

Wild Nature

Mark Dery

One of the "Characteristics of the Emerging Network Economy," from Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization*[1]

Odyssey of a Mad Genius, the *Time* cover story on suspected Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, invites us to read that odyssey as a transformation scene straight out of *An American Werewolf in London*. In five head shots, Kaczynski metamorphoses from the high school and Harvard math nerd of the '50s and early '60s, neatly attired in regulation suit and tie, into the shaggy-haired, sallow-faced hermit of his 1996 mug shot. The story told, as in all werewolf tales, is Wild Nature revenged upon culture — the nightmare, equal parts Darwin and Freud, of the return of what a "Cheers" episode hilariously called the "inner hairy man", the bestial self brought to heel by evolution and civilization. Here, vengeful nature overmasters culture in the person of a skinny-tied math professor transformed into a furry, foul-smelling wild man, red in tooth and claw.

But, as in *An American Werewolf*, where the transformation of human into animal is effected, ironically, through technology [latex skin, inflatable bladders, and so forth], Wild Nature — the Unabomber's utopian alternative to technological modernity — conceals "wired" nature: the Unabomber may be a Wolfman, but he's a prosthetic one, a "techno-nerd" [his term] beneath his hairy neo-Luddite hide. Consider the Net's seemingly incongruous elevation of the poster boy for neo-Luddite resistance to the status of a Manson-esque anti-icon, a living symbol of chaos culture. Kaczynski's manifesto seems to be everywhere on the Net, and he is extolled in Usenet newsgroups like *alt.fan.unabomber* or the *Unabomber-for-President* website hosted by the "Unabomber Political Action Committee", UNAPACK.

Superficially, the Net's embrace of the Unabomber has much to do with the black humor of the terminally ironic, but just beneath its brittle surface lies a gnawing anxiety at the superhuman speed of technological change and the deadening, disorienting white noise of the info-deluge. The Unabomber gives vent to simmering resentment toward the digerati who blithely advise the rest of us to keep our hands inside the moving vehicle at all times as they joystick our wired society into the coming millennium. Psycho killer though he is, he speaks for more reasonable minds, many of whom resent Alvin Toffler's inexorable "Third Wave" and AT&T's imperious "You Will" ads, whose peremptory tone forecloses any alternatives to a corporate brand future. In the taunting letter he wrote one of his victims, computer scientist David Gelernter, the Unabomber counters the corporate futurologist Stewart Brand's contention that elites drive civilization [an article of faith among *Wired* editors and like-minded digerati] with the assertion that "there are a lot of people out there who resent bitterly the way techno-nerds like you are changing the world." [2]

But at the same time that some among the off-line millions have come to see the Unabomber as the pathological embodiment of anxieties provoked by an ever more wired, increasingly denatured world, there are those in cyberculture who recognize him as one of their own — Yahoo Serious with an animus. He is a hardware hacker who began, in the best hacker tradition, as a teenage basement tinkerer and homemade bomb freak. After reading *Industrial Society*, *Wired* executive editor Kevin Kelly dropped a bomb of his own: "Most important," he noted, "this guy is a nerd. He is a geek. He is one of us. The [manifesto] is structured like a doctoral thesis, or those computer science papers with numbered graphs. Very tidy. Like the bombs." [3]

Indeed, to fellow "techno-nerds," the Unabombs are unmistakably cyberpunk. Before the FBI dubbed him the Unabomber, investigators called Kaczynski the "junkyard bomber" in reference to the fact that his engines of destruction were concocted from lamp cords, sink traps, furniture parts, old screws, match heads, and pieces of pipe. Evincing a decidedly hacker-ish love of retrofitting and refunctioning, the Unabombs cast an ominous light on Gibson's cyberpunk shibboleth, "the street finds its own uses for things."

Even Wild Nature, the anti-technological ecotopia at the heart of the Unabomber's ideology, is consonant with the cyberpunk mythos. The manifesto offers a curiously Hobbesian vision of paradise regained, where humans rejoice in the fulfillment of what Kaczynski calls "a need [probably based in biology] for something that we will call the 'power process'," by which he seems to mean the pursuit of the basic requirements of survival rather than the consumption of commodified images that characterizes consumer culture. Untouched by Fordism, Taylorism, or any of the other command-and-control instrumentalities of industrial society, Wild Nature is the sole province of freedom, defined by the Unabomber as "being in control [either as an individual or as a member of a small group] of the life-and-death issues of one's existence: food, clothing, shelter and defense against whatever threats there may be in one's environment."

Reducing beings to bodies [i.e. their immediate physical needs] and redefining freedom as the struggle for survival, the Social Darwinian eco-politics of the Unafesto bear more than a passing resemblance to the post-apocalyptic primitivism romanticized in cyberpunk movies like *The Road Warrior*. A heady brew of masculinist power fantasies, frontier mythology, and the American cult of the anomic loner, SF films and fiction in this vein betray a nostalgia for a more embodied world, before the TV screen, the computer terminal, and the rest of the technological membrane grew between us and reality.

Survivalist and anti-statist to the core, the Unabomber and cyberpunk make common cause in their libertarian leanings, as well. The Unabomber's statement, in a letter to the *Times*, that he "would like, ideally, to break down all society into very small, completely autonomous units" parallels cyberpunk's vision of society decentralized into self-sufficient autonomous zones like the Lo-Tek Nighttown in Gibson's *Johnny Mnemonic*. [4]

Libertarianism is the default politics of real-life cyberpunks like Japan's "otaku", the hacker subculture that bends technology to its obsessive ends even as it embodies what *Wired* calls "the apotheosis of consumerism and an ideal work force for contemporary capitalism." [5] The libertarian philosophy of minimal government and maximal individual freedom appeals, as well, to the globetrotting computer professionals who are less citizens than netizens, wired by cel phone, fax, and modem into the world space of ceaselessly circulating information and liquid capital but increasingly disengaged from public space and social responsibility [many of them live in the guarded, gated enclaves that are the nation's fastest-growing residential communities], a disquieting dynamic Robert Reich has identified as the "secession of the successful."

The Unabomber's radical libertarian vision of a post-political body politic, decomposed into scattered cells, is the missing link between Wild Nature and wired nature, and the toggle switch that connects the Unabomber to cyberpunk on one hand and to cybercapitalism on the other. In a crowning irony, the Unabomber's call for the atomization of the nation-state resonates sympathetically with the Tofflerist-Gingrichist rhetoric of decentralization, demassification, and desynchronization dear to the hearts of *Wired* editors and the laissez-faire futurists they lionize [George Gilder, Peter Drucker, Peter Schwartz, and their ilk].

Although they prefer deregulation to demolition and obviously reject the anti-technology and anti-corporate planks in his platform, the digerati share the Unabomber's libertarian contempt for politics with a capital "P," by definition statist. "This is not to be a political revolution," writes Kaczynski, in the Unafesto's opening section. "Its object will be to overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society." Astutely, he realizes that political power's center of gravity is rapidly shifting from the nation-state to the multinational corporation, specifically to technology-dependent, post-industrial entities such as media conglomerates.

Wired's editors are singing from the same page when they write, in an on-line statement conceived by founder and publisher Louis Rossetto and posted by managing editor John Battelle, "We [at Wired] have basically ignored Clinton, Washington and politics in general. The Revolution is definitely not happening in the halls of the Capitol, and politics are becoming not only increasing obsolete, but irrelevant ... Everyone on the planet believes in the free market now, like they believe in gravity ... There are other, better ways to affect change in society today than pulling a lever in a voting booth. Politics isn't the solution, it's become the problem — and the Digital Generation may be consciously rejecting politics ... because they have rationally decided that politics and government are fundamentally discredited ... [Wired] reports on a Revolution without violence that embraces a new, non-political way to improve the future based on economics beyond macro control." [6] [Clearly, the digerati for whom Battelle speaks also share the Unabomber's revolutionary fervor — the unshakable hubris of the true believer confident that history has a telos, and it's going his way.]

Of course, as with their deregulatory soulmate, the "conservative futurist" Newt Gingrich [to whose Progress and Freedom Foundation Wired has contributed], the Tofflerist rhetoric of decentralization mouthed by Wired's digerati is a blind for a massively parallel Reaganomics whose immediate business is the dismantling of the rickety regulatory framework that [just barely] constrains multinational corporate power and whose ultimate goal is the elimination of the nation-state [and thus even an unreliable governor of utterly unfettered corporate power, answerable to no one].

In keeping with the Social Darwinist undertones of their vision of a cybercapitalist "revolution" masterminded by a technocratic elite, with the Second Wave masses along for the ride [or part of the road, if they won't hop aboard], the digerati lend their radical libertarian economics the force of natural law by couching it in the language of chaos theory and artificial life.

Kelly's *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization*, whose executive-friendly jacket copy promises "out-of-control business strategies for an emerging global economy built on networks," invokes both disciplines to validate the notion that capitalism, unconstrained by Second Wave assumptions [the necessity of governmental regulation presumably among them], would evolve into something rich and strange — a "network economy" of decentralized, outsourced "economic superorganisms," able to adapt to the nonlinear dynamics of the global economic ecosystem.

Visions of out-of-control cybercapitalism also dance in the heads of managerial gurus like Tom Peters [author of the business book *Thriving on Chaos*], whose corporate gospel of "crazy", nonlinear decision-making and perpetual re-invention is congruent with chaos's thesis that turbulent natural systems, when sufficiently far from equilibrium, often give rise to startling new phenomena. In addition, Peters's concept of the post-industrial "Atomized

Corporation, with spirited, often pint-sized subunits with their own personalities and headed by disrespectful chiefs" recalls chaos theory's notion of self-organizing natural phenomena such as hurricanes, or amoeba colonies, in which previously disconnected elements suddenly reach a critical point, where they begin to "co-operate" to form a complex phenomenon.[7]

Darwinian cybercapitalism also buttresses its world-view with paradigms common to artificial life. "This is the age of biological models of organization, not mechanical models," says Peters. "I'm keen on companies such as CNN, which are creating something organic, something that invents, recreates itself each day." [8]

Management theorists like Peters are already living in William Gibson's cyberpunk future, where multinational corporations — highly evolved "life forms" whose DNA is "coded in silicon"— are "the planet's dominant form of intelligence." [9] The notion of the corporate entity as a complex colonial organism is implicit in recent attempts to obtain a ruling conferring on corporations the legal status of individuals, thereby protecting corporate image advertising as free speech. Then, too, the global marketplace is increasingly conceived of in Darwinian terms, with the social and environmental depredations of multinationals rationalized as corporate life forms' struggle for survival in an economic ecosystem. In *Bionomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism*, business consultant Michael Rothschild argues that "what we call capitalism [or free-market economics] is not an ism at all but a naturally occurring phenomenon" [and therefore presumably beyond reproach].

Thus, the digerati, with their Darwinian marketplace populated by corporate life forms, and the Unabomber, with his inviolate wilderness peopled by neo-Luddites gone native, have built contrary world-views on a common cornerstone — the notion of Nature as a legitimator of theories about culture.

Nature, as Andrew Ross notes in *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, "is the ultimate people-pleaser, whose name can even be lent to and honored by causes associated with its destruction." [10] A little spadework reveals that the indisputable authority of natural "law" has been invoked, throughout European history, to legitimate the subjugation or extermination of women, non-whites, and other lesser others, as well the exploitation of nature itself. [11] In *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Londa Schiebinger reveals how 18th century anatomists, anthropologists, and natural historians, "working under the banner of scientific neutrality," cited the supposedly simian anatomy of Africans to account for their location near the bottom of the great chain of being. Similarly, the childlike "compressed crania" of women of all races were adduced as evidence of impulsive, emotional, and generally inferior intellectual qualities. [12]

The Unabomber's feral eco-topia and the free-market ecology of the digerati are only the latest examples of nature used as a ventriloquist's dummy in the service of social agendas, few of which are pretty to look at: Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism [as popular in its day with monopoly-builders like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie as Kevin Kelly's neo-biological capitalism is with Tom Peters and his corporate flock]; the American eugenics movement of the 1920s, which resulted in the passage of laws that legalized the forced sterilization, in more than two dozen states, of anyone deemed "socially defective"; and, more recently, the voodoo sociology of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*.

The Unabomber and the digerati are not alone in ventriloquizing nature. Ross contends that we are witnessing "a wholesale revival of appeals to the authority of nature and biology ...

nature's laws are invoked once again as the ground of judgement and the basis of policy ... biologism and Social Darwinism have returned with a vengeance, and are a driving force behind the sweeping new world view engineered by biotechnology and genetic medicine." [13] The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life is darkened by the author's premonitions that "the authority of nature, and hence of the status quo, will become a despotic vehicle for curtailing rights and liberties." [14] Roland Barthes warned us about this nearly forty years ago when he argued, in *Mythologies*, that one of ideology's most insidious aspects was that it converts constructed social reality, and the power relations embedded in it, into innocent, immutable "nature." Ideology, he noted, "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal." [15] Wild Nature and wired nature are pernicious because they do just that, forestalling debate by camouflaging the man-made as the god-given.

[1] Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994, p. 200

[2] Steven Levy, *The Unabomber* and David Gelernter, in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 21, 1995, p. 50

[3] Kevin Kelly (kk), Topic 283 [fw]: *The UNABOMB Manuscript in Cyberspace*, in the WELL, September 21, 1995

[4] Quoted in Tom Morganthau, *Who is He?*, in *Newsweek*, May 8, p. 40

[5] Karl Taro Greenfeld, *The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures Who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds*, in *Wired*, premiere issue, p. 69

[6] John Battelle (jbat), Topic 129 [wired]: *New Republic Slams Wired!*, in the WELL, January 14, 1995

[7] *The Nine "Beyonds"*, 1994 Vintage Books press release for Peters's *Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*

[8] Thomas Kiely, *Unconventional Wisdom*, in *CIO*, December 15, 1993-January 1, 1994, Volume Seven, Number Six, p. 26

[9] William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, New York: Ace, 1984, p. 203; Gibson, *New Rose Hotel*, *Burning Chrome*, New York: Ace, 1987, p. 107.

[10] Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*, New York: Verso, 1994, p. 4

[11] This is not to say that the Second Law of Thermodynamics and other natural laws have been wished out of existence, by an act of postmodern will; only that "nature," for naked apes, is first and foremost an object of knowledge, mediated by language. Given the historical abuses perpetrated in nature's name, it behooves us to be wary of those who presume to speak on its behalf.

[12] Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, pps. 5, 7

[13] Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, pps. 5, 15

[14] Ross, *ibid.*, p. 12

[15] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, p. 142