1 Atlas of the Cloud

Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon

Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon investigate by searching the Internet, drift in the space of hyper-information, tell post-cybernetic fables, tinker with alternative lifestyles, create films, books and installations.
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T.C.	Tangible-Cloud

(T.C.) During your conference at Tangible Cloud, you presented two projects: the collection Atlas of the Cloud[1] and the film World Brain,[2] made together with Gwenola Wagon. Both related to what you call the cloud-society. Could you please define this term for us?

(S.D.) The cloud-society is our way of life altered by permanent connection. Products, services, information, human relationships … fall "magically" out of the cloud, as if they were not material (which obviously, they are). Most of all, it affects our relation to the outside world: it's now just a vast externalized stock that potentially contains "everything", but whose the machinery is totally invisible.

What it hides, is a gigantic and delirious infrastructure, which covers the whole world (datacenters, underwater cables, logistics warehouses, armies of delivery people, etc.). It is ultra-capitalist monopoly economies. It is growing inequalities. It is also the ever-increasing distance of the structures of production, put further away and idealized.

The cloud is a multiple metaphor: we live in a cloud, since everything is made instantly accessible; but we also live in a cloud in the sense that all of this is an illusion that cannot last, under neither ecological nor ethical or social standards.

Cloud-society is also the title of my doctoral thesis in urban planning, defended in 2019.

(T.C.) In these two projects, there is a clear intention to value humans, landscapes and infrastructures, whose interactions embody the digital network. Cloud-computing or informatique-nuage in French, on the other hand, tends to make this living tissue invisible, by marketing its technologies as non-material, and entirely automatic. Where does your desire to make this alive network visible come from? How can or should art participate in this work of revelation?

(S.D.) "Cloud" is a metaphor that was first used to refer to the Internet in general, not just cloud-computing: the word has been "stolen" by marketing to sell online services, and it is in this general sense that we use it.

Indeed, the cloud in general tends to make its own operations invisible.

Hence our desire, on the contrary, to make them visible. And this in several projects, such asThe World as a Delivery Warehouse,[3] which shows the infrastructures of data processing, of

logistics and, of he living. We have patiently collected hundreds of videos showing these invisible infrastructures, often with no of human workers.

The world that is being built here is totally delirious, because of its scale and its global reach. And we are very unaware of it. Amazon, for example, spends 8 billion dollars a year on infrastructure improvements alone. All this money is aimed at making the buying process smoother and smoother. Obviously, this cost is passed on to the consumer. He doesn't pay for the delivery and the products are cheaper and cheaper, but he buys more and more, without realizing it, he increases the monopoly of Amazon (or other) and generates a gigantic pollution. It leads to unbearable working conditions for the delivery people, who earn lower and lower fees. And so on.

We thought it was essential to make this visible. But, as the filmmaker Adam Curtis puts it, the problem with these topics is that they are extremely non-visual. It is therefore very complex to find forms in which they can be shown. There is nothing less sexy than the systemic logic of infrastructure. Yet it is one of the aspects that rules over the configuration of the world. And this non-sexy aspect helps to establish a hegemony: not so many people are interested in delving into it– though it would be a shame to leave it to engineers and investors alone.

This is a fast-moving issue, though. When we first covered it in our film Cyborgs dans la brume in 2011, few people knew what a datacenter was. Today, everyone does.

(T.C.) In the film World Brain, the scene with the shark biting a cable is pretty striking. It opens up the question of the frictions between infrastructures and the living, which have increased since the industrial and, more recently, digital revolution. What aspects fascinate you in these interactions? How do you imagine them growing in the future?

(S.D.) World Brain is a film about the infrastructure of the Internet and utopias of connection between human beings. But it's also a film about animals. We see a shark biting a cable, a horse under hypnosis, laboratory mice being subjected to all sorts of atrocious manipulations, a blob, ants pulling an earthworm, bacteria, narcoleptic kittens …

A large part of the film takes place in the forest,

where a pack of nomadic researchers tries to survive by re-establishing links with the living, in the tradition of Richard Brautigan's poem, All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace.

It's about embodying the question of utopia and infrastructure. The ends of the Cloud are bitten by sharks, the Internet runs through the brains of mice whose brains have been optogenetically modified, etc.

To build the scenario of the film, we mixed past and present utopian visions of general connection, from Franz-Anton Mesmer to Michael Chorost to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. We were interested in different visions pushing present utopias to the extremes. Then we mixed everything together in a kind of great treasure hunt.

World Brain is a kind of shaker that bangs together different visions, an echo chamber, or a hall of mirrors. Or as Andreas Rauth puts it: "a labyrinth, in which the idea of a world brain would be the virtual center."

(T.C.)   Your Atlas of the Cloud is a collection of stereotypical computer-related visuals, most of which drawn from tech marketing. For example, a series devoted to images of people using their computers sitting on clouds matches the term cloud-computing. These visuals literally describe the physical phenomenon of the cloud: "an aerosol consisting of a visible mass of miniature liquid droplets […] suspended in the atmosphere of a planetary body […]."[4] to sell services. Of course, this is only a metaphor, far from the real marketed products. Which impact do you think this imagery has on our relation to the digital?

(S.D.)   Part of the images of the Cloud Atlas, indeed, comes from micro-stock platforms such as Shutterstock, iStockPhoto, Dreamstime, etc. These images have a very intriguing aesthetic, which questioned us a lot, so much, we wrote an article about them.[5]
Their aesthetic is smooth and neutral, but there's more than that: they are images over which the eye glides without seeing them–and it seems to us that it's precisely what they were made for. Not to exist. But this aspect is very confusing: why do we produce images that should remain invisible? Our thesis is that they're images replacing reality, so to speak. It's as if all parts of the real world would be replaced, not by spectacle, as Debord said, but by ghosts, illusions.

And what for? Creating meaningless information, that supports corporate communication, positive thinking, green-washing, and all sorts of washing.

To us, it seems perfectly compatible with how the cloud-society likes to appear without being seen. How it likes to show off, while remaining invisible.

If these images are created to make invisible what they actually display, how can it be possible to evade this mechanism?

We choose to multiply them, to highlight how they incessantly repeat the same motives over and over. And we confronted them with real pictures. Thus, in the Atlas, smooth stock images of smiling deliverymen mix with pictures of injured deliverymen. Smooth advertising images, displaying fleets of self-service bicycles are contradicted by pictures of mountains of trashed bicycles, and so on.

(T.C.) Your work seems to resemble strongly that of a collector or an editor. Indeed, in several of your projects, you gather, sort and order existing images, still or animated. Why do you favor collection, editing and collage to the making of visuals "from scratch"?

(S.D.)   In some projects, such as World Brain, half of the images are made by us, while the other half comes from the Internet. The idea is to make it difficult for viewers to identify the source, to drag them in a kind of confusion–but at the same time, to clearly state that the sources are multiple and colliding. This would be a cut-up, a collage.
In other projects, such as Erewhon or the Cloud Atlas, all the images were patiently collected over the Internet.

The profusion of images is such that, for those who know how to search, it's become possible to carry out real work of investigation, or fiction, without even having to stand up. Moreover, it allows the quick collection of lots of images, related to a specific topic. Which would be impossible by other means, unless dedicating a life to it. What we aim at is precisely the opposite: we dedicate investigations to multiple, vast and complex subjects. Which would be, by other means, impossible.

[1] Stéphane Degoutin & Gwenola Wagon, Altlas of the Cloud, 72 sheets, 48 x 35 cm, color, 2021. See: https://d-w.fr/en/projects/atlas.

[2] Stéphane Degoutin & Gwenola Wagon, World Brain, film,

installation and map, 2015. See: https://www.arte.tv/digi-talproductions/fr/world-brain.

3 See: https://d-w.fr/fr/projects/le-monde-comme-entrepot-de-livraison.

4 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud.

5 Stéphane Degoutin & Gwenola Wagon, "Le Blanchiment des images", AOC, 05.06.23. See: https://d-w.fr/fr/projects/culte-du-stock.

Figure 1.1   Altlas of the Cloud, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, board 73, colors, 2021

Figure 1.2   Altlas of the Cloud, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, board 43, colors, 2021

Figure 1.3   Altlas of the Cloud, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, board 57, colors, 2021

Figure 1.4   World Brain, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, Film, installation and map, 2015

Figure 1.5   World Brain, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, Film, installation and map, 2015

Figure 1.6   World Brain, Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon, Film, installation and map, 2015

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