Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation
By Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark
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With Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation, the three authors appeal in large part to the Greek myths—of Hermes, of Iris, and of the Furies—forsaking to some extent the more empirically inflected studies they accomplished in the past, in books such as Galloway’s Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization (2006) and The Interface Effect (2012), Thacker’s After Life (2010), and Wark’s A Hacker Manifesto (2004) and Gamer Theory (2007). How productive this will be is a question for the future—for the present it is an intervention into a crisscrossed disciplinary miasma where the contradictions and aporias of different media provoke such a resort to myth and, probably ironically for many, to philosophy, even if this is in the form of the “non-philosophy” of François Laruelle. Beyond constituting different genealogies of media or studying what media do, Galloway, Thacker, and Wark seek a new methodology where media theory also becomes a kind of media, “that is itself algorithmic or procedural” (4). Such a generalized media theory for the authors can only be broached through questioning anew the whole notion of mediation—for communication to connect there must first be separation, even in the most elementary communications theory—and the trio here is dedicated to exploring different facets of this prior condition of non-mediation or non-media. Their goal is far from papering over or reconciling this situation, but rather of stretching it further, “out into the realm of the absolutely alien,” preoccupied with “not so much the extensions of man but the exodus of man from this world” (21).

This non-mediation or non-media evokes the nonhuman, which now must be thought, whether through exploring the varying levels of radical disjunction in quotidian mediation presided over by these three different avatars—of the “middle” (Galloway); of the eclipse of “communication” that takes place in “dark” or “weird” media events in the emergence of the unseen or unsayable (Thacker); or of the multiplication and release of possible portals to “xenocommunication” (Wark).

The three mythic figures suggest a periodization of media, however inexact. Hermes, the Trickster god of messages, travel, deceit, and theft, grants the name, after all, to hermeneutics—and the first task, as Galloway introduces it, is to examine mediation through hermeneutics and the current crisis of critique, which reveals the necessity to go beyond this state of affairs. Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, is a stand-in for communication as luminous immediacy, pure immanence, as in Marshall McLuhan’s “light is pure information” (qtd. 13, 17). If Iris is one of the most overlooked of the messenger divinities, the Erinye or Eumenes, the Roman Furies, probably have had the most alienating image, being a “prehistoric” pack that “move through contagion” (57); in comparison to Hermes or Iris they have often been depicted as “a monstrous, inhuman other” (156). The Furies are a sign of the swarm or assemblage—both the capacity to form such networks and the excess that disrupts them and pushes over into chaos. All of these figures rely on or incorporate a prior excommunication, Galloway writes, “since they each acknowledge the impossibility of communication, whether be via deception, immediacy, or multiplicity” (30). They can also represent certain media—text (Hermes); image (Iris); or network (Furies)—with the network, Galloway argues, now taking historical precedence and priority over the other forms that are “gradually withering away” (62).

Despite this argument, the myths are woven together in fruitful ways in analyses that arguably border on hermeneutic ones, such as Thacker’s treatment of the horror genre (especially Japanese horror or “J-horror”), or H.P. Lovecraft’s “cosmic outsiders” (qtd. 91), exploring the differences between “haunted” and “weird” media (134). Thacker’s journey, beginning with his thesis “excommunication is a double movement in which the communicational imperative is expressed, and expressed as the impossibility of communication” (80, italics in original), takes him into discussion of the mediation of what cannot be mediated in the chasm between objects and “the thing” (das Ding), of the apophatic mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, a via negativa whose concerns are increasingly reflected in the contemporary horror genre. Yet in Thacker’s analysis, even a film that reaches the furthest point of “breaking-through” all remnants of representation, like Kenneth Anger’s Invocation of My Demon Brother (1969)—being a kind of spell or “practical magick” that one does not watch so much as participate in—activates another kind of mediacy, one that indicates there is “nothing” to mediate (111–2). It is in this context that Thacker cites Georges Bataille’s stance towards transgression in Erotism: Death and Sensuality (1986), in which “[t]here exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed” (qtd. 112). In his films Anger frequently enough is depicting magickal rituals, as Thacker notes, not
enacting them, but since these are practices of power (to affect or change "reality") the example begs the question of where transformation or individuation takes place in these however heretical theological frameworks. Such apparent zero-sum games regarding the void are lacking in analyses rooted in the irreversibility of change, as are found in Félix Guattari’s notion of the “machinic,” for example, mentioned as an option in the introduction (9). Guattari named a “mystic machine” without ever elaborating it very much in Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm (1995) and other works. Both he and Gilles Deleuze had a radically different relation to structures of theology than in evidence here, though the notion that a host of dilemmas have now long passed any theological control and in Wark’s terms “[sprawl] across genres” (163) is a commonality. Such a path requires asking different questions. Thacker ends by suggesting that perhaps "dark media . . . are really demonic media, the mediation of that which recedes beyond an always-moving horizon” (138), another sign of world events and crises slipping from possible comprehension. In the final chapter, Wark provides “Furious Media: A Queer History of Heresy.” While Wark zeroes in on the third divinity of the Furies, he also partakes of a fourth that Galloway introduces in his contribution, which squares the other three: that of Aphrodite, goddess of love and sexuality rooted in the body, a “fondler of media, and lover of the middle” (68). Reaching back behind modern seers like Comte de Lautréamont and Arthur Rimbaud to the religious heretics whom he sees as their roots, Wark reads through the lenses of either science fiction or the Situationist International, especially Raoul Vaneigem’s history of the Movement of the Free Spirit, to explore “xenocommunication”—communication with the alien, the infinite, the impossible, or the cosmic outside. Wark does propose the issue of transformation via the loosening and escape from protocols over access to xenocommunication—achieved by the swarm—or the further realization, through poetic materialist practices of everyday life, that there is no xenocommunication. For Wark, Vaneigem extended Karl Marx’s and Guy Debord’s critiques of political economy to a larger critique of general economy both secular and spiritual, and thus of communication, “one of communication itself as a form of control” (168). It is in this light that Wark summarizes Vaneigem’s achievement: “in the end a natural history of everyday human gestures” (173). As part of this “natural history,” Wark discusses the community of Simon of Samaria (labeled “the father of all heretics” by second-century Church Father Irenaeus) and the Barbelites, cults where free enjoyment of the body “flickered briefly” and succeeded in “[turn[ing] the language of transcendence against itself” (179–80). Their limitations today, “as capitalism sheds its sacred shell,” are also evident—from the fascination with esotericism to the cults of yoga and “making sex into a workout” that “likewise turn the labile and voluptuous morays of the body against the body itself” (180). Wark adds French mystic Marguerite Porete (1250–1310) and utopian socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837) to his “red trace of another way of life” (184) found in Church heresies but, in terms of current thinking, affirms his affinity with Galloway and Thacker in urging the significance of Laruelle. Part of Laruelle’s contribution, Wark writes, is his insight that not only does capitalism mask unequal exchange, it also “masks a non-exchange, a noncommunication” (201). A project of universalization, which “puts everything in communication with everything else,” capitalism is the “endless separation of the world into exchange values, all equivalent to, and competing with, each other. Capitalism is a realization of the practice of philosophy itself” (202).

The expositions in Excommunication are manifestly devoted to concepts, creating and expanding them, or as Jussi Parikka has commented, resorting to the “hacking of concepts” to restore the excommunication that is part and parcel of any communication, going beyond the “insufficiency of communication as a model” (16) to broach the credibility of the “absolutely alien” (21). Although some experiments are mentioned in the introduction that succeed to greater extent in “procedural writing,” in exploring algorithmic stratagems—Kenneth Goldsmith’s Day (2003) and Soliloquy (2001), or Stewart Home’s Blood Rites of the Bourgeoisie (2010) among them—in creating new conceptual objects, Excommunication must largely point in that direction, like a finger to the moon. In pushing beyond notions of media and mediation that are, in Thacker’s words, “perhaps, all-too-human” (138), the authors provide a salutary shaking up of a discourse often at once moribund or moving all too quickly, while also indicating the absolutely crucial importance that the subterranean energies of soma, the body, still play in these future directions.

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