. Donna J. Haraway: *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago 2003.

becomings in which the two are mutually implied: they are symbiotic and emergent. Such situated case studies are not merely for the purposes of ontological meditation but they are ways to address »livable politics and ontologies in current life worlds.«⁶ They teach that ontologies not merely »are« but they emerge; they are active realities, which resist stable typologies of being. Haraway draws on A.N. Whitehead's process philosophy and the active verb form: the world is through prehensions,⁷ an insight that forms Haraway's understanding of the world as knotted. This is where it becomes clear that the concept is driven by situated practices that take into account feminist knowledge, which refuses handed-down categories. It also draws from the reality of postcolonial situations that inform Haraway's examples. Indeed, it is also the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work that becomes an important reference point in thinking outside the dysfunctional dualism of nature or culture. Instead, Strathern's fieldwork in Papua New Guinea contributes to Haraway concept in terms of offering the idea of partial connections that are not determined by »wholes nor parts.«⁸ It is instead a relational nexus that one could also understand through Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's emphasis on molecular realities that work under and across the visible, formed molar identities.⁹

Naturecultures is a way of addressing the world of intra-actions and co-becomings in which the significant others—dogs, bacteria, and a multiplicity of non-humans—are accompanying the so-called human. This sort of an agenda contributes to the possibility of thinking outside the individual and other similar concepts that misplace concreteness (in Whitehead's sense) on the stability of the form (such as nature).¹⁰ There would be a lot to be unfolded as to the philosophical genealogy of this sort of an account that—in addition to the mentioned Whitehead, Deleuze and Guattari, feminist theory and for example Strathern—could be seen related to Gilbert Simondon's notion of individuation. Furthermore, through radical anthropology, one can summon a wide range of alternative metaphysics to understand the contemporary condition of mutation of understanding of culture and technology but also the multinaturalism.¹¹

Besides its own conceptual power, the term *naturecultures* allows us to think of *medianatures*, a concept which builds on the new materialist emphasis on the connectedness of material-semiotic (Haraway) and discursive-material (Barad) by way

⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis/London 1987.

¹⁰ Cf. Donna J. Haraway: *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis/London 2008, p. 32f.

¹¹ See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, edited and translated by Peter Skafish, Minneapolis 2014.

of a specific media cultural and technological focus. Similarly, as *mediation* happens across a whole spectrum of material realities irreducible to the media devices,¹² *media* itself can be seen to consist of an assembly of elements of nature.¹³

Instead of thinking that there is a historical disconnection between media culture and the natural formations that historically precede the modern technical media, medianatures works to illustrate the specific and situated material interactions that underpin media technological practices. Media technology itself is material; it is composed of a variety of geological material and geophysical forces. It needs metals and minerals to summon its worlds of audiovisuality, colour, speed, processing power and storage. Such processes of technical quality are made of seemingly odd elements (at least to standardised media studies) such as lithium, coltan, rare earth minerals, while not forgetting the massive energy consumption of the devices and the networked cloud services. This assembly that we call by the name of media technology is reliant on massive global networks of energy and supply chains that themselves are linked to a geography of media materials from African, Chinese, South American minerals, to various pipelines and power plants that provide energy,¹⁴ to the labour conditions and practices that make these materials move.¹⁵ It is a massive ecological operation that sustains the fact that we have a communication sphere of digital information that seems immaterial when it comes to the speed of retrieval of a web page, the reliability of the cloud stored image, and the instantaneous feeling of the intimate chat services that run, in most cases, through corporate servers. To talk of medianatures illustrates this double bind: on the one hand, media offers our epistemology, and is instrumentalized in the intensive mapping of the planet for its resources, materials and energy. And it is these resources excavated often in places inhabited by indigenous people or in environmentally vulnerable areas like the Arctic that places special emphasis on locality.¹⁶ The epistemologically misplaced dualism of media and nature gives way to the intensive ties and individuations that bring about media culture as a formation that consists of ecologies of materiality as well as labour. In addition to the construction of technologies, issues also reach out to the discarded technology

¹² Cf. Richard Grusin: *Radical Mediation*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 42/1 (2015), pp. 124–148; Sean Cubitt: *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels*, Cambridge, MA 2014; Jussi Parikka: *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis 2015.

¹³ Cf. John Durham Peters: *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago, IL 2015.

¹⁴ Mél Hogan: *Facebook Data Storage Centers as the Archive's Underbelly*, in: *Television & New Media* 16/1 (2015), pp. 3–18.

¹⁵ On the metabolic rift see McKenzie: *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, London/New York 2015.

¹⁶ See Sean Cubitt: *De-Colonising Ecomedia*, in: *Cultural Politics* 10/3 (2014), pp. 275–286.

that is an e-waste hazard and becomes another disposed zombie media object in rural locations outside the main centres of consumption.¹⁷ They end up in regions such as West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana), China (Guiyu), Pakistan, and India where even the opening up of dead media technologies for their scrap metals is seemingly worth the risk despite the massive health risks involved.

Hence, medianatures is a concept that speaks to the materiality of media technologies. But it does it in ways that are also always about place and placement, of use and uselessness, of the work of material sciences and the prehistoric Earth materials such as fossil fuels firing up our computers. It is a philosophical concept but sustains the energy of Haraway's naturecultures in that also medianatures is to contribute to politics of global life of media products in their prehistory and their afterlife—as well as the various people exposed to media before, and after, they become media for the consumer sphere.

¹⁷ Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka: *Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method*, in: *Leonardo* 45/5 (2012), pp. 424–430.