

Chapter Title: AFTERWORD: SO-CALLED NATURE

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AFTERWORD

SO-CALLED NATURE

Geology of media deals with the weird intersections of earth materials and entangled times. It includes several events that reveal this combination of the planetary ancient and the technologically advanced. The futuristic changes place with the obsolete in ways that are at times too close to notice. The design culture of the new hides the archaic materials of the planet.

The explosive event of industrialization was dependent on new forms of energy; coal, oil, and gas became main drives replacing the reliance on wind, water, plants, trees, and animals as energy sources.¹ After dirty aesthetics of coal that painted the surface and the sky black, through other fossil fuels we accessed the deep time of the earth: over three-million-year-old deposits of plants and animals from the predinosaur era; age-old photosynthesis that the planet stored to enable for instance capitalism to expand in its current scientific technological form. The scientific studies on deep time were paralleled with this practical tapping into the underground where mining engineers were discovering in the depths both coal and valuable metals such as gold, silver, and copper.

Computers are a crystallization of past two hundred to three hundred years of scientific and technological development, geological insights, and geophysical affordances. They are dependant on precious metals, and even early-nineteenth-century networks needed copper for conducting the signal traffic of globalizing media culture. During the past decades, optical fiber has made its entry as the glassy backbone of global infrastructures. Rare earth minerals already useful in earlier eras become essential

in new technological contexts, when the computer turned visually attractive: graphical user interfaces, advanced screen technologies, and digital design culture geared for the consumer pleasure on massive scales, to gather through interactive participation data on digital habits—material for the data-mining industry.

The use of certain key minerals enables the miniaturization of the computational worlds; they become mobile, ubiquitous, pervasive, and embedded into the natural environment.²

The coal that fired first Western Europe then gradually other bits of the world into industrialism is still very much present in the information culture. “Dig more coal, the PCs are coming”³ alerted an article in *Forbes* magazine, referring already in 1999 to the energy-intensive processes of computers. Increasing bandwidth, more efficient processors, data-heavy digital design practices, and the sheer increase in the number of computational events tell the story of the upward curve in absolute numbers of energy consumption of the supposedly immaterial matrix of computation. The microchipped world burns in intensity like millions of tiny suns: “On its surface, where bits are incarnated as electrons, a chip runs at enormously high power densities—up to one-tenth those at the surface of the sun.”⁴

In Roger Caillois’s little book on stones, he hints of a passage from the earth to inscription: “Already present in the archives of geology, available for operations then inconceivable, was the model of what would later be an alphabet.”⁵ In a later media technological perspective, we can adjust this prophetic statement relating to the mystical “readability” of the earth as a sign into something more technical: the archives of geology give, not a model, but the material for what would later be media and technology. Already Lyell and Darwin imagined the earth as a library and a recording machine, continued in the elemental imagination of Charles Babbage, who pitched even the “air as one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered.”⁶

The readability of the earth is still a continuing trope. The earth is constantly read as if it were a script needing to be interpreted, a trace of hermeneutics persistent in the age of advanced technology. Yet this refers less to the long traditions of animistic nature and a world of meaning inside its seemingly silent bowels than to the military operations that

constantly, to use Ryan Bishop's words, "convert geography (geo-graphy, writing on the earth's surface) into geology, a logos of the earth."⁷ Besides the military, there are different contexts, too—including the arts. In their piece *Medium Earth*,⁸ the Otolith Group speaks of the earthquake-sensitive group of people who channel the "subconscious" tremors of the earth like the figure of a nineteenth medium who was channeling the dead. "It listens to its deserts, translates the writing of its stones, and deciphers the calligraphies of its expansion cracks."⁹ This sort of mapping the earth as our geophysical underground is one of sensitive bodies but also the technical and audiovisual culture in which the earth is circuted as part of mediatized expression.

To return to where we started: notions of materiality of media must take into account this geophysical reality as both the source and the target of our technical media. Lewis Mumford spoke of paleotechnics but restricted that to the earlier phase of industrialization, which was based in mining. But mining and the appropriation of the geophysical have never stopped: they are still part and parcel of the advanced media technological culture through which environmental sensing, smart dust, and new protocols allow the world to be filled with IP addresses that map the "natural" effectively as part of media.

This book is less a critique of theorists such as Friedrich Kittler or others than it is a call for a further materialization of media not only as media but as that bit which it consists of: the list of the geophysical elements that give us digital culture. It is not a world devoid of war, but in a rather pessimistic way, we can say that the Cold War culture of surveillance, paranoia, and national and intra/extranational state interests is only intensified with the scarcity of energy and material resources necessary to maintain those technological national regimes as economic and security units. Media materiality is not contained in the machines, even if the machines themselves contain a planet. The machines are more like vectors across the geopolitics of labor, resources, planetary excavations, energy production, natural processes from photosynthesis to mineralization, chemicals, and the aftereffects of electronic waste. Where exactly in this mix do you find the materiality of media? Kittler spoke about the "so-called Man" as a constructed object of media technological culture: the human being made visible in the intersection of scientific mapping of

its modes of sensation and the technological mobilization of its regimes of sensation. The human being was understood as a second-order creation wired into the circuit. Yet we need to extend and ask if it is as important to map the existence of “so-called Nature”:¹⁰ the existence of the environmental as we see it through our technoscientific sensorium and gradually disappearing from view, from existence, in the midst of the Anthrobscene.