

‘Wild Nature’

The Unabomber Meets The Digelite

Mark Dery

2001

Contents

1	3
2	4
3	5
4	7
5	8

“Increasing intolerance of encroachments on the rule of biology.” (Kevin Kelly, “Characteristics of the Emerging Network Economy”)¹

1

*With its cover story, “Odyssey of a Mad Genius,” Time Magazine of April 1996 invites us to view the wanderings of the (then suspected) Unabomber⁽¹⁾—Ted Kaczynski—as a transformation scene from the film *An American Werewolf in London*. In five photographs, Kaczynski undergoes the metamorphosis from the suit-and-tie-clad math whiz he was in high school and Harvard in the 1950s and early 1960s to the shaggy, buff-haired recluse of a 1996 mugshot. As in all werewolf stories, this one is about Wild Nature taking revenge on culture, or the nightmare (part Darwin, part Freud) of the return of what was once called in an episode of the soap opera *Cheers* “the inner hairy man”: the bestial self, harnessed by evolution and civilization. In this case, the culture was overwhelmed by a vengeful nature in the person of a scrawny, tie-wearing math professor who had undergone the transformation into a stinking, fur-clad, bloodthirsty, armed-to-the-teeth savage.*

*However, as in *An American Werewolf* – where the transformation from human to animal ironically takes place with the aid of technology (inflatable, rubberized skin, etc.) – Kaczynski’s Wild Nature (his utopian alternative to technological modernity) conceals a thoroughly technologized nature. The Unabomber may well be a wolf-man, but a prosthetic one: beneath his furry, neo-Luddite coat, he is, in his own words, a “techno freak.”*

Consider the Internet, where Kaczynski, a kind of *poster boy* for neo-Luddite resistance, is seemingly illogically elevated to a Charles Manson-esque anti-icon, a living symbol of chaos culture.² His *Unabomber Manifesto* is all over the Internet, he is glorified in newsgroups like alt.fan.unabomber and on the website ‘Unabomber-for-President’ of UNAPACK, the Unabomber Political Action Committee.³

At first glance, the veneration of the Unabomber seems a lot like the dark humor of terminal patients. Just beneath that fragile veneer of mockery, however, lurks a

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

² A poster boy is a child who is used in commercials to raise money for charity.

³ Kaczynski’s writing was originally published in *The Washington Post* under the title *Industrial*

⁽¹⁾ The Unabomber has carried out sixteen bombings since 1978, killing three and wounding 23. His main targets were *UNiversities* and *Airlines*, hence the name UNA bomber. The word ‘digerati’ means ‘digital elite.’ In English, the term *digerati* is used. It comes from the American digital culture magazine *Wired* and is derived from *litterati*, which means ‘literary intelligentsia.’ *Wired* uses it to refer to the digital elite. Hence the Dutch neologism ‘digerati.’

nagging anxiety about the superhuman pace of technological change and the murderous, disorienting white noise of the information flood. The Unabomber vents the simmering resentment toward members of the digital elite who blithely remind us to keep our arms inside the vehicle at all times, while they steer our frantic society into the new millennium with their joysticks. Although Kaczynski is a psychopath and a murderer, he speaks for people who are much wiser, but who were offended by Alvin Toffler's relentless 1980 *Third Wave* and AT&T's haughty *You Will* ads, which brook no dissent and preclude any alternative to a capitalist future.⁴ In a mocking letter to one of his victims (computer scientist David Gelemter), the Unabomber rails against corporate futurist Stewart Brand's view that elites are the driving force of civilization, an absolute article of faith among Wired editors and like-minded digitetes. Kaczynski wrote to Gelemter that "there are a lot of people out there who are extremely upset about the way techno-idiot like you are changing the world."⁵ While some among the millions offline saw the Unabomber as the pathological embodiment of the anxiety generated by an increasingly deranged, unnatural world, people in cyberspace came to recognize him as one of their own: a kind of Yahoo Serious, plagued by a paralyzing, gnawing hatred.⁶

2

Kaczynski is a computer geek who, in true hacker tradition, began tinkering with computers in his parents' basement as a teenager and became a make-your-own-bomb freak. After reading the Unabomber Manifesto, Kevin Kelly dropped a bomb of his own: "The bottom line," he wrote, "is that this guy is a schlemiel. He's crazy, a nutcase. He's one of us. The Manifesto is structured like a doctoral dissertation or one of those computer science journals with numbered paragraphs. Very neat. Just like the bombs."⁷

Indeed, to fellow "technomafics," the Unabombs are unmistakably cyberpunk.⁸ Before Kaczynski was given the FBI title of Unabomber, investigators called him the

Society and its Future. It was published in Dutch translation (by Aad Janssen and Mare Hurkmans) by Ravijn/Arsenaal, Amsterdam 1996, under the title *Het Unabomber Manifest. De Industriële samenleving en haar toekomst*.

⁴ The *You Will* commercials from telecommunications giant AT&T suggest a brighter, brighter, high-tech future, brought to you by AT&T: "Have you ever put your baby to bed from a pay phone? You will!"

⁵ Steven Levy, 'The Unabomber and David Gelemter' in *The New York Times Magazine*, 5/21/1995, p. 50.

⁶ Yahoo Serious was the Einstein-like clownish brainiac in an Australian comedy film of the same name.

⁷ Kevin Kelly (kk), Topic 283 [fw]: The UNABOMB Manuscript in Cyber-space, *The WELL*, 9-21-1995. ('kk' is Kelly's on-line name, 'fw' means FringeWare, and *The WELL* is a well-known bulletin board, one of the first virtual communities.)

⁸ Cyberpunk was an avant-garde science fiction movement that began to engage with 'pop consciousness' after the publication of William Gibson's seminal novel *Neuromancer* (1984). It continues

“scrap-metal bomb maker,” referring to the fact that his destructive mechanisms were cobbled together from lamp cords, sink filters, bits of furniture, old screws, match heads, and lengths of pipe. In displaying a decidedly hacker penchant for repurposing and recycling, the Unabombs cast an ominous light on Gibson’s cyberpunk shibboleth: “the street finds its own ways to use things.”⁹

Even Wild Nature, the anti-technological eco-utopia at the heart of Unabomber ideology, conforms to the cyberpunk myth.

The Unabomber Manifesto presents a curiously Hobbesian vision of Eden regained, where people rejoice in satisfying what Kaczynski calls “a need (probably biological) for something we will call the ‘power process.’” By which he seems to mean basic survival needs rather than the consumption of market-driven ideas that characterize consumer culture.

Uncorrupted by Fordism, Taylorism, or other control mechanisms of industrial society, Wild Nature means the sole domain of freedom, defined by the Unabomber as “having control (as an individual or as a member of a *small* group) over the life-and-death issues of existence: food, clothing, shelter, and defense against whatever threats may be in one’s environment.” By reducing human beings to bodies (that is, their immediate, physical needs) and redefining freedom as the struggle for survival, the social-Darwinian, ecopolitical imaginaries of *Unafesto* bear more than a superficial resemblance to the post-apocalyptic primitivism romanticized in cyberpunk films like *The Road Warrior*.¹⁰ Science fiction films and books—intoxicating concoctions of masculinist power fantasies, pioneer mythology, and the American cult of the unhinged loner—betray a nostalgic yearning for a more corporeal world, when TV screens, computer monitors, and the rest of the technological membrane had not yet intersected CNS with reality.

3

Ted Kaczynski and the cyberpunks are survivalists and anti-statists to the core, but they also share libertarian tendencies. In a letter to the *Times*, the Unabomber declares that he would “ideally like to break down the entire society into tiny, com-

to this day, led by torchbearers such as Bruce Sterling, Neal Stephenson, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan, and Gibson himself.

⁹ The Street finds its own uses for things is the cyberpunk battle cry Gibson uses in several stories. The slogan – the ‘shibboleth’ – is at the heart of cyberpunk, encompassing the subcultural principles of stolen, subverted technology or information.

¹⁰ Dery refers to *Mad Max II – The Road Warrior*, the second part in a ‘dystopian’ science fiction trilogy (with *Mad Max* and *Mad Max III: Beyond Thunderdome*), in which man was reduced to his most primitive state after a nuclear explosion and the law of the strongest once again applies. The only objective: finding fuel. *Road Warrior* is cyberpunk because – recalling Gibson’s infamous quote *The Street finds its own uses for things* – it uses low-tech debris from the past to construct a vision of the future. (TP)

pletely autonomous units,” a view that parallels the cyberpunk vision of a society decentralized into self-sufficient autonomous zones like the *Lo-Tek Nighttown* in Gibson’s *Johnny Mnemonic*.¹¹ Libertarian ideology is the default political view of *real-life* cyberpunks like the Japanese *otaku*, the hacker subculture that bends technology to its own ends. Even if it involves what *Wired* calls “the apotheosis of consumerism and an ideal labor force for contemporary capitalism.”¹² The libertarian philosophy of minimal government and maximum individual freedom also appeals to globetrotting computer professionals who are increasingly becoming “net citizens”: via cell phones, fax machines, and modems, they are connected to a world space of continuously circulating information and liquid capital. They have become increasingly disconnected from public space and social responsibility. Many live in gated, guarded enclaves that form the fastest-growing residential neighborhoods in the United States, a disturbing dynamic that Robert Reich has defined as “the secession of the successful.”¹³ Kaczynski’s radical, libertarian vision of a post-political body politic, disintegrated into dispersed cells, is the

missing link between Wild Nature and thoroughly technologized nature, and the toggle switch that connects it to cyberpunk on the one hand, and to cybercapitalism on the other. As an ironic flourish, we can also note that the Unabomber’s call for the atomization of the nation-state resonates happily with the Toffler-Gingrich rhetoric of decentralization, demassification, and desynchronization that the editors of *Wired* hold dear, as do the laissez-faire futurists they idolize (George Gilder, Peter Drucker, Peter Schwartz, and their ilk).

While they favor deregulation over demolition and, of course, reject the anti-technology, anti-corporate principles of Kaczynski’s platform, the digital elite Unabombers share his libertarian disdain for politics with a capital P, which is by definition statist. “This is not to be a POLITICAL revolution,” Kaczynski writes in the introduction to his manifesto. “The goal is not to overthrow governments, but to destroy the economic and technological basis of present society.”¹⁴ Astute as he is, he realizes that the center of gravity of political power is rapidly shifting from the nation-state to the multinational corporation, especially when it comes to technology-dependent, post-industrial entities such as media conglomerates.

In *Wired*’s online statement, written by founder/publisher Louis Rossetto and made public by editor-in-chief John Battelle, a song is sung from the same sheet music: ‘We

¹¹ Kaczynski is quoted here by Tom Morganthau in ‘Who is He?’ *Newsweek*, May 8, 1996, p. 40. It is called Lo-tek or low-tech (the opposite of high-tech) because Gibson’s streetscape (like *Blade Runner*, by the way) was built from the ‘detritus’ (Giulliana Bruno calls it *Ramble City* or deconstructivist architecture) of a previous civilization (read: ours). (TP)

¹² Karl Taro Greenfeld, ‘The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures Who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds’, *Wired*, first edition (1993, undated), p. 69.

¹³ Reich uses this concept in many of his writings, especially in his book *The Work of Nations*.

¹⁴ The Freedom Club (= Ted Kaczynski), *The Unabomber Manifesto. Industrial Society and Its Future*, Ravijn/Arsenaal, Amsterdam 1996, p. 16.

at *Wired* have naturally ignored President Clinton, Washington, and politics in general. The Revolution will not happen in the halls of the Capitol, and politics is becoming not only increasingly outdated but also irrelevant. Everyone on the planet now believes in the free market as in gravity. There are now other, better ways to effect change in society than by pushing a button in a voting booth. Politics has become the problem, not the solution, and the Digital Generation can consciously reject politics because they have rationally concluded that politics and government are fundamentally discredited. *Wired* reports on a Revolution without violence, one that embraces a new, non-political way of improving the future, based on an economy outside of centralized, top-down macro-control.¹⁵ (Apparently, the de-elite for whom Battelle speaks also shares the revolutionary fervor of the Unabomber, the unwavering hubris of the true believer who is confident that history has a predetermined destiny; and it is going in the right direction!) As with their deregulatory soulmate, the ‘conservative futurist’ Newt Gingrich (to whose Progress and Freedom Foundation *Wired* has contributed), the Tofflerist rhetoric of decentralization espoused by the *Wired* de-elite is of course a cover for an exact replica of *reagonomics*, which aimed to overhaul the rickety regulatory system. to dismantle the framework that has (barely) curbed the power of multinational corporations, the ultimate goal of which is the elimination of the nation state, in which unleashed corporate power is no longer accountable to anyone.

4

In keeping with the social Darwinist undertones of their vision of a cyber-capitalist ‘revolution’ hatched in the minds of a technocratic elite, the digital elite ascribe their radical libertarian economics the force of natural law by couching them in the language of chaos theory and artificial life.

On the cover of *Out of Control*, Kelly promises “business strategies for an emerging global economy free of government control” (something that will appeal to corporate executives), and he calls on both disciplines to support the idea that unfettered capitalism could evolve into something rich and unfamiliar: a “network economy” of decentralized, outsourced “economic superorganisms” capable of adapting to the nonlinear dynamics of the global economic ecosystem. Visions of unfettered cyber-capitalism also dance around in the minds of management gurus like Tom Peters (author of the business book *Thriving on Chaos*), whose business gospel of “mad” nonlinear decision-making and constant reinvention echoes the chaos theory thesis that turbulent natural systems, when thrown far enough out of equilibrium, often give rise to surprising new phenomena. Peters’ idea of the post-industrial ‘Atomized Enterprise, with energetic, often minuscule sub-units with their own personalities and a ruthless boss’ is also reminiscent of the chaos-theoretic notion of self-organizing natural phenomena such

¹⁵ John Battelle (jbat), Topic 129 [wired]: New Republic Slams Wired!, the WELL, 1/14/1995.

as hurricanes and amoeba colonies, in which previously unrelated elements suddenly reach a critical point at which they begin to ‘work together’ to form more complex phenomena.¹⁶

Darwinian cyber-capitalism also concretizes its own view of the world with paradigms from the world of artificial life. According to Peters, “this is the age of biological models of organization, not mechanical ones. I love corporations like CNN, which organize something organic, something that recreates itself, reinvents itself every day.”¹⁷ Management theorists like Peters already live in William Gibson’s cyberpunk future, where multinational corporations are highly developed “life forms” whose DNA is “encoded in silicon” that constitute “the dominant forms of intelligence on the planet.”¹⁸ The conception of the corporation as a complex, colonial organism is implicit in recent attempts to obtain a court ruling to grant corporations the legal status of individuals, so that advertising for a corporate image is given the same protections as freedom of speech. The global market is increasingly couched in Darwinian terms, rationalizing the social and ecological devastation of multinational corporations as the struggle for survival of corporate entities in an economic ecosystem. Business consultant Michael Rothschild argues in *Bionomics: The Inevitability of Capitalism* that “what we call capitalism (or free market economics) is not an -ism at all, but a natural phenomenon” (and thus presumably above criticism).

5

In summary, then, we can see that on the one hand the digital elite with its Darwinian market populated by corporate life forms, and on the other hand the Unabomber with its pristine wilderness populated by neo-Luddites, have built opposing worldviews on one and the same cornerstone: the notion of Nature as legislator of theories of culture. ‘Nature’, says Andrew Ross, ‘is the ultimate man-pleaser whose name can be bestowed upon and honored even by things associated with its destruction.’¹⁹

A little digging reveals that the unquestionable authority of ‘natural law’ has been invoked throughout history not only to legitimize the exploitation of nature itself, but also to legitimize the oppression and extermination of women, non-whites, and other ‘inferior beings’. Londa Schiebinger reveals how eighteenth-century anatomists, anthropologists, and biologists ‘worked under the banner of scientific neutrality’ and invoked the supposedly ape anatomy of Africans to explain their position near the

¹⁶ ‘The Nine ‘Beyonds’, 1994 Vintage Books press release for Peters’ *Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*.

¹⁷ Thomas Kiely, “Unconventional Wisdom,” CIO, December 15, 1993 – January 1, 1994, vol. 7, no. 6, p. 26.

¹⁸ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace, New York 1984, p. 203; Gibson, ‘New Rosé Hotel’, *Burning Chrome*, Ace, New York 1987, p. 107.

¹⁹ Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature’s Debt to Society*, Verso, New York 1994, p. 4.

bottom of the great chain of life. Similarly, the childish ‘compressed brains’ of women were held up as evidence of their impulsive, emotional, and usually intellectually inferior qualities.²⁰

The untamed eco-utopia of the Una-bomber and the free-market ecology of the digital elite are just the latest examples of nature being used as a ventriloquist’s dummy in the service of social agendas. Other, not so pretty examples include Herbert Spaicer’s social Darwinism (that’s popular with monopolists like Rockefeller and Carnegie as Kelly’s neo-biological capitalism was with Tom Peters); but also the American eugenics movement of the 1920s, which saw more than two dozen states pass laws for the forced sterilization of anyone deemed “socially defective”; and, more recently, the voodoo sociology of Richard J. Hemstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*.²¹ The Unabomber and the digitelite are not alone in using nature as a ventriloquist’s dummy.

Ross rightly argues that we are witnessing ‘a massive revival of appeals to the authority of nature and biology’. The laws of nature are once again being invoked as a basis for making judgments and as a basis for policy. Biologism and social Darwinism are back in full force, driving the radically new worldview constructed by biotechnology and genetic medicine.²² His book is full of ominous warnings that ‘the authority of nature, and thus of the status quo, will become a despotic vehicle for curtailing rights and freedoms’.²³ Almost forty years ago, Roland Barthes warned that one of the most insidious aspects of ideological thinking is that it converts a constructed social reality and the power relations inherent in it into an innocent, unchangeable ‘nature’.²⁴ ‘Ideology’, he argued, ‘has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification and of making contingency seem perpetual’.²⁵ The concepts of ‘Wild Nature’ and ‘techno-nature’ are fatal because they do exactly the same thing and each of which stands in the way of discussion. By presenting it as God-given.

This essay was first presented as a largely improvised lecture at a conference on gender and technology on April 27, 1996, at the *Humanities Institute* at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (Long Island).

²⁰ Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Beacon Press, Boston 1993, pp. 5, 7.

²¹ A bestseller in America, notorious for its claim that blacks are intellectually (and genetically) inferior to whites.

²² Ross, *ibid.*, pp. 5, 15.

²³ Ross, *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, The Noonday Press, New York 1972.

²⁵ Contingency is a philosophical concept. Something is contingent if it could not have been derived or foreseen, does not fit in anywhere or is ‘coincidental’. According to some, including Spinoza, contingency is only due to our lack of knowledge: if we knew more, the necessity of everything would become apparent.

Mark Dery is a cultural critic. He wrote, among other things, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, translated (by Tom Paulus) and published by Houtekiet as *Het Digitale Lichaam*. He regularly contributes to *Andere Sinema* and gives lectures in America and Europe on new media, marginal art and subcultures.

The Ted K Archive

Mark Dery
'Wild Nature'
The Unabomber Meets The Digelite
2001

ISSN 0920-3257. <<https://www.tijdschrift-de-as.nl/2000.html>> &
<https://www.tijdschrift-de-as.nl/documenten/de_AS_133.pdf>

www.thetedkarchive.com