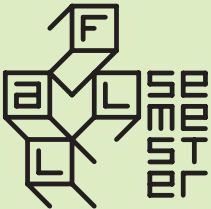


Metahaven

Neo-Medievalism Explained

(A Version)
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(Two friends recently asked us to design an icon, signifier, or message to mark their departure from Facebook in the wake of the Trump election. Both of them have significant follower amounts and one of them has a “verified” status—a blue checkmark next to their name. It feels relevant to think about, and discuss exit as a sacrifice.)

Versions

YouTube, Fall 2015. I’m watching a drone video made in Syria. The video is produced by an organization called RussiaWorks.

They have put their watermark over the footage using one of these free fonts available everywhere that go under names like “KGB” and “propaganda.” There are endless, deserted battlefields in hues of grey and light-brown. Destruction everywhere, stretching from horizon to horizon, trenches, collapsed homes, dust and concrete, set to music from the 1990s.

The Russian intervention in Syria has changed the surface of the conflict; among many other things, it has incised hyper-aesthetization into its mediation. The high-definition drone footage is both an unreal-looking science fiction film, a reverberation of the first aerial battlefield photographs—which were taken from military balloons—and also: hotel lobby-esque ephemeral new age muzak. The RussiaWorks videos seem to have no point beyond normalizing dust, enmeshing the viewer in the virtual reality of total war-as-stasis; a still ruin, a model

city of death that leaves us ethically, and aesthetically, in a weird state of trance.

There is no account of the relationship between people and their architecture, their families, the inhabitants and their buildings. There is no account of the displaced, the dead, and the wounded.

One is reminded of the wars in the Russian separatist republic of Chechnya in the 1990s, in which the Chechen capital city of Grozny was reduced to bare rubble. In her extraordinary account of that war, journalist Anna Politkovskaya once carbon-copied school compositions made by children in a refugee camp in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia. Ingushetia, by the way, is a word that I could not readily pronounce, so I resorted to a YouTube video to teach me that, and here is the screenshot.

Politkovskaya lets us read these lines from a school composition written by the then eight- or nine-year old Marina Magomedkhadjieva:

My city Grozny always radiated beauty and goodness. But now all that is gone like a beautiful dream and only memories remain. The war is blind, it doesn't see the city, the school or the children. All this is the work of the armadas from Russia, and therefore not only our eyes are weeping but also our tiny hearts. Now we have nowhere to go to school, to play and enjoy ourselves. Now we run back and forth and we don't know what to do. But if they asked us we would say: "That's enough bloodshed. If you do not stop this senseless war we shall never forgive you." Soldiers! Think of your children, of your own childhood! ¹

Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in the elevator of her Moscow apartment block in 2006. Googling for the name Marina Magomedkhadjieva produces only a single search result: her school composition just cited, from the book just cited.

Magomedkhadjieva's voice was buried on a printed page, without amplifier, without reproduction or echo in the then-nascent world wide web.

It seems relevant to consider what is today's architecture for amplification, reproduction, and so on, taking into account that the hyper-aestheticized Russian drone film has

been viewed by more people than probably have even read Magomedkhadjieva's words.

The design theorist and philosopher Benjamin Bratton understands the world wide web as one initial component of what he calls an "accidental megastructure" formed by systems of planetary-scale computation. Rather than understanding this megastructure as some extra layer or gloss, Bratton considers planetary-scale computation to have acquired a "de facto sovereignty" alongside existing political geographies, a de facto independence, adding up to them instead of replacing them. Comprised of the six layers of User, Interface, Address, City, Cloud, and Earth, Bratton has named this megastructure the "Stack."²

We had the pleasure to design this diagram for the Stack. As a graphic abstraction it comprises six vertically stacked dashes, roughly resembling an MIT Press logo turned 90 degrees. Expanded, a point on a layer may be vertically connected to a point on another layer, meaning that a single "event," "actor," or "place" on one layer of the Stack exists in more than one layer. Bratton calls these vertical connections "columns."

For example, a User takes a selfie with a smartphone, and then posts it on Instagram using the program's Interface. This happens on the basis of resources from the Earth layer. A cell phone antenna receives the phone's outgoing signals. The digital recording and its geographical coordinates enter into the Cloud layer via an Address system that makes origin and destination communicate flawlessly. The data are received by a Cloud storage facility in a different continent. Once available, the image becomes itself a trigger for new realities. For example, Instagram posts by Chechnya's current head of state, Ramzan Kadyrov, have frequently commanded news headlines and are key to his public perception. But Instagram images also fulfill a role as a kind of public record—a form of potential forensics. Instagram's high-resolution, personalized mobile grid, weaponized through smart phone cameras pointed at every occurrence, replaces a prior judiciary reality that was still under some presumption of innocence.

The example just mentioned focused on a single social platform, Instagram. Now, consider millions of entities like and unlike this one as components of a megastructure . This

object—the Stack—can't be reduced to any single one of its many components.

From TCP/IP to IPv6, from insurgent digital dropboxes to Facebook, from Instagram selfies to Google map border disputes, from self driving cars to smart dust, from Adobe Creative Cloud to the Stuxnet virus, from Tinder to WikiLeaks, from Tesla to DigitalGlobe, the components are all acts of intent.

However, the overall structural diagram that results from these acts of intent is an accident—a site for both re-engineering and reverse engineering the world in a way that is distinct from techno-utopianism by subtracting its authorship from any pre-existing corporate or statist totality.

For the limited scope and purpose of this story, we are taking the Stack to be a circulation system for versions of events that may or may not have happened on the Earth layer; an air-conditioning system for post-fact. And everything that isn't, or just minimally, registered as an event in the Stack—like the handwritten account of a child in school—presents a problem. The problem is that the event itself can credibly be claimed to not have happened, simply because there aren't any electronic tidal waves or digital echoes. There are no versions. There isn't a film version, there's no metadata sequel—simply nothing that can provide the event with enough escape velocity from its isolation on the Earth layer. One may have this experience with the passing of loved ones who lived largely pre-internet or off-internet. Googling their names, in many cases, produces barely any results.

The drone, as an integral component of the Stack, produces a kind of visual texture that reconfirms the megastructure through which the video was made, the hard- and software used to grade it and give it a cinematic edge, the GPS coordinating the drone's movements, the camera's wireless signal, the vehicle's position above-ground, etcetera.

All these factors taken together then produce a version of events to have occurred on the earth layer in Syria; a version rendered whereby all of the people are missing.

Finally by posting it on YouTube, it contributes to the shifting of attention around the events and the places that it is presumed to apply to; it becomes a trigger. As a single video,

it still doesn't have much influence; yet as part of a planetary-scale, algorithmically infused timeline occupation, it is part of a perceptual shift, asserted through mere quantity.

The theorist Brian Massumi calls this the “state of perception.” As Massumi suggests, “(a)ttention is the base-state habit of perception. Every awareness begins in a shift. We think of ourselves as directing the shifts in our attention. But if you pay attention to paying attention, you quickly sense that rather than you directing your attention, your attention is directing you.”³

Rather than there being a one-off cause-and-effect relationship between event and report, upload and download, events real and fictional that exist on the Earth layer, and inside the technological stack, are mediated and re-mediated as versions of themselves and each other that occupy the timeline and thus influence the making of decisions, and the shaping of actions to come. The “state of perception” is a force-to-own time, as Massumi calls it. This state, this occupation of the timeline, unfolds itself in the lengthy gaps and empty spaces between action, in a time spent waiting, and in addition: scrolling through endless feeds and algorithmically induced apathy. The force to own time shapes not so much the outcome of the next action, as much as it produces a vector that an actor will take toward the next action; hence ownership of as many as possible mediated relationships between events, and their various versions in the Stack, produces a force that can effectively own your time.

Vladislav Surkov in his short story *Without Sky* describes a not-so fictional village after World War Five, where there is no more sky to look at, so people have to go to a neighboring village to see it. The narrator is both to some extent subject, mastermind, and historian of the village-without-sky. His account is legible as a fictionalized strategy paper for Massumi's force-to-own-time. As Surkov writes,

The simple-hearted commanders of the past strove for victory. Now they did not act so stupidly. That is, some, of course, still clung to the old habits and tried to exhume from the archives old slogans of the type: victory will be ours. It worked in some places, but basically, war was now understood

*as a process, more exactly, part of a process, its acute phase, but maybe not the most important.*⁴

If not already firmly in its grip and scope, we subscribe to the megastructure. We willingly provide its layers with our data—we insist to be seen by it, to sign ourselves in. The feedback loop is made of living color—of “reality” on one end, in its multiverse of plurality, its irreducible multiplicity, captured, and then, interfaced, mediated, flattened, simplified, displayed back in cinematic hues of post-technicolor tablets, phones, screens, surfaces, buttons, clickables, splintered into versions. Marina Magomedkhadjieva’s school composition strikes us so much because the drama that has played out cannot dim the lyrical mind of the child that has observed and partaken, and now shatters the forgetful with her passionate call, with living color.

There is and always will be—at least as long as there are humans—some form of unresolved dispute, or level of pain, between the strata of computation and the persistence of a lived reality as in the undeniable, irreducible limitations that come with our being breathing, caring, belonging, sometimes loving, child-carrying successors and ancestors—having established and maintaining our place on the planet with inexplicable violence yet telling each other fairytales to the contrary. Our brains are equipped to differentiate fact from fiction insofar intermediate caretakers and gap-bridging aides stand ready to extend our sense of enlightenment outside of our bubble.

In no way are we humans special enough, either as philosophical constructs or as IP addresses, to see ourselves as the center of the universe we have discovered, and yet—there we are still doing that very thing through every word we utter, character we type, asserting ourselves and our capacities.

As the electronic layers tighten themselves like a sleeping bag, we are drawn towards the black holes, the gaps, the times and places where no camera can follow and no machine vision can exist. You have guessed it—we are drawn to the black holes to bring the cameras there; to narrate it, to bring in the GoPros and Blackmagics and with them, machine vision, digital platforms and feudal operators. Incessant mediation and more timeline occupation.

So yes, I was watching YouTube and looked at Syria's ruins through the cinematic gaze of the drone, bewitched by the image and the soundtrack. Who will stand trial for what happened in Syria? YouTube, Vimeo, Syria, ISIS, Russia, Instagram, the US?

Our daily submission of clicks and movements triggers better-targeted ads, fired at ourselves, that raise the value of the platform; companies and governments data-mine our every heartbeat and use the info thus acquired to offer the inner reptile more of the same digital food, enhanced in intensity, to vet us at border checkpoints and other random places and times where prejudice and xenophobia are licensed as pre-emptive hard power. And the antidote, so far, has been withdrawal. Data encryption: empty laptops, black phones, faceless disks, nobodies clad in anthracite hoodies, disappearance as swag. Or indeed the Facebook exit sign, though that is different.

Encryption as an antidote doesn't seem to get the point completely; if only because a systemic critique that is branding itself as a privacy countermovement is already a simulacra at the moment of its pronouncement; t-shirts saying "Encrypted" are the same t-shirts that say "FBI." Encryption is necessary. Yet neo-medievalism lies not in our submission of data, but in our subsistence as data—be it as target, or wholeseller.

By the same token as our submission of and subsistence as data, our immersion in the Stack is circulating hypothetical truths, dreamt consequences, and potential realities.⁵

Fictional powers for everyone

Theoretically, it was much better. The permanent input channel of billions of facts per second—GPS coordinates, heartbeats, selfies, currency fluctuations, etc.—into the super-computational megastructure, is always pushing for a transparent world. In such a hypothetical world "truth" would cease to be a word because there were public records of everything; the epistemological boundary between reality and forensics would disappear. On the other hand, such a public record, much like a blockchain, would sooner or later have to surrender its conceptual perfection to the actions of fixers, stalkers, and

invaders: records would be still be deleted, never to be seen again, or return as mutated versions of their obliterated originals: blurred, corrupted so as to no longer able to reliably perform their role as existential metadata.

The fairytale that was actually realized is asymmetrical—using imbalances of power and means of production, one where transparency has become weaponized, used most often “against” rather than “for,” so that the outcome, by and large, resembles the political— slash—is, as a software update, no better than the political.⁶

The conflict arising from the disparity of the truth blockchain isn’t addressing an intermediary institution, gatekeeper, or “middle man.” There will be no bank run, let alone bank robbery. Surkov asserts that his conflict is a Hobessian state of nature. The various parties to the conflict face each other directly, with indeterminate edges of reality consisting of lots of “yes, but,” gets served through interfacial regimes that let us interact with it, decide on it, with a “yes / no,” red pill or blue pill, leave or remain, basis. The binaries of the political.

Surkov collapses the interfacial regime of overdeterminative simplicity with the Earth layer’s need for belief and universalism.

We founded the Society and prepared a revolt of the simple, two-dimensionals against the complex and sly, against those who do not answer “yes” or “no,” who do not say “white” or “black,” who know some third word, many, many third words, empty, deceptive, confusing the way, obscuring the truth. In these shadows and spider webs, in these false complexities, hide and multiply all the villainies of the world.⁷

Yet with his previous assertion of war as a “process,” Surkov also undermines his own binary interfacial proposition. We may say that he is shapeshifting, as a political technologist, between the complexity of reality and information, its processual usage as a strategy of conflict, and its compression into steadfast makebelieve.

To advocates of the open internet, borderless global societies, open societies, supra-national platforms, global networks, and other modern liberal abstractions, it must seem strange that the thriving openness and borderlessness that they

projected is now sometimes the digital homeland and hunting ground of seemingly incomprehensible new nationalisms, nativisms, territorial pissings, earthbound sagas, mythological creatures, and soil-based ancestries. Uncapturable pre-modern fictions. It must seem as if the hoped-for digital citizens of the world (in a liberal sense) are caught LARPing⁸ around—pretending that they are not who we want them to be. But who do we want them to be?

Identity is no longer assigned to the whole person. Instead it addresses a potentially vast amount of layers—hence, consumer markets—within the person.

It addresses the Napalm Death fan inside the investment banker alongside her penchant for art nouveau pottery. The pro-Russian Donetsk People’s Republic operative inside the Berlin-based Balenciaga-clad designer reading Patti Smith’s memoirs. And then take that same person, without food, clothes, or water, isolated on the Earth layer with no digital echoes, yet with a personality built on echoes inside the Stack. In the indefinite “withinscapes” of the post-singular individual resides a folded mental topology; its inconsistencies are only reunited by the physical integrity of the body that brings them together. And on that folded plane rests the unfinished business of the 20th century.

The Old Cold War’s information shortages have been replaced by ever-accessible information overloads. Aided by new digital centralities (massive social software platforms, each of which handles its avalanches through algorithms and personalized filters), confusion (too much information, exceeding the mental capacity to calculate and make sense), and the de-centralization of the tools of communication, everybody becomes their own broadcaster, designer, filmmaker, key witness, prosecutor, judge, victim, perpetrator, storyteller, etc., acting on, spreading, re-confirming information which may or may not be accurate.

A name invented for these practices is “netwar,” coined in the early 1990s by RAND researchers John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. They wrote that “adversaries are learning to emphasize ‘information operations’ and ‘perception management’—that is, media-oriented measures that aim to

attract or disorient rather than coerce, and that affect how secure a society, a military, or other actor feels about its knowledge of itself and of its adversaries.”⁹

The prevalence of technology, platforms, video and design software and hardware in recent examples of propaganda, information counterstrikes, and disinformation campaigns, highlights not just the capacity of states and other powerful actors to fund and organize such operations, but by the same token, maps the granularity of redistribution of the means of production away from “licensed” operators toward all who may engage. The redistribution of the effective means of production towards all possible computers, smartphones and cameras held by all people in the world is mirrored, paralleled, by their re-unification onto a limited set of digital platforms in which the operations are granted a digitally distributed network power which makes its expressions scalable and accessible beyond regional bounds. These networks themselves, whether acting from factual data, forms of belief, or combinations of both, are always lived realities on the chokepoints and checkpoints that join together the Earth layer with other layers in the Stack.

Upon graduating in journalism at Moscow State University, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya wrote her thesis about the poet Marina Tsvetaeva. The poetry of Tsvetaeva is characterized by a tragic pull and a lyrical edge, adding a sense of passionate empathy and immersion to every written phrase. It is not difficult to see how high school compositions from Grozny became important to Politkovskaya’s later work; not just as accounts of reality but as poetry, echoing Tsvetaeva’s views into an uncertain geopolitical future.

*In my enormous city it is—night,
as from my sleeping house I go—out,
and people think perhaps I’m a daughter or wife
but in my mind is only one thought: night.*

*The July wind now sweeps a way for—me
From somewhere, some window, music though—faint.
The wind can blow until the dawn—today,
in through the fine walls of the breast rib-cage.*

*Black poplars, windows, filled with—light,
Music from the high buildings, in my hand a flower.
Look at my steps—following—nobody.
Look at my shadow, nothing's here of me.*

*The lights—are like threads of golden beads
in my mouth is the taste of the night—leaf.
Liberate me from the bonds of—day,
my friends, understand: I'm nothing but your dream.¹⁰*

1 See Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War. A Russian reporter in Chechnya*, London: The Harvill Press, 2001 (translation John Crowfoot), 161.

2 See Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack. On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.

3 Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: Power, Wars, and the State of Perception*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, 65.

4 Vladislav Surkov, "Without Sky," http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue582/without_sky.html, 2014.

5 Our interpretation of this computational layer is analogous to, and has emerged in dialogue with Benjamin H. Bratton and his concept of The Stack, which he defines as an "accidental

megastructure" of computational systems that adds to and distorts political geography as we know it. See *Benjamin H. Bratton, The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

6 By "the political" here we mean what Chantal Mouffe, and other authors, have understood to be the baseline antagonism between a "we" and a "they," as it was once outlined by the controversial German legal theorist Carl Schmitt. Whilst Mouffe argues for the transformation of a potentially violent "antagonism" into a peaceful but non-consensual "agonism," her theoretical work has, with good reason, emphasized the role of institutions in mediating and regulating this

process. "The political" as we mean it here however does not recognize gatekeepers and filters in the same way, and uses leaks, hacks, and "cyber"-attacks to have its way, no matter what.

7 Vladislav Surkov, "Without Sky," http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue582/without_sky.html, 2014.

8 LARP=Live Action Role Play

9 John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382.html

10 Marina Tsvetaeva, "Insomnia" (verse 3), from *Selected Poems*, New York/London: Penguin 1971-1993, 18-19, translation Elaine Feinstein.

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