What Traces Do We Leave?

In Which It Is Argued that We Leave a Lot of Traces

I rarely think about the traces that I leave in the world as an ecology. I tend to think of them (when at all) quite concretely. First, my library. It operates as a form of external memory for me (when I, rarely, use it) and as a commemoration of things I have read. Its probable fate after my death is its dispersal into a hundred homes. Marginal notes that I have written will lower the selling price rather than attract attention. Second, on the Web. It is interesting to track dead people on the Web. My friends and acquaintances who died before Mosaic are sparsely represented, and when they are it is generally in a classical, canonical academic style (footnote references, bibliographies, etc.). Or in a Mormon database. Those who died more recently carry on a rich afterlife. They often still receive email messages; links to their Web sites rot very slowly; their informal thoughts are often captured on listserv archives, on comments they have left on a Web site (signing the visitors’ books). Some people even have “eternal flame” Web sites—where the problem of maintenance is as live as it is for the Olympic torch or the refrigerated truck. Each of these modes of memory was in place before Mosaic, but it is now possible to articulate it

1. B. Latour, B., Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches (Paris: Les Empecheurs de Penser en Rond, 1996c). This is the double nature that Latour explores.

2. See http://www.venus.co.uk/gordonpask/.
in ways that were previously unworkable. It would take a researcher a lifetime to track down my written traces—where I have signed guest books in weird museums and twee hostels, people with whom I have carried on informal correspondence. Those of us enjoying and being irritated by post-Mosaic syndrome (PMS), leave legible traces across a wide range of our activities in electronic form. Everyone their own Boswell.

When I, rarely, think about the articulation of the set of traces that I am leaving, I have the immediate apprehension that it’s not the real me that’s out there on the Web. I know the times when I’ve censored myself (oh problematic concept!) and when I have performed actions to complement—and frequently to confound—a trace. Thus I might write a positive review of a friend’s book and then offer close colleagues a different reading.

Taken globally, the set of traces that we leave in the world does without doubt add up to something. It is through operations on sets of traces that I understand an event in which I take part. Tolstoy wrote about the foot soldier in the Napoleonic wars. The soldier he describes cannot have the experience of the war he is waging or the battle he is fighting because the only “global” traces of the war are inscriptions—notably, maps and statistics. There is no scaleable observation that moves from “I was in a copse hiding behind a tree and was terribly confused” to “I took part in Napoleon’s bold attack on the left flank.” In this case, where is the experience of the war? When we experience a war, we are relying on the aggregations of other experience to ground and shape our experience.

In general, we use scientific representational forms to fashion our experience. Hacking writes about this at the personal level in terms of learning to be a child abuser or a multiple personality by reading the accounts of others (Hacking 1992, 1995). We internalize these accounts and experience them as our own. Žižek claims that there are no pure patients in psychoanalysis now, there are only Jungian patients, Lacanian patients, and so forth: the stuff of our experience (our symptom) is the aggregated experience of others (Žižek 2000). This has always been the case. History was just as multivectorial then as it is now, and our individuality was just as vectored in archives.

With digital archiving in all its forms, a new regime of technologies for holding and shaping experience has emerged. Our past has always been malleable, but now it is malleable with a new viscosity. The new texture of our past is that we can go from the global to the local and back again with great speed. The new analytic objects that emerge are different if we look at the transition of the local through the global (the unit local-global-local, to paraphrase Marx) or the transition of the global through the local (the unit global-local-global). The former will lead into the new, rich interiority that is emerging
with faster global exchange of information, people, flora, fauna, and things. We now have so many identities available to us—just geographically I can reasonably lay claim to Celtic, Isle of Man, Australian, French, English, and so forth. The latter leads into a new form of exteriority, in which the map and the statistic are richer than the territory and govern the territory. It is not that we have the ability to aggregate brute numbers—that has been available since the early nineteenth century at least in a number of domains. It is rather that we can aggregate that data along multiple different dimensions and perform complex operations over that set of dimensions. It is the pleats and the folds of our data rather than their number that constitute their texture.

What This Book Is About

The paradox of digits lies in this. The best possible analog representations are produced by digital computers. If you want a flowing sea of lava oozing from a volcano spuming smoke (as doubtless many of us do), then you don’t go to the people who produce analog computers. You go binary. The situation is strictly analogous to that of the moving picture we call cinema being constituted of a sequence of still pictures, recreated anew each fraction of a second just like Descartes’ discontinuous universe. Does it make any difference that our best apprehensions of data, past viewscapes, and encapsulated memory are brute numbers, binary and static? For they are also folded, fractal, and febrile.

In order to tackle that question, we need to start with the questions of (1) how our personal memories are technically, socially, and formally mediated (local-global-local) as well as in our heads, and (2) how the socionatural world we operate in is produced locally (formally, technically, socially) to be global (global-local-global). Clearly a vast amount has been written about these questions.

A central aporia that I explore is constituted by the very general condition that what we leave traces of is not the way we were, but a tacit negotiation

3. See the discussion of aporia in G. Agamben, Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience (London and New York: Verso, 1993). Aporia is a figure whereby the Speaker sheweth that he doubteth, either where to begin for the multitude of matters, or what to do or say in some strange or ambiguous thing (from OED). Etymologically, it derives from a tropos—without path, or without road.
between ourselves and our imagined auditors (whether in the sense of listeners, readers, or moral or economic watchdogs); yet we also need at some level an understanding of what actually happened in order to forge our futures. The aporia takes many forms. When Bill Gates came up against the U.S. government in the antitrust suit against Microsoft, much was made of some internal email correspondence that laid out his company’s predatory strategies. This is a standard tale from the early days of email. Now, there are numerous companies that specialize in searching out and destroying all traces of possibly damaging email correspondence; and many organizations have laid down strict rules about what can be said in an electronic conversation. A similar move was made in the 1930s by the Schlumberger company, when it realized that its internal records could be scrutinized by a court—the company shifted very quickly from writing detailed accounts of their practices in French to writing highly sanitized versions in English (Bowker 1994). Similarly, Ed Hutchins (1995, 20) observes that records kept of navigation on navy ships are written with an eye to a future legal enquiry should there be a disaster. Scientific texts are written not to record what actually happened in the laboratory, but to tell the story of an ideal past in which all the protocols were duly followed: the past that is presented should be impregnable—thus perpetual worrying over whether the Millikan oil-drop experiment (he discarded partial charge values for his particles) was fraudulent, whether Pasteur misrepresented his findings or Mendel messed with his peas. It takes a great deal of hard work to erect a past beyond suspicion. When I tell my life story to a boss or a coworker, there are many things that I unmention, discontinuities that I skate over (Linde 1993). It is very rare to commit a story to paper with a view to telling it “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.” Stories are told in a context, under a description (Hacking 1995). The aporia to which we will return is that despite this central fact about record keeping, there is still a need to keep good records. Microsoft Corporation still needs to retain and propagate a memory of how to be a predator; Schlumberger still wants to know how to work around regulations; scientists want to be able to pass on knowledge about how an experiment really works to their students. This brings us centrally to the question of memory practices. Acts of committing to record (such as writing a scientific paper) do not occur in isolation; they are embedded within a range of practices (technical, formal, social) that collectively I define as memory practices. Taken as a loosely articulated whole, these practices allow (to some extent) useful/interesting descriptions of the past to be carried forward into the future.