

Charlie Gere, **Community Without Community in Digital Culture**, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 208 pp., \$75.00/£50 (hardcover).

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In the field of digital media theory, discussions are largely guided by various approaches to poststructural criticism and continental philosophy, post-1968. With “immanence” as a key modality to the a-historicity and antiteleology of French philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, discussions of a metaphysical system of governance of subjectivity and epistemology, embodiment, and ethics have largely fallen out of fashion. Imagine my surprise, then, when beginning **Community Without Community in Digital Culture**, a recent book by media art theorist Charlie Gere, and finding by page 3 a lengthy discussion of angels and by page 5 a parallel drawn between Derrida and John Milton’s character of Satan. I must say, I felt more interested in Satan than heretofore, but I also experienced a strange bewilderment at Gere’s intention to rectify what he cites as the nihilism of the digital age by “a return to liturgical Christianity” (p. 17). Such bewilderment created both an immediate repulsion to the potential containment of a structure like Christianity forced upon the vast expressive potential of digital networks, and a desire to understand just what Gere means to achieve by grouping Medieval natural philosophers, Modernist avant garde artists, and the material plasticity of software code.



Creating a parallel between the numerical data of the digital file and the haptic exercise of moving the fingers across the keyboard or the touch screen, Gere begins his text with an intellectual movement between the material fact of code as digits (0,1) and the different but related materiality of the finger digits enabling the body to exercise speech as writing. From this initial, establishing relationship, Gere traces various developments in materiality, visuality, and relationality through the same paradigm, that is, through the disconnection from the material and the Derridian aporial connection to touch via writing.

In the first chapter, touch is integrated as an activity of bodies feeling or tasting and seeing. Gere cites Aquinas’ characterization of the Medieval Mass as a seeing/touching of the body of Christ, where actual touch is complicated by the integration of the medium of the body and the sensorial perceptions of the soul. Seeing and touch are integrated and “remain haptocentric [*sic*] no less than logocentric” (p. 25), that is, understanding or cognition rendered as discourse and material sensation collected through the fingers and eyes are inter-related and dependent. Whether it is problematic or not, the God of Aquinas (and perhaps of Gere) remains the transcendent God of old. This God is perhaps external but also perhaps a fully integrated “matrix” or Spinozian “substance” that governs the experience of seeing but that also

enables and entertains the possibility of being touched through the materiality of the Mass or *le stylo*, the keyboard, the strangely sublime materiality of cultural rhetoric.

Gere claims at the outset that “one of the insistent tropes in this book is blindness, insistent enough perhaps to be a symptom of whatever underlying pressures led to its writing” (p. viii). Groping is the way that blindness seems to be articulated, however, especially as it relates to the kind of fleeting or difficult-to-capture touch enabled by the machines of the digital. This touch, the digital touch, is signified by a largely transcendent virtual and is different from but coextensive with the digital indicated in the actual fingers pressing keys or swiping touch screens. While Gere uses Leroi-Gourhan’s anthropological discussion of tools to clarify this relation, here, I purposely invoke these oft paired terms, virtual and actual, as they further relate to the structure of Gere’s book itself. In the mid-1980s, French philosopher and psychoanalyst—respectively, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—unfolded a structure for organizing subjectivity as a “rhizome.” With this rangy and nonlinear root system as the figurative organization, subjectivity and objectivity, that is, identity and materiality, are made active in an ongoing, energetic exchange that always evades quantification and containment. While Gere is not interested to engage Deleuze and Guattari in this book, he does structure his text as a series of nonlinear, oddly related set of arguments that evoke the rhizome without ever mentioning it. This is perhaps the most “Deleuzian” of moves—creating with ideas and words—rather than merely explaining.

That is not to say that Gere does not explain. In fact, he consistently offers concise, clear exegesis on each theorist or history he evokes to trace his complicated argument about touch and blindness, writing and transcendence. There is an interesting ebb and flow between the clarity of these explications and the ghostly traces that linger in the gaps between various arguments in his rhizomatic network of noncommunity. On one hand, Gere resists the nihilism of a Derridian statement like “each man or woman is marooned on his or her own island . . . with no isthmus, bridge, or other means of communication to the sealed worlds of others” (p. 103), and yet he claims the digital, the numeric, and the fingered to manifest a latent communion (if not communication) with God. He points instead to the disconnection between the failure of the Internet to nurture the utopia it promised in the 1960s and again in the 1990s, Derrida’s criticism that there is no way to “restore transparency” to communication as “freed speech . . . and so forth,” and the strange sort of “God in the Machine” that he articulates in the first chapter. The ways that community is negated in the book, from a sociological or anthropological perspective, rely heavily on assumptions about the sense of alienation people must feel when they stare at a flat screen instead of interacting with material bodies or about the loss of and the implied (maybe overt) yearning that Gere expresses for a transcendent signifier to organize the chaos. The ways that community is aesthetically “non-relational” or incommunicable are fleshed out in the (by now) quite clear points that Derrida makes about deferral and alterity. Even the most radical, the most sincere, the most careful attempts at collective engagement are made moot by the prisons of our communicative and thus subjective isolation. Gere tries to complicate the isolation problem with the one of impossible hospitality, worked through by Derrida in the mid-1990s to include the gap between self and other spanned but never overcome by the willingness to “host” the other. Because acting as host also involves receiving hospitality or paradoxically reversing positions with the guest, there is a moment when the “self” becomes tangled up in, if not completely reconciled to, the “other.” This tangling up occurring in acts of hospitality is a potential activity that enables community beyond the failed ones of May 1968 or the Internet of today.

At the conclusion, Gere circles back to the metaphysical invoked at the outset. He is careful not to argue too emphatically in a theological direction and undercuts this position throughout the book by a sort of advance and retreat movement that feels inconclusive but matches up with the rhizomatic structure I pointed to earlier in the review. Unusual rhetorical choices pull the theological argument in and position Gere as a "believer," however restrained. For example, he works to disavow the transcendent argument introduced at the beginning and which has lingered throughout by referring to Quentin Meillassoux's discussion of the divine in contemporary life, where the universal is now arbitrated by a "human mediator," who incidentally appears "Christlike . . . [while excluding] . . . the temptations of transcendence" (p. 143). Gere follows this description with the comment that Meillassoux's admission about the Christlike quality of his mediator with the observation that ". . . this actually brings it into line with many of the *atheist* [italics added] readings of Christianity by, for example, Thomas Altizer, Jean-Luc Nancy, or Slavoj Žižek." In a discussion of theology, describing a particular theorist as atheist is perhaps common, but in the bulk of literature in the field of the digital humanities, it is unusual to say the least. Further, Gere claims the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky for Christianity, yet it could be argued that his films evidence a much more muddled and conflicted, if deeply profound and evocative, sense of spirituality and even symbolism. While I deeply enjoyed the convoluted argument Gere develops to make a case for the Christian God as an open, disseminated rhizomatic network through the figure of Christ, it was difficult to reconcile the position to everything else I know about posthuman discourse. Perhaps this paradoxical invocation is the truly radical act of this text.