

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY, EUGENE THACKER, AND
MCKENZIE WARK, *EXCOMMUNICATION: THREE INQUIRIES
IN MEDIA AND MEDIATION*. UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
PRESS, 2013

Daniel Colucciello Barber

Excommunication includes distinct texts from Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, though with a collectively written introduction. This last allows the book to commence as a kind of commonality, yet as the book lasts the commonality gets increasingly dispersed, or in reality excommunicated. On the next to last page of the introduction, this excommunicative dispersal—enacted by the many ways of conceiving excommunication *as*—is anticipated and summarized: “the book presents media as love [Galloway], media as darkness [Thacker], and media as fury [Wark].” (20)

Focusing for now on the introduction—I will note the authors’ distinctive inquiries in the course of my review—we can say that this book presents a radical intervention in and rethinking of media theory. Yet it would be wrong to call it an innovation. This is because innovation connotes something new, something that has value in virtue of its capacity to supersede what is presumed to be in the past. For the authors of *Excommunication*, it is precisely this commitment to innovation that ought to be questioned. Such questioning extends to the new in general, but it has specific relevance for media theory, which often gets positioned in terms of a division between new media and old media, between Twitter and the telegraph. The authors seek to undo this positioning by observing the presumptiveness of acting “as if we already knew everything about old media,” (2) but more fundamentally by asking some essential questions: “do media always have to be ‘new’ to be an object of a theory? Is it even possible to think about new media without thinking about media in general? Likewise is it possible to think about media without thinking about the *temporality* of media, about why they are labeled new or old?” (1)

As these questions make evident, the aim of this book is to shift media theory’s attention from the classification of media back to the nature of media as such. And it is not just that media is divided within itself, as the difference between old and new; it is also that media is divided from other things, as—for instance—the difference between media device and literary text. To divide between new and old media, or between what is and is not media, requires that we already understand “media in general” and the manner in which time is mediated.

Yet such understanding is absent from many studies of media, which proceed with division while leaving unthought what is divided. Furthermore, even media theory's concern for the way media produce or resist regimes of domination leaves unthought the nature of media. Against the novelty of media, and against the workings of media, the authors call for a reversion: "Have we not forgotten the most basic questions? Distracted by the tumult of concern around what media do or how media are built, have we not lost the central question: *what is mediation?* In other words, has the question of 'what' been displaced by a concern with 'how'?" (9)

Excommunication is a response to this "central question." Although the question addresses "mediation" rather than "media," we should not divide these terms. The force of asking about mediation is to foreground that questions of media are not about devices, discrete objects, or sets of determinative effects. In other words, media are part and parcel of the broader kind of setting implied by a term such as mediation. The conjunction in the subtitle therefore seeks not to bridge across a division between media and mediation but rather to refuse any presumption of their division: mediation is found in media, and media are always already bound up in mediation. Yet even as the authors pose the question of mediation, they give an answer that refuses the position often given to mediation, namely that of communication. While mediation—when we ask about it in a general sense—often leads us to accounts of communicativity, the thesis of this book is that mediation is a matter of excommunication. The difference is this: theories of communication presume that media or mediation is sufficient, that it works; theories of excommunication address "*the insufficiency of mediation,*" (10) they address media in which the work of communication breaks down. *Excommunication* is thus an intervention not only in media theory, but also in "our media cultures," marked as they are by "the seduction of empty messages, flitting here and there like so many angelic constellations in the aether," by "attitudes ... [that] always presume the possibility of communication." (10)

The authors' refusal of such possibility is encapsulated in their refusal of the discourse of new media, for the effect of this discourse is to position media in terms of the possibilities of innovation. Furthermore, the authors' refusal of this discourse is in no way redemptive: the objection motivating the refusal is not that new media discourse needs to become newer or to expand in scope; the objection has nothing to do with the desire to make new media better. To make new media better implies making more of new media, and the problem with new media is that it is already too much. It is too much in the sense that it is plagued by the *and*: new media and this, new media and that, new media and—as the authors put it—"pretty much anything else." (1) But if new media is like a missionary, always expanding into new territories by means of the *and*, this may have something to do with the fact that the *and* is constitutive to new media: the new *and* media, or media *and* the new. What the authors propose is not an additive but a subtractive move. The subtraction begins by taking out the *and*, wherever it is found. When this is done, we find media everywhere, precisely because media is no longer divided from other things, and because it no longer divides itself into old and new. There will only be media. But this is not new. Already there was only media, it was just that we were very busy dividing then trying to overcome these divisions—always through communication—and thus we could not see media.

To highlight the centrality of differentiation and identification to the authors' treatment of media is to highlight the centrality of philosophy to media. After all, the dynamic of difference and identity, along with the "central question"—concomitant to this dynamic—of what mediation is, can be imagined as the essence of philosophy. Yet even as media become entangled in philosophy, excommunication does not produce a philosophy of media. To do so would be to produce division, namely that between the position of philosophy and the position of media. It would be, furthermore, to take up the task of bringing them together, making them communicate in new ways—a new media discourse of philosophy and media. While media's divisions require us to speak philosophically, speaking philosophically cannot resolve these divisions precisely because the divisions of media are the divisions endemic to philosophy. Therefore to contextualize media within philosophy would be to contextualize division within division rather than to refuse it. Given the demand of this refusal—which, we can now see, must be made with respect not only to media but also to philosophy—it is no surprise that one constant, across these three essays, is the non-philosophy of François Laruelle.¹ The entanglement of philosophy's divisions and media's divisions is refused by way of the entanglement of Laruelle's non-philosophy and

the authors' excommunication.

An understanding of the latter entanglement requires an understanding of excommunication. According to the authors, "Every communication evokes a possible excommunication that would instantly annul it. Every communication harbors the dim awareness of an excommunication that is prior to it." (10) Thus excommunication is at once the shadow of and the condition for communication. It surrounds communication, appearing both "before a single word has been said" and "when there is nothing more to say." (11) If excommunication is anterior and posterior to communication, then we cannot avoid saying that it is both constitutive of and in excess of communication. Communication depends on excommunication, from beginning to end, while excommunication names a kind of exteriority to communication—but one must be careful in saying this. For excommunication, though exceeding communicative bounds, is never distinct from these bounds: "excommunication is itself communicated." (15) We have, then, an exteriority that necessarily perseveres, but this perseverance is just as necessarily bound up in the sort of communicativity that it exceeds. Exteriority is there, but it must be communicated, which is to say that it cannot be communicated—even as, and precisely because, it must be communicated. It is along these lines that Thacker speaks of a "communicational imperative" in which "one either confronts an otherness beyond all possible communication, or communication's possibility is enigmatically foreclosed and withdrawn." (79) We find ourselves amidst "a basic paradox: mediation as those moments when one communicates with or connects to that which is, by definition, inaccessible." (81) The media that mark and are marked by this paradox "inhabit [a] twofold movement—seeing something in nothing ... and finding nothing in each something." (85) Similarly, Wark speaks of "xenocommunication" in a twofold manner: "It can be the irruption within a mundane communication of something inhuman. Or, it can take the form of an alien mode of communication itself." (161)

We ought to attend to excommunication's twofold formulation, and specifically to the way it articulates an asymmetrical immanence. This twofold formulation is not dialectical in any classical sense, for there is no possibility or promise of bringing the two sides together. There is no redemptive hope in synthesizing exteriority and communication, nor is there any hope in a full exteriority of excommunication, given the inescapability of some sort of communicative act. Excommunication's twofold formulation belongs to immanence rather than to the dialectic, but this immanence—with one term in excess of the other—is asymmetrical: although communication can never be dissolved, it remains subordinate to the exteriority that comes before and after it. Such asymmetry is likewise a matter of principle, for immanence's indifference to division means that communication, because it enacts division, can never accede to indifference. Therefore what is divided out, or what is excommunicated, will always bear a capacity for articulating immanence that communication has abandoned.

What I am calling asymmetrical immanence is what is shared by the authors' excommunication and Laruelle's non-philosophy, which conceives a One indifferent to the division between being and alterity. If this One remains central to non-philosophy, or if it remains unthought by philosophy, this is because philosophy constitutes itself through division and continues itself by generating connections across the divide it has first created. That all of reality can be submitted to this operation of division and connection is what Laruelle calls the philosophical decision. But Laruelle also speaks of a communicational decision, which is "the idea that everything that exists can be communicated or mediated." (124) Having observed this, Thacker remarks: "One senses that, for Laruelle, the communicational decision is even more insidious than the philosophical decision ... It is one thing to claim that everything that exists, exists for a reason. It is quite another to claim that that everything-that-exists-for-a-reason is immediately and transparently communicable." (124) In any case, the communicable and the philosophizable are deeply intertwined, such that the story of one is bound up in the story of the other: "one can trace a legacy of thinking about communication, from Socrates and Plato (communication is presence), to Heidegger and the hermeneutic turn (communication is interpretation), to Habermas and discussions over the public sphere (communication is discourse)." (11)

The stories of philosophy and communication, whether divided from one another or brought together, do not attend to excommunication. The authors, by giving such attention, refuse the incorporative powers of these

stories. In doing so, they make an essential contribution to—or break within—a pervasive problematic of contemporary philosophy: Amidst the context of real subsumption, or the society of control, or (more to the point) communicative capitalism, how does it become possible to conceive an outside, given that a political demand for something else would seem to depend on the exteriority implied by such an outside? This problematic is at the core of many analyses: Althusser's interpellation, Foucault's care of the self, Deleuze and Guattari's affirmative immanence, Badiou's event, Hardt and Negri's multitude, Rancière's part which has no part, Agamben's bare life ... we could go on and on. The difficulty running throughout these analyses is the need to choose between affirming this context, invoking something strictly beyond it, or mixing both approaches. What excommunication offers—or what Laruelle makes it possible for excommunication to offer—is a refusal to side with any of these choices. This is because excommunication understands these choices as side-effects of division: we have to choose because there is a division, and the choice will never suffice because the problem resides in having divided in the first place.

The term excommunication has connotations not only of media and philosophy, but also of a religiously-inflected outside. This is no accident, for the logic of excommunication at work in contemporary forms of mediation is continuous with the act of excommunication that marks the Christian formation. Excommunication refuses investment not only in the story of philosophy but also in the story of modernity, which tells us that the time of religion has been superseded by the time of secularity. To accept such a story of modernity would be to accept another division, this time between the old and the new, where modernity's new media proclaims its liberation from the mediation of Christ, whose body and blood promised to transform its consumers. The constitution of the Christian body was the new media of its day, a day that has not been overcome by this day, for today we still constitute the social body by incorporating some and excommunicating others. Hence we find Wark expressing his understanding of contemporary xenocommunication in terms of "the heretics excommunicated by the Christians ... whose excommunication is what constitutes the church as such." (160) Similarly, we find Thacker giving significant, if not central, importance to the excommunicative valences of mysticism.

To emphasize the continuity between our contemporary context and a supposedly superseded religious context is to insist on excommunication's refusal of developmental stories. This insistence addresses the relation of present to past, but what about the relation of present to future? It is Galloway who pursues this question most directly, and he does so by providing a taxonomy of "three modes of mediation, three middles" (28), each of which is mythologically figured: hermeneutics (Hermes), iridescence (Iris), and infuriation (the Furies). It is the last of these, which refers to "complex systems like swarms, assemblages, and networks" (29), that concerns us. This is because the Furies, capable as they are of "upend[ing] a situation, thrusting it into a flux of activity and agitation," (29) seem to play a double role. On one hand, they are situated in common with the other two middles as one of "the excommunicative thresholds of the world, the standard world," which fall short of the "non-world" or "non-standard reality" of Laruelle's non-philosophy. (52) On the other hand, the Furies are distinct from the other two modes: if "Hermes or Iris are media, the Furies are quite literally anti-media." (59) Thus the Furies oscillate between indicating a mode of mediation like the others and indicating a distinct mode that might, because it is "anti-," radicalize the exteriority of excommunication. The stakes of this oscillation are increased all the more due to the fact that the mode of the Furies is contemporary, marked by the event of "postfordism" or the "rhizome"—that is, the event of communicative capitalism. Should we then see the contemporary, furious mode of mediation as somehow favorably disposed toward excommunication? Or is it that our contemporary infuriation presents, here and now, the same crisis of mediation that mysticism or heresy once posed, namely that of the insufficiency of the communicational imperative?

To the three modes of media we have already mentioned, Galloway adds one more, which traverses all three: sexual media, figured by Aphrodite. If Aphrodite traverses all three, then she does so not as a predicate common to all of them but rather as a concentrated mediation, prior to any distinction between and dispersion of the three modes. According to Galloway, "Aphrodite might be best understood, then, as a kind of pure mediation. She is the mediation of the middle as such ... in the middle of the middle, the governor of the middle." (64) She is this precisely as sexuality, as the mediation of bodies without anything like a clear and distinct division across

which they need to communicate. Perhaps, then, the indifference of Laruelle's non-philosophy finds its basic intensity in sexuality, which takes place without the division of soul and body. Along these lines, Galloway contends that Aphrodite involves not just sex but also smile: "Neither mouth nor groin reside at the top of the psyche. Nor at the bottom. They reside in the *middle* ... As a mediator she is the 'lover of smiles' just as she is the 'lover of the sex.' Indeed it would be difficult to have one without the other." (68)

Sexual mediation, because it refuses division, refuses both Christianity and philosophy. It refuses all at once the communicational imperative of the West, which is always dividing between soul and body, subject and object, religious faith and philosophical reason. These divisions, disseminative though they may be, amount to a single demand of communication, one that creates disciplinary boundaries in order to control them and thereby to mediate domination. As Wark remarks, "What philosophy and Christianity have in common is that they claim to control the portal between worlds, or in Laruelle's terms between aspects of World: heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, beings and Being, and so forth." (198) This commonality of control, I suggest, can be understood as a logic of conversion.

It is conversion, after all, that is at issue when we go about the business—and it is a business—of dividing old and new and thereby giving a narration of, or accounting for, the passage from old to new as a means of success, as mediation. This is the case whether we are talking about a Pauline turn to fidelity, a philosophical achievement (either as illumination or as critique), a confessional transformation of sexuality to storied identity, a modernization from religious to secular, a capitalization of labor (not to mention life), or a profitable exchange of currencies into the future. It is for this reason that I place central importance on the authors' claim that they "pursue not so much a post-media condition but rather a non-media condition." (21) To respond to mediation through a logic of the "post-" is inadequate precisely because such a response amounts to yet another conversion narrative, now from mediation to post-mediation. This would be to convert from a logic of conversion to a logic of conversion. Against the logic of conversion's "post—"—which is at work, no doubt, in the Speculative Realist narrative of overcoming Kant and in the futurity of Accelerationism—excommunication poses the (Laruellean) logic of "non-." It is a matter not of what is next but of what is not; it is a matter not of the common that was or is or could be, but of the excommons.

NOTE

1. Laruelle's non-philosophy is also central to my own work. I have, it should be noted, previously collaborated with two of *Excommunication's* authors on the theme of Laruelle and the contemporary theoretical significance of mysticism. See *Dark Nights of the Universe*, Daniel Colucciello Barber, Alexander Galloway, Nicola Masciandaro, Eugene Thacker (eds.), [NAME] Publications, 2013.