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Timothy Barker (2018) against transmission: media philosophy and the engineering of time

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Timothy Barker (2018) *Against Transmission: Media Philosophy and the Engineering of Time*. London: Bloomsbury, 192 pp.

"The really real things of the world," writes Timothy Barker in *Against Transmission: Media Philosophy and the Engineering of Time*, "are in fact processes" (p. 46). And so, when it comes to understanding the media that inform and occupy our daily existence, the "trick," as Barker puts it in his introduction, is to apply such processual awareness to them, and to the technologies of which they are made, too (p. 7). This "trick" is indeed the fundamental premise of Barker's book, whose approach combines the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead with understandings of media as environments or conditions, rather than objects, as developed in in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan (2001), in the 1980s by Vilém Flusser (2011), and in the 1990s by Friedrich Kittler (1999). Despite a title poised "against" what would seem a process par excellence, namely transmission, Barker's book looks at media not as fixed entities but as complexly dynamic phenomena, even as he pays attention to the materiality of media and their technologies.

Like other media theorists and philosophers, such as McLuhan and, more recently, Steven Shaviro (2009), Barker finds Whitehead's ideas, developed in light of modern physics' transformation of the very understanding of matter, generative for thinking about the processuality, rather than the objectness, of our increasingly technologically mediated existence. Indeed, another conceptual strand important to Barker's argument (even if its importance is not necessarily made very prominent in the book itself) is the approach of philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler (1998, 2009, 2011), who, influenced by Gilbert Simondon (2017), have sought to bring into relief the role of the technological in helping us to understand what constitutes human, and social, being. According to these approaches, the technological and the human cannot be separated: the human has been technological, and technologically mediated, from its origin. And so, concurring with these positions, Barker argues that media are a "non-optional part of human experience" (p. 28), and that "the technical conditions of media themselves" constitute that through which the human subject comes into being, or is at the very least "expressed" or "formulated" (p. 30).

Within these premises, *Against Transmission* focuses on using modern technological media and their historical transformation to map a transition from the past of "modernity" to the present of the "contemporary." For Barker, such epochal transition hinges primarily on the perception and expression of time that the media of these different moments enabled and engendered. Indeed, in addition to mediating the

human, or perhaps because they mediate the human, media and their technological conditions also mediate time; they are that through which time takes its contours. While the familiar distinction between analogue and digital media ultimately underscores Barker's argument, the demarcation he adopts is between "synthetic" and "analytical" media. Media "such as cinema and print which characterized modernity" were "synthetic" with respect to temporality. They articulated – or, indeed, "synthesized" – time, and hence history, "into a line" (p. 4). By contrast, "the measurement and storage media [database, photography and digital television are Barker's examples] that now characterize the conditions for contemporaneity" are "analytical" (p. 2). Rather than condensing time into a line, they break it down into fragments which are not only instantly, and perpetually, stored but also non-linearly and simultaneously accessible. The contemporary era of analytical media is thus "archival" rather than "historical" (p. 59). As time is opened up to analysis, so buckles that synthesis of time that was history; the era of analytical media is in this sense post-historical, permanently *con*-temporary, as the past itself, preserved and viewable through technological media, seems to become fully integrated with the present and to expand into the future. Barker draws on concrete examples from contemporary media arts (such as works by Jim Campbell, Jeff Wall and David Claerbout in the third chapter) to articulate these points. Indeed, contemporary media arts often function as allies of media philosophy, for they might work to "upset" the "analytical tendency"; in making it "dysfunctional," they make it visible (p. 59).

In addition to an emphasis on the processuality of media, what Barker also perhaps ultimately seeks to bring into relief is that neither synthetic nor analytical media can offer plenitude and continuity. Mediation by definition entails gaps and losses. This idea in particular comes through in the book's last two chapters, dedicated to a discussion of what may seem a medium of transmission par excellence, namely television, which Raymond Williams famously suggested in the 1970s was a medium of "flow." If transmission, like flow, evokes a continuity and plenitude of signal, Barker's discussion of the material and technological genealogy of television seeks to disprove this. For even the seemingly time-continuous signal of television is the product of a segmentation – or what Barker terms a "radical cutting" (p. 103) – of its visual and sound information, which is necessarily broken down, converted or transduced, into an electronic signal *prior to*, and *for* transmission. In finding "analytical" elements such as fragmentation and reduction in a seemingly "synthetic" medium, Barker is not only countering a narrative of radical breaks or shifts, but also perhaps arguing for caution against the rhetorics of

fullness, completeness, and accuracy surrounding our contemporary digital media.

Against Transmission contains many interesting and enticing ideas. Yet, to savour these, the reader needs to persevere beyond what is an unenticing introduction (awkward syntax and typos suggest hasty production), whose often opaque "synthesizing" of the book's core argument short-changes its ideas. At some level, perhaps, the "analytical" drive of which Barker speaks in relation to contemporary media seems to be structurally enacted by the book itself, the rationale of which feels itself diffuse and analytically fragmented. A short preface with bullet points for key concepts at the beginning of each chapter seems intended to prevent or obviate such a sense of fragmentation or conceptual dispersal, while at the same time, I think, revealing the existence of this preoccupation on the author's and editors' parts.

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