

# The CCRU as an Attempt of Doing Philosophy in a Digital World

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## 1. Introduction

The consequences brought about by the Internet have been immense. The resulting chaos effected society at large and while natural sciences could enjoy the greater availability of information, social sciences and humanities found themselves in a new world with new problems. A new environment was created for communities to function in, and this environment was ready to be studied. But it was also an area effected by those sciences, a breeding ground for theories. The fact that theories effect realities they study has been accelerated with the emergence of the Internet. It is not clear how to act in such an environment. In 1995 at Warwick University, England, an experimental cultural theorist collective was formed called the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU).

## 2. Goal of the paper

The goal of the paper is to examine the problems presented by the Internet and to look at the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit as an example of theorists (specifically those in the field of philosophy) adapting to the new medium.

## 3. Influences

Main influences on the CCRU were French postmodernists and it is itself a postmodern project. Sadie Plant, the feminist lecturer writing a book on “The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age” and Nick Land, the eccentric professor teaching a course on “Current French Philosophy” took their influences and led them to new levels of eccentric.

### 3.1. Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard was first to introduce the term “postmodern” in philosophical context. According to him the availability of knowledge is what causes the transition from the modern to a postmodern condition. Organization of knowledge is the thing that serves to justify power in the modern world. As knowledge becomes more available, the power of old actors such as nation-states withers, new actors emerge and the nature of society changes profoundly. Scientific knowledge is not easily accessible and to bring it closer to people for the purpose of legitimation whether of itself or some political, economic, cultural or any other kind of system, it takes the form of a narrative. That is when a problem of a conflict of narratives emerges, but generally one dominates over others and becomes a metanarrative, a story which offers an explanation for the world and justifies a certain social order.

The fundamental feature of postmodernism according to Lyotard is the decay and disappearance of metanarratives. He was enthusiastic about postmodernism and wanted to fragment and break down society in order for experimentation in the social field to yield improvements.

The CCRU presents the Internet as a fertile ground for Lyotard’s theories. It should be clear why. It makes knowledge even more accessible as well as the power of expression.

### 3.2. Derrida

The way in which Jacques Derrida is most reflected in the works of the CCRU’s style. What is reflected are his hopes for philosophical writing. He was critical of the seriousness of the philosophical canon which in his day he saw dominated by Hegelian thought.

Derrida celebrates poetry, laughter and ecstasy which he sees as neglected. He sees developed two forms of writing, serious philosophy on the one hand and playful literature on another. He opposes what he calls logocentrism, perceived domination of the ideal of the spoken word and criticism of writing as in literature, something stemming all the way from antiquity with Socrates and Plato sticking out as important critics of writing.

“This-major-writing will be called writing because it *exceeds* the *logos* (of meaning, lordship, presence etc.). Within this writing – the one sought by Bataille – the same concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning, or rather will be struck by (even though they are apparently indifferent), the loss of sense toward which they slide, thereby ruining themselves immeasurably.” (Derrida, 1990)

Derrida aims to destroy boundaries between philosophy and literature. With the CCRU the boundaries get lost in the creation of a brand-new writing style, theory-fiction. Theory-fiction could be considered a genre of its own, a surreal combination of cyberpunk and Gothic horror. Writings in this style are ambiguous and even their literary meaning is hard to distinguish yet they are filled with philosophical ideas waiting to be deciphered. One could imagine this making Derrida proud or jealous.

### 3.3. Deleuze and Guattari

As far as theoretical influences are concerned, the French pair that coauthored many works, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst and political activist Félix Guattari are probably the most influential. The CCRU writings aim for what Deleuze and Guattari called schizoanalysis. It is an alternative to what is typically understood as rational thinking and more in line with the spirit of the time. It embraces the kind of thinking associated with schizophrenics and people with cluster A personality disorders which are often associated with it. The similarity between a philosopher and a schizophrenic is that they both rely on abstractions and finding connections between wildly different phenomena. Schizoanalysis takes this connection and runs with it before letting it run loose. Thinking becomes chaotic yet orderly in its own way, within its own logic. Everything becomes rhizomatic.

“Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005)

A pair of terms of special note are deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the first one referring to the process by which social relations are altered, mutated or destroyed and the second one referring to the process by which new relations emerge. The CCRU was revolutionary in its accelerationist embrace of social change which meant celebrating deterritorialization, whether for its own sake, motivated by a libertarian desire for freedom, or for the sake of better alternatives emerging, maybe even new trees and new metanarratives.

### 3.4. Baudrillard

The last very much important figure influencing the CCRU was the French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. The key concepts for him are simulation, simulacra and hyperreality. Simulation is a process by which reality is replaced with its representation and what is left are called simulacra.

Baudrillard describes three orders of simulacra, all stemming from the original traditional symbolic order.

“In the first case, the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance - it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance - it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.” (Baudrillard 1994)

This fourth case, the third order of simulacra is the pure simulacra, something only ever referencing itself without any authentic reality behind it. This is how Baudrillard conceived of the postmodern world. For him the history of modernity is the history of the disappearance of the real.

However, what is left isn't the unreal or the false, it is the hyperreal. Baudrillard's writing is full of references to magic when speaking of traditional societies and to new technologies, virtual reality, explosions of information, machines conquering humanity etc. when talking about contemporary societies. This is very much thematically relevant to the CCRU. They weren't the only ones fascinated with Baudrillard, he was so influential that *The Matrix* is full of references to his work. However, as opposed what is depicted in *The Matrix*, in the hyperreal world there is no real to refer to, there is no exiting the simulation, no escaping the code. But for the CCRU there is hope in the Internet that from the “Desert of the Real” will emerge something new. Baudrillard is pessimistic about changes he observes and only brings up possible solutions to problems in order to refute them, but in the CCRU there is an amor fati present even if not optimism.

## 4. Playful and dangerous writing group

From the name, Cybernetic Culture Research Unit and the basic knowledge of what it is about, one might suspect two things, cyberpunk and philosophy. Instead, what one finds is a surreal drug fueled collection of writing about Lovecraftian demons, numerology, ghost lemurs of Madagascar preserving the memories of psychic amphibians... And the things one might expect are so enigmatic as to be distorted beyond recognition. Two things become clear, one is the role of drugs in the CCRU and the other is that it wasn't really a philosophical or information science research group at all, but was primarily a literary club. People involved mostly had a background of philosophy and they had their independent careers, some writing in a more psychedelic style revealing their history in the CCRU and some being more “normal” and understandable. Which isn't to say that there is no philosophy to be found in the CCRU, but a lot of it is motifs and sources of inspiration arising from the chaos of collective storytelling and the authors' common interests and influences.

One important concept related to the CCRU is hyperstition. Hyperstitions are fictions that make themselves real, like how the concept of space travel caused space travel to come into reality. This explains the importance of the artistic style for some members. All ideas can be understood as hyperstition using humans as hosts that bring them into existence. The CCRU often wrong about a fictionalized version of itself. This can be understood as a sort of magic.

## 5. Prominent figures and their insights

From this literary group emerged strains of thought ranging from far right Nick Land to far left Mark Fisher and cyberfeminist Sadie Plant.

### 5.1. Sadie Plant and cyberfeminism

Plant offers a unique blend of postmodern feminism and hopes typical for the 90s and visible in films like *Hackers*. According to her, the transformative power of the Internet lies in the fact that it offers a space without physical bodies. Furthermore, computer technology and programming are inherently feminine and therefore benefit women. Finally, women are treated as machines and because of this share a connection with them emancipation of machines will bring about an emancipation of women.

In some respects, Plant proved prophetic. The Internet greatly improved the visibility of marginalized groups and made the general public more compassionate for them. In other respects, not so much, the Internet allows all kinds of opinions to prosper and that certainly includes sexist opinions. But in any case, she certainly offers food for thought about how gender identities are formed and expressed.

### 5.2. Mark Fisher and blogging

Fisher is most famous for writing about how hard it is to people to imagine an alternative and how capitalism is capable of coopting resistance and creating fake opposition. However, one subject where he was surprisingly optimistic was blogging. Fisher reflected on how doing serious philosophical work (for instance writing a PhD) can be difficult and depressive, but writing a blog is more relaxing, by being less serious it can trick people into doing serious philosophy and it also offers an interactivity that hasn't been seen since the days of the Greek agora. The new digital agoras have since also been assimilated into the existing system. In a way there is a contradiction in Fisher's writing, but the glimmer of hope he saw is important. If it is forgotten, we are not due for any better of a fate than Fisher who killed himself due to depression.

"I started blogging as a way of getting back into writing after the traumatic experience of doing a PhD. PhD work bullies one into the idea that you can't say anything about any subject until you've read every possible authority on it. But blogging seemed a more informal space, without that kind of pressure. Blogging was a way of tricking myself back into doing serious writing. I was able to con myself, thinking, 'it doesn't matter, it's only a blog post, it's not an academic paper'. But now I take the blog rather more seriously than writing academic papers." (Fisher, 2018)

### 5.3. Nick Land and neo-reaction

For better or worse the member of the CCRU who is most prominent today is Nick Land. One of the ideas which he developed was conceiving of capitalism as an artificial intelligence, but while other authors may hope for this AI to update its software and produce something new, Land seems to be content in accepting that there is no alternative. Land continues to either inspire interpretations of new phenomena on the Internet or offer new interpretations himself. A significant example of the former would be the influence by a combination of younger Land's ideas of hyperstition and older Land's right wing political attitudes in creation of the online theory of meme magick, the idea that Internet memes can influence reality and that this is why Donald Trump won the 2016 US presidential elections in a supernatural way. A significant example of the latter would be Land's philosophy of Bitcoin which isn't only economic, but metaphysical as well, using Bitcoin to explain the logical law of identity and to reaffirm the Kantian understanding of space and time.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The CCRU is relevant because today Internet is so ingrained in our lives that we don't even notice it any more just as fish don't notice the water they are in. It can prove useful to look at the time when this technology was new and if the future did turn out disappointing maybe we should examine yesterday's speculation of today to remind ourselves what could have been. Sometimes it happens that parts of writing prove to be oddly prophetic and in that case it is good to appreciate what we have or maybe just look at it with new eyes. And even when they seem wrong they represent a valiant attempt at doing something new.

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