

## 'Black-boxed' [Review] Mark B. N. Hansen (2015) Feed-forward: on the future of twenty-first-century media

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*Race to Finding Myself* (1999) could even be found on self-help shelves. For Scribner, this self-image is continuous with that of the sexist male urban guerrilla of the 1960s and 1970s that Fischer once was. In distinct contrast, the performance of Meinhof's body shows it to be shattered and abnormal, ghostly, force-fed, abused; but this, too, comes to be, in some contexts, synonymous with the German state, as an entity that is broken and discontinuous. It is also an emblem of the fractious and fragmented meanings attributed to Ulrike Meinhof, which refuse to resolve. Not least within this book. There are various intersecting, obliterating, overwriting lines explored here: art, politics, aestheticization, terror, reform, enlightenment, mystification, gender, class. Feminism and social change are at the heart of it all. Meinhof's notebooks show her to be critical of feminism. A note puts it crudely: 'Fuck equal rights for women'. But if Meinhof was not interested in feminist analysis or demands from that perspective, Scribner is.

The final chapter explores the complicity of artists and media in confecting the image of the RAF. This was the ground that the exhibition *Regarding Terror* explored in 2005, as it put on show the extent to which so much art that reflected on the RAF drew on newspaper and stock photography. This is indicative, according to Scribner, of a 'mediatized condition', but it is, she asserts, a deceptive one, eclipsing some of the other motivations of artists who contributed to the show, and also denying the extent to which, through art, they transformed the media materials. There are other reflections to be had on the legacy, and Scribner sets the much-acclaimed 'sexed-up' glamfest that is Uli Edel's *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* (2008; see my review in *RP* 153, January/February 2009) against a German-Turkish film by Fatih Akin, *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), which approaches the question of political activism and armed resistance in the context of post-9/11, relating in the process questions of feminism and its relation to the Far Left. This latter film stands as a model of what is needed, phrased by Scribner as 'the power of dialectical mediation', in which difference is respected, but strategic alliances may still be formed. This position Scribner attributes to Adorno. But the language is not Adornian really. It is a liberal plea to end 'them' and 'us' conceptualizations. Essentially it wants a democracy that does not use force against its people and a people that does not use force against its democracy (assuming that democracy has an agreed and stable meaning). It recognizes that the Far Left might be the agents, unintentionally, of the best reforms, but most of all it

counsels for more reflection, more culture and more books of this kind, to generate 'new modes of resistance, both critical and aesthetic'. It is most worthy.

Esther Leslie

## Black-boxed

Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2015. 320 pp., £57.50 hb., £19.50 pb., 978 0 22619 969 6 hb., 978 0 22619 972 6.

*Feed-Forward* sets an ambitious goal for itself: that of integrating late Husserlian phenomenology with the speculative empiricism of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead is employed by Hansen to make up for phenomenology's inadequacy in conceptualizing the ways in which contemporary media are changing experience and subjectivity. Hansen's engagement with Whiteheadian ontology is a learned and confident attempt to produce 'new philosophy for new media' (to paraphrase the title of one of Hansen's previous books). The strength of this attempt, however, is partly undermined by the fact that Hansen subtracts some key ingredients from Whitehead's metaphysical schema in order to add him to the legacy of phenomenology. Moreover, in order to relate this proposed Whiteheadian phenomenology to contemporary media, Hansen's study can be seen to sidestep the technical specificity of the media that it wishes to theorize.

The nub of the book's argument is the claim that contemporary media impact upon and participate in 'worldly sensibility' (that is, in Hansen's words, the 'general sensibility of the world'). This participation in a broader and distributed domain of sensibility is prior to media's affecting human experience, but also a condition for this affecting. The book's point of departure is thus the following observation: human experience is undergoing a fundamental change, brought about by our entanglement with media technologies that operate outside our awareness. Drawing on media theory's insight that agency is radically environmental, and yet refusing media theory's disregard for the category of the human (an accusation of neglect that is only partially justified in this book), Hansen offers a reconceptualization of the global experiential patterns of techno/human activity by recuperating phenomenology's attention to subjectivity. The subjectivity that he addresses, however,

is an unusual one: it is, again in Hansen's words, a 'non-subject-centred subjectivity', composed of multi-scalar processes. Not so much the straightforward high-order, singular source of consciousness, attention and sense perception of traditional phenomenology, then, but a post-Husserlian, assemblage-like, low-order 'environmental sensory confound' that Hansen finds to be best conceptualized in terms of the mode of organization that Whitehead called a *society*.

A Whiteheadian society is a compositional agglomerate of the operations of elemental entities that partake in the societal composition as a plurality. Crucially, Hansen takes societies to be the principal experiential agents within Whitehead's philosophy, thus explicitly refusing to consider *actual occasions* (i.e. Whitehead's foundational ontological units, which constitute the structure of reality and



whose achievements form societies) as the main active players in Whitehead's metaphysics of experience. Drawing on Judith Jones's interpretation of Whitehead (which takes 'intensity', understood as the power that exceeds individual actual occasions, to be his fundamental category), and also following Didier Debaise's distinction between the 'speculative' (i.e. what concerns the structure of reality) and the 'experiential' (i.e. what accounts for experience) in Whitehead, Hansen empties actual occasions, and their concrescent phase, of creative value. What Hansen instead addresses as the agent of experiential novelty is the Whiteheadian concept of *superject*, arguing that the attained, composite status of societal subjectivity (i.e. the superject) best describes how humans today co-function with technology. Our subjective experience, the book claims, is born out of the sensory affordances that repose in contemporary media situations. This condition, Hansen says, shows that humans are not separate and superior experiential entities, and that consciousness is not the hallmark of subjectivity. In Hansen's view, Whitehead's philosophy can then be used to rethink

the environmental dimension of subjectivity vis-à-vis the ways in which media are responsible for propagating a distributed mode of sensibility that is decoupled from human perception.

There is much I admire in Hansen's engagement with Whitehead. However, I also have some concerns: some arise from disagreements regarding technical issues in Whiteheadian scholarship; others pertain to our differing opinions about what might be most usefully drawn from Whitehead's ontology. Debating who has got the right or wrong version of Whitehead, however, is beside the point. Whitehead's philosophy is so complex, and often so unapologetically obscure, that there cannot be one Whitehead. The impossibility of reducing Whitehead's philosophy to orthodoxy attests to its power and richness, and also explains the contemporary renaissance that it has come to enjoy. Yet, recognition of this potential plurality is

underdeveloped in Hansen's study. With few exceptions, Hansen tends to characterize other readings of Whitehead as problematic or inadequate. These readings are charged with being instrumental or tactical, and with privileging certain aspects of Whitehead's philosophy in order to make pre-established

points. To some extent, this may be true. However, and perhaps inevitably, this charge could also be applied to Hansen himself, and in a manner that goes beyond questions of interpretation. In order to forge a kinship between Whitehead and phenomenology, Hansen has to choose certain elements of Whitehead's philosophy and discard others. Hansen sees this as a sort of correction: as a 'transformative criticism', or as submitting Whitehead to 'philosophical critique'. Nonetheless, doubts remain as to whether certain dismissals (of parts of Whitehead's metaphysics, as well as of many Whitehead's past and present commentators) are not equally a form of instrumentalization.

The scope of the book is to address worldly sensibility and our involvements within it. This is a phenomenological issue, Hansen explains, which nonetheless emerges from a technological condition that phenomenology is unable to engage with because of its insistence on relating sensation to human perception and consciousness. For Hansen, Whitehead is the philosopher that might come to the rescue here, for he might give us just the right

ontology to conceptualize this worldly sensibility and, at the same time, to advance a non-anthropomorphic and non-representational phenomenology able to address technology beyond its prosthetic coupling with human capacities. It is precisely at this ontological level, however, that Hansen adds most of his corrections to Whitehead's account, with a view towards forging this reformed phenomenology. These corrections result in a Whiteheadian ontology that is, in fact, somewhat non-Whiteheadian: *eternal objects* are not eternal anymore; *actual occasions* do not end, but indefinitely converge into an imperishable 'total power'; the atomic processuality of Whitehead's many beings (indeed, the actual occasions) is overlooked in order to give room to a holistic Being-of-the world that would seem to belong more to phenomenology (or to the neo-materialism and affective turn from which Hansen would want to detach his phenomenology of media) than to Whitehead himself.

The value of *Feed-Forward* is that it contributes to both Whiteheadian scholarship and media theory with a thought-provoking proposition, achieved by way of rigorous philosophical commitment and labour. However, whilst the book opens up and reworks Whitehead's philosophy, the techno-operations that it addresses remain, to an extent, black-boxed. Hansen's term 'twenty-first-century media' is intended to denote a plethora of 'technical incursions that are now reshaping our lives'. These include social media platforms, the Internet and global networks, smartphones and smart devices, location-aware technologies, data-mining and data-gathering techniques, biometric recording, and the 'passive sensing' of what Hansen calls 'microcomputational sensors'. Twenty-first-century media differ from their predecessors, because they do not rely on agent-centred perception. Instead, they pertain to (and enhance human contact with) an environmental mode of sensibility. Yet, quite what these 'intelligent sensing technologies' really are, and indeed where their intelligence might lie, is not tackled; at least not in a manner that goes beyond observing and conceptualizing what these technologies do to us, and to our relation with the world. In other words, Hansen chooses to focus on the ways in which twenty-first-century media inscribe human experience into worldly sensibility, as opposed to theorizing how a 'computational sensing' might actually be carried out by machines.

'Feed-forward' is the book's central concept. It aims to surpass the Husserlian notion of *protention* in order to describe the data-driven anticipatory

structure of the 'experiential paradigm' engendered by twenty-first-century media. Feed-forward 'names the operation through which the technically accessed data of sensibility enters into futural moments of consciousness as radical intrusions from the outside'. This 'presentification' of data to consciousness is, Hansen argues, 'the principal mode in which contemporary consciousness can experience ... its own operability'. However, the fact that the twenty-first-century media's 'calculative ontology of prediction' is indeed about calculation remains opaque in this conceptualization of feeding-forward mechanisms. Despite identifying the role of calculation vis-à-vis prediction, Hansen does not fully address it. I see this as a problem: for if twenty-first-century media's anticipatory nature is indeed about calculation – and I would argue that this is the case – then it must concern a computational power that not only presents and presentifies data, but also has to represent the latter via symbolic but functional reductions.

The decision to not engage more directly with the calculative nature of twenty-first-century media could, however, be read as Hansen taking a specific philosophical stance. In other words, he would seem to be choosing phenomenology over Whitehead by implicitly asserting that, because we do not have direct access to these computational operations, we should not speak of them. It is therefore legitimate to wonder whether ultimately Hansen has remained loyal to phenomenology's focus on describing the 'experiential' by favouring the latter category over a more strictly and peculiarly Whiteheadian consideration of the 'speculative'. From this perspective, it is possible to say that, although the book recognizes that it is the speculative that grounds the experiential in Whitehead, its very own speculative contribution aims to assess *the reality of techno-human experience* rather than that of twenty-first-century media *per se*. In this sense, what the book affords is less a Whiteheadian ontology of media technology than a Whiteheadian phenomenology of contemporary media situations.

**M. Beatrice Fazi**