

Stéphane Hugon, *Circumnavigations : l'imaginaire du voyage dans l'expérience Internet*

Paris : CNRS, 2010

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- ¹ In *Circumnavigations. L'imaginaire du voyage dans l'expérience Internet* Stéphane Hugon proposes a sociology of practices and imaginings to uncover the workings of the online experience. The book was written under the auspices of Michel Maffesoli (who contributes an introduction) and emphasises Maffesolian tropes such as the way micro-events act as social glue, the importance of “consensus” understood as the sharing of feelings and sensitivities, and the return in a new guise of tribal forms. The book is divided in two main parts, dealing first with analyses of movement across space and then with the issues of technique and mediation.
- ² Hugon's main theme is that connections can be established between landscapes and sociality: a social relation can take a spatial form. The usage of terms such as “surf,” “site,” “superhighway,” and “cyberspace” indicates that spatial imagery plays a role online, and Hugon argues that the Internet is allowing people to reconnect to the age-old human interest in wandering through space by engaging in nomadism, *flânerie*, *dérive*: “people don't use Internet; they go on it” (p. 248). Going online represents a reaction to boredom and to a disenchanted world (Weber) of disciplinary techniques (Foucault) which assign people a fixed place. In addition to these authors, Hugon invokes a wide array of thinkers, as when viewing the online experience through the lens of Simmel's description of urban processes or of Bollnow's distinction between

different kinds of social spaces according to whether an experiencing subject is present. These citations, and the myriad others which appear alongside (Sloterdijk, Bachelard, Žižek, Heidegger...) have scientific consistency inasmuch as they represent a philosophical intention to account for the diverse and elusive aspects of existence, and particularly for the role which mental representations play in constructing the social.

- 3 At other times the author's metaphorical approach shows its limits, as when an analogy between the communitarian sentiment and fractal images is detected because both exhibit traces of "echo and representation", so that the partial appearance of the one "leads to total and infinite representation of the whole" (p. 140). This comparison, while not incorrect per se, would also apply to such a wide variety of synecdoches that its explanatory power is questionable. Another issue is that the book ignores some central aspects of today's online experience. Hugon includes snippets of interviews with people who describe their various activities on the Internet,¹ but these mainly support an understanding of online communities as elliptical, fragile, evanescent occurrences; according with a "postmodern" theoretical stance which rejects any systematic approach as constituting "master narratives" which impose a rigid reading on a multiple and contingent reality.
- 4 Similarly when Hugon mentions blogs, he emphasises their self-referential aspects, the importance of friendship and affect. This approach is certainly appropriate to describe the early social Internet of the 1990s, where non-programmers engaged in activities such as role-playing and chatting in forums. However this exclusive focus on communication or play does not mesh with more contemporary forms of mass Internet sociality ("Web 2.0") such as organising political campaigns through community weblogs, building online free culture databases through wikis, or advertising different kinds of events and publications through social network sites. In peer production groups such as free software communities or Wikipedia for example, participants engage in a common *project* which is also a *cause* to be championed (promoting free culture over proprietary models, for example). Rules and norms are established; hierarchies and leaders emerge. A new form of organisation has been generated. An exclusive focus on intense and immediate events does not account for these organisational arrangements or for the ideological message which they convey. In spite of these reservations, the fact remains that *Circumnavigations'* uniquely original approach of online sociality is sure to enrich the methodological portfolio of Internet researchers.

NOTES

1. No information as to the number and nature of these interviews is provided.

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