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<http://jussiparikka.net/2011/03/04/insect-media-interview-and-more/>

New APPS Interview: Jussi Parikka on his new book "Insect Media"

Today's New APPS Interview is with [Jussi Parikka](#), Reader in Media Theory and Culture at [Anglia Ruskin University](#) (UK) and Director of the [Cultures of the Digital Economy Research Institute](#). His new book, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minnesota, 2010), is the subject of today's discussion.

Welcome, Jussi. Thanks for doing this New APPS Interview with us today. What is the immediate context of your work in *Insect Media*?

Thanks, John. The starting point for the book was to continue something I had started in my previous book, *Digital Contagions*, which was both a history of computer viruses, but also a wider mapping of the discursive and material exchanges between biology and technology. The recent years of almost excessive focus on swarms, collective hive intelligence, distributed networks, and more widely an enthusiasm for describing media by borrowing models, ideas and metaphors from the animal world, was naturally a key impetus for this book.

One of the striking concepts of your book is "insects as media." How does that relate to this contemporary background in media theory?

I wanted to reverse the idea of "media as insects" implicit in the "swarm" image into "insects as media." So I traced how this particular brand of animals has been seen, since the formation of modern entomology in the 19th century, as a form of non-human intelligence and mode of perception – something very anti-McLuhan and foreign, but still very inspiring. I am thinking here how 19th century entomology and popular culture were enthusiastic about the ways in which insects inhabit the world differently – an alien form of being that does not move with two legs, does not think with the reflective brain but through a more instinctual enfolding with the milieu, and senses in a variety of different ways to that of the human. What David Cronenberg, or for that matter the film *Microcosmos*, have done in cinematic terms, I wanted to do as a slightly alternative cultural history and media theory.

Who are some of the people whom you read in this respect?

A good example is Roger Caillois, the French thinker close to the Surrealist movement. He was interested in a "New Science" that would move transversally across established disciplines. His famous writings on mimicry and the praying mantis gave huge inspiration not only to the artistic ideas interested in forms of perception and a space that is intensively devouring, but also such thinkers as Jacques Lacan. Whereas later writings of Caillois on typologies of game have been incorporated into game studies, I try to see how his thoughts on space, immersion, and psychic disorders (losing the sense of "I") could be seen as foundational to new sensory realms. That is, I try to see what could be transported from his interest in insects to contemporary game spaces. We can use those ideas to make sense of the affect worlds, and affective capitalism, in which we are living in contemporary post-Fordist culture.

This interchange of nature and technology is summed up in a second key concept of yours, "technics of nature," isn't it?

Yes. Technics of nature refers to the way in which it is not only us humans who fabricate things, artifacts, to establish relations with the world; the whole of nature can be seen as such a dynamic process of relations, perceptions, durations, and cohabitation that is creative. Think of Darwin's curious way of

making sense of the dynamics inherent in nature, or the later architectural discourse at the turn of the 20th century, all that enthusiasm about how ingenious insects are in creating milieus of living. Or for that matter, take Bergson's idea of "creative evolution." These are the elements through which I try to argue that a media theory that starts with aesthetics – perception, sensation, memory, and the distributed nature of these processes in which the human is only one passing point – ought to look more not only at technical media, but at animals too. I just heard Mark Hansen [Literature Program, Duke] give a great talk at the Transmediale 2011 conference where he insisted that we need to turn to process-based media theory, instead of our focus on objects: this is however not only a theme we need to grasp through new ubiquitous media, but can find clues already much earlier – and in surprising contexts.

One of the most interesting moves of your book is to move far back past the cybernetic period to the nineteenth century. What are some of the important things we learn from that period? How does your analysis deepen our understanding of the cybernetic period?

Of course we should acknowledge that "cybernetics" – as the systematic research into animal worlds and communication after World War II – is a very important episode in the history of ways of thinking about the relations between organisms and technology. Yet if we follow the thread of "technics of nature" we can see what the Deleuzeans would call more nomadic, minor traits of a genealogy of animal-technology relation. Here we would come across, for example Jakob von Uexküll's way of insisting on the primacy of perception as the way in which an animal inhabits the world is an intriguing "pre-cybernetic" notion of interfacing through a constant differentiation. We incorporate the world in ourselves, in a dynamic fashion. Cybernetics sucked this idea in from a variety of directions – theories of language, mind, the brain, and animal sciences. What I try to show is that these things have a longer history, and that a lot of the stuff we discover from earlier parts of 20th century and indeed the 19th century gives fantastic clues to think about technology as embodied, animal-like.

I'm glad you mention von Uexküll, who is receiving a lot of attention nowadays. The English translation of his *Umwelt* book (*A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*), for instance, has just appeared with University of Minnesota Press.* You devote a number of pages to von Uexküll and his celebrated analysis of the tick, an analysis picked up by both Heidegger and Deleuze, a bit of a philosophical odd couple.

Indeed, von Uexküll is important – and as we know, has been for a range of philosophers such as Heidegger, Agamben, Deleuze; so many so different thinkers becoming enthusiastic about this curious researcher, and the tiny simple insect, the tick. I was curious to pick up some of the philosophical arguments by Heidegger and Deleuze; for example Heidegger spent a lot of time on von Uexküll as part of his 1929 lectures on metaphysics, touching on questions such as perception as processes of nature, differentiating the animal from the machine, but also from the human – animals still remained for Heidegger "poor in the world" as they could not *ex-ist* in the similar manner as we humans understanding our temporality. Deleuze is much more interesting in how he tries to tap into the dynamics of potentiality as that of affect; affect as the relation to entities, and the process of unfolding of such relationality, that von Uexküll can be seen practicing through his ethology.

Beyond the philosophical resonances, what positive role does von Uexküll's work play in your book?

I am indeed less interested in philosophical debates than in how von Uexküll is a media theorist *avant la lettre*; how the tick is a conceptual figure for living in mediated environments that for us are not so much about strolls in the woods, than electronic, digital, urban environments of perception, attention management, unfolding of our sensory systems in such milieus. Von Uexküll himself was however not keen on parallels between animals and machines. Yet, I argue that in the way he frames perception as a tuning of the sensory potentials of an animal with its surroundings von Uexküll insists on the primacy of aesthetics, of perception, through which worlds are created, and understanding that embodied relation to the milieu is for me in this context a form of technics of nature: enfolding, environing, temporally unfolding becoming with the world.

Although the tick is a solitary animal, the image of the “swarm” is now widespread. In some respects your book is a genealogy of that image. How does your genealogy of the swarm-image help us understand what’s at stake in contemporary media and media theory?

I start from the idea that these images of insects are now so widespread, such a crucial form of our media culture, that they need critical unraveling. Images such as the swarm have acted as a formational concept through which people have tried to make sense of a variety of phenomena from politics (smart mobs), political economy of labor (hive minds and collaboration) to the network form itself. Eugene Thacker is one theorist who has already offered a wonderful, critical exposition of these tricky transformations. My take was to offer a media archaeological look: on the one hand, track the concept as part of early 20th century entomological discourse and on the other hand, to investigate the forms of distributed agency that seem to be part of the image of the swarm. What interests me is the temporality of swarms as a formation in a constant state of turbulence, tiny little movements within the form, the molecular; swarms are shortcuts to thinking about the molecular. They are philosophical figures to tap in to the translations between biological and technical sciences.

What’s the future of insects as media? Of the technics of nature?

Insects are already the future! They are terribly fascinating, a form of invention that is already much older than us that will outlast us humans after we destroyed our own habitat because of pollution, waste and not least, electronic waste – the leftovers of our media culture leaking toxins and heavy metals to nature. This is truly non-human, non-linear “archaeology” that spans thousands, millions of years, and that invented a form of relating to the world that differs from our reflective, conscious relation. Yet, at the same time, I want to use insects as a figure of thinking to illuminate those sides of our experience that are non-conscious: affect, instinct, embodiment and knowledge that stems from an unfolding, intensive embodiment in milieu relations. What technical media and insects share is a non-human perspective, and my book is a sort of an anti-McLuhan take on media theory; media are not extensions of the human as the mainstream idea from Ernst von Kapp to Marshall McLuhan insisted, but media are extensions of a variety of affordances of nature: of different materials, of various different ways of sensing, thinking, memorizing.

*Full disclosure (Protevi): my own *Political Affect* appears in the same Posthumanities series at Minnesota as does *Insect Media* and the von Uexküll book. I asked for and received a review copy of *Insect Media* in order to prepare for this interview, but there is no other financial arrangement.