

John Zerzan's *Twilight of the Machines*

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a review of *Twilight of the Machines*, John Zerzan, Feral House, 2009; 140 pages, \$12, www.feralhouse.com

John Zerzan has infuriated and fascinated readers for decades. His sweeping critique of the modern world condemns not just capitalism, the state, technology and even “civilization,” but he openly calls for the abolition of all forms of symbolic representation and a return to a hunting and gathering existence.

And, at the bottom of his resolutely nihilistic denunciation of the present, is a beautiful and poetic vision of life free of mediation and alienation, and based instead on love and empathy.

Zerzan's present views were developed in five articles (sometimes called the “Origins essays”), which first appeared in the *Fifth Estate* between 1983 and 1988. They identify Time, Language, Art, Number and Agriculture as the primary forms of alienation. Zerzan claims that anthropological evidence shows that before the emergence of these forms, people lived in an unmediated oneness and harmony with their world.

Furthermore, our contemporary problems (he names them as “Specialization, domestication, civilization, mass society, modernity, techno-culture... Progress”) arise from these primal separations. We now live in a world of complete alienation, where everything we experience has been standardized and controlled, turned into quantifiable forms that are repeatable and exchangeable.

“We inhabit a landscape of emptiness, grief, stress, boredom, anxiety in which our ‘human nature’ is as steadily degraded as is what is left of the natural world”, he writes in this collection's title essay. Zerzan calls us to throw off these alienated forms and return to our true being, which is intuitive, primal, spontaneous, and which still exists underneath. There are ecological, spiritual, psychological, social and political implications to his perspective, and they form the basic beliefs held by most radicals who today call themselves “anarcho-primitivists” or “anti-civ.”

Most of the essays in *Twilight of the Machines* first appeared in *Green Anarchy*, where he is a contributing editor. (Starting in the mid-1970s, Zerzan published most of his new works in the *Fifth Estate*, until a final falling out with members of the editorial collective in 1988 over his theoretical views.

Afterwards, he became a contributing editor at *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, until it shifted hands into the new Bay Area collective a few years ago.) The majority of this collection's works follow the same themes in Zerzan's earlier anthologies *Elements of Refusal*, *Future Primitive* and *Running on Emptiness*. For example, he repeats the same stories about toddlers on anti-depressants and teen suicide rates which can be found in his 1970s essays.

He also presses ahead his attack on post-modernism, which he initiated in *Future Primitive's* “The Catastrophe of Post-Modernism.” In “Exiled From Presence,” he writes that, “Post-modernism, the handmaiden of technoculture's malignant spread, must deny that matters were ever outside the realm of estrangement, or ever will be.” His attack on post-modernism is intrinsic to his philosophical views regarding the nature of being: Zerzan's vision of a unified totality runs counter to the stress on the fragmentation of identity in post-structuralism (which is the underlying philosophy that post-modernism reflects).

The most interesting parts of this book are the essays in the first half which look at the origins of war, patriarchy, religion and cities. (The second half of this collection consists mostly of restatements of Zerzan's basic formulations.) Zerzan gives an account of the development of each of these four concepts in line with his basic perspective.

“Patriarchy, Civilization and the Origins of Gender” nods towards eco-feminism, one of the few contemporary intellectual currents Zerzan has shown a fundamental affinity towards.

In “The Iron Grip of Civilization: The Axial Age,” Zerzan comes close to condemning all non-animistic spiritual beliefs, including Buddhism; only Taoism receives a partial exemption. And, in “Alone Together: The City and Its Inmates,” he adds the city as a primary form of the material incarnation of alienation. (In the Origins essays, he identifies agriculture as the material embodiment of the mediations of time, language, art and number. Now, he adds the city as a second form of alienation that assumes a concrete, three-dimensional, material form. This is why, unlike other critics of civilization such as *Fifth Estate’s* David Watson, he calls for a return to hunting and gathering societies).

However, the only evidence of any fundamental reconception of his position is, in the interview with Kevin Tucker, the admission that spoken language may be up to half a million years old. If this comes to be accepted, it would potentially problematise his initial list of the five sins of alienation, or at least his periodization of them.

If true, Zerzan’s highly speculative claim of when an unmediated humanity existed would be pushed considerably further back in time than he had previously claimed.

Conceptual Specifics

Even on the level of understanding Zerzan’s own schema, lingering questions remain. In particular, it is difficult to understand how he conceives of the relationship between technology, civilization and symbolic representation.

For example, despite the reputation of primitivists as focusing their fury on technology, Zerzan has written surprisingly little about it. In earlier works Zerzan seems to reject the notion of tool-making as compatible with his vision, but here he praises the archeological find of a 400,000 year old spear as evidence of “high intelligence” in the absence of “symbolic culture.” Will there be “culture” or even “objects” in an unmediated world? Do “objects” have an independent ontological existence in the world, or are they a product of our alienated consciousness? How would knowledge of spear-making be passed on without culture; and if so, is there non-symbolic culture?

Rhetorical Structure And Citations

There are problems with his structure of argumentation as well, all of which have plagued Zerzan’s writing for decades. The most obvious is Zerzan’s effusive use of quotations from a wide array of sources. (It has always struck me as odd that someone who considers language to be one of the world’s greatest catastrophes is such a voracious reader.) These quotes serve to add the veneer of intellectual depth to Zerzan’s claims; but he almost never spends any time on the substance of the arguments in the works he cites, instead severing them from their larger narratives and presenting them only as fragments (and, in effect, mirroring the very post-modern bricolage that Zerzan despises).

Indeed, once you grasp the basic essence of his perspective, one can find elements that back up parts of it in a large number of writings on a variety of topics and from various perspectives. However, these writers almost never come to a fundamental agreement with Zerzan’s worldview.

One example is Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, a caustic critic of contemporary mass society and even civilization. But Adorno forcefully repudiated the notion that there can ever be a self-identical, subject-object identity (i.e. the kind of unmediated existence that Zerzan calls us to return to).

In fact, Adorno argues that this kind of perspective is intrinsically fascist. This however, does not stop Zerzan from citing Adorno when it suits him, while simply discarding the remainder of his arguments—or dismissing them with a single sentence. Despite his wide-ranging reading, one gets the impression that Zerzan is simply mining these books for choice quotes which are hung as adornments on an already-completed argument.

Fascist References

Despite occasional claims from detractors, it is clear that Zerzan is absolutely not a fascist and that he has no sympathies for their politics.

However, because his philosophical views parallel certain elements of fascism, some fascists are drawn to his views (especially his denouncement of the “Left!”). For example, recently a crypto-fascist website (which did not reveal its politics openly) asked for an interview with him; he later denounced them when their politics were exposed. But his books have also been reviewed in pagan-fascist literary journals, and his ideas are discussed on fascist internet forums. Because of this, it is disturbing to see references to fascist and proto-fascist thinkers in Zerzan’s work.

Oswald Spengler is one writer Zerzan admires; he says that despite the fact that Spengler is a “nationalist and reactionary,” his book *The Decline of the West* “is the great masterwork of world history, and his grasp of Western Civilization’s inner logic is uncanny in its prescience.” Spengler influenced the Nazis and was sympathetic to them early on, although he ended up denouncing them before his death in 1936.

Zerzan also cites Romanian thinker Mircea Eliade, who not just supported the fascist Iron Guard before WW2, but in the 1960s supported GRECE, a think tank that was the brainchild of Alain de Benoist, who is the most sophisticated of contemporary neo-fascist philosophers. Benoist publishes his English-language pieces in the same journal, *Telos*, which occasionally runs Zerzan as well.

Lastly, Zerzan also continues to cite phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was an avid Nazi supporter before the war and continued to defend his interest in them after. Zerzan’s views about the self closely parallel Heidegger; both uphold the notion of an authentic being which has been perverted by modernity, but not lost. In the past, Zerzan has been very critical about Heidegger.

For example, in a 1993 review of Tom Rockmore’s *Heidegger’s Nazism and Philosophy*, Zerzan writes that Rockmore “convincingly demonstrates that Heidegger’s Nazism was no mere contingency or accident.” But *Twilight of the Machines* contains a number of references to Heidegger, even though they are not always completely favorable.

Adorno, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, said that thinkers who championed the unmediated self (such as Heidegger and psychologist Carl Jung) forwarded intrinsically fascist perspectives. Adorno, along with many post-structuralists, also questioned the existence of any kind of complete social totality, as well as the possibility of an unfragmented self.

Zerzan rejects these views as reflections of our own alienated society, but the fact that fascists are drawn to Zerzan’s views, and that he is inspired by certain philosophers with ugly pasts, raises concerns. In fact, it is easy to see why Nazis see his attack on symbolic thought as the same as their attack on the Jews who they claim are the source of alienation, decadence, and abstraction. Nazis see his championing of the unmediated community as the same as their desire for a homogenous, racially-pure community, which they think will exist as a unified whole, free of fragmentation.

Zerzan is not sympathetic to Nazi ideas, but in terms of certain philosophical categories, there is a closeness. Because of this, and because he rejects Adorno’s path of separation from fascism, he needs to go further than denouncing fascist political actors; he needs to confront their philosophies directly.

Zerzan needs to explain why his views are fundamentally different, and incompatible, with theirs.

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