

SOME MYTHS OF THE END OF THE MILLENIUM

Against the trivialisation of technoculture¹

Claudia Giannetti

The use of the concept of redundancy in art and aesthetics is not something new at all. It is enough to remember the theories of aesthetic perception of the fifties to realise that the idea, according to which there can be an erosion of the aesthetic quality produced by its banalisation, was already quite developed at that time. Max Bense affirmed that a piece of information is a function of the improbability of the message received and this piece of information is directly proportional to improvidence and, therefore, to excitement and entropy. In other words, redundancy can increase the intelligibility of the message but makes its aesthetic interest decrease.

It is clear that this hypothesis is almost directly bound to the concept of "novelty" which is also not a contemporary discovery. During the twentieth century the "new" has been a prerequisite of "modernity" and contemporaneity, and its use and disproportionate abuse have provoked a neutralisation of its meaning. To the question "what is the 'new'?" we would not know how to reply or perhaps we would reply with another question: in the postmodern period, does the new exist? If we agree with Fernando Pessoa, who summed up the spirit of postmodern art in an extraordinary and concise way by affirming that "it is a copy without original", then the answer can only be negative.

From this point of view, we should support the theory of redundancy. In fact, the feeling of *déjà-vu* that constantly accompanies us is a consequence of the banalisation and massification to which, in the information era, practically all things, our culture and our environment, are exposed.

¹ Published in: Mostra d'Arts Electròniques 1998, Departament de Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona, 1998. (First Prize *Espai de la Crítica*, 1999)

Let us get to the point. The title of this text does not indicate a mythographical study and much less mythophobia. It simply seeks to open a small space for critical reflection on the phenomenon of the progressive symbiosis between technologies and art and on some myths which are being generated by this process. It tries to find a balance between technocultural euphoria and pessimism.

Among the countless concepts with which people speculate within the context of digital culture, I intend to focus on four notions which have become surprisingly widespread in the world of art: cyberspace, interactivity, hypertextuality and the death of the author.

After the publication of the essay by mathematician Alan Turing's *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (1950) in which he formulated the basic question "can a machine think?", there was a veritable avalanche of publications speculating, analysing and hovering around this subject. In just the three years following 1950, more than one thousand articles were published on the questions of intelligence and communication with and between machines. Something similar happened with the notion of cyberspace. Since William Gibson proposed in his book *Neuromante* (1984) the existence of a complex scenario "behind" the screen where billions of "operators" could act simultaneously from any part of the world and which was based on a global infrastructure of communication and database (the "matrix"), the accumulation of texts which have been published on cyberspace has been quite unprecedented.

In the main, these texts follow the devout conception of John Perry Barlow who apprised himself of the concept of cyberspace and gave a specific definition of "another" artificial world allowing a new form of intercommunication, free and global, through the telematic system. Within a short time, cyberspace became a synonym of freedom and attracted, in a very unusual way, the most diverse ideological and amateur groups: from the high-tech-hippies, the computer-freaks and the contracultural activists to the electronic democrats, the info-capitalists and the neo-liberals, among others. Thus, cyberspace achieved, perhaps for the first time, the rare alliance between supporters of

cyberanarchism and cyberliberalism, with reference to the need for democratisation of the net, against interventionism. It is not necessary to ponder too much in order to realise that there is something extremely schizophrenic and incongruous in this coincidence.

It is an indisputable fact that the diffusion of the romantic image of a universalist and global cybersociety acknowledges neo-liberal interests. From this point of view, the myth arising from a democratic space where "everybody has access to everything" can be considered equal to the vision of a world as a global supermarket. However, it is much more complicated to understand the naive belief of the activist and cyberhippies in "access for all" without control. Barlow's "Proclamation of Independence of Cyberspace" does not sound less demagogic than, for instance, the well-known cry of "Independence or death!" uttered in 1822 by Don Pedro I, Brazil's Regent. That the emperor was not thinking about one thing or the other is as clear as the merely rhetorical proclamation of the inhabitants of the cyberfatherland to the "governments of the industrialised world, the tired giants of flesh and blood," representatives of a "past era" in order to "be let alone". Barlow naively affirms that "where we meet, you already have no power."

Net-activists see the Internet as a "new" medium allowing minorities to actively participate and even "to have influence in the social process". Its enormous importance would lie, as Eveline Lubbers states together with many others, in the diffusion of "information to all the social strata. The net surpasses all physical borders and creates new possibilities, even in the south." We do not want to be too sceptical but if we know that the users of the net are mainly whites and from a determined western social class, what kind of "information" are we talking about...? It is as if a technological structure could intercede in a compliant way in the programme of social emancipation.

Despite this integrating "alternative" position, the myth of cyberspace is created as a "place" democratically inhabited where culture and art can, at last, freely develop. In fact, they become a part (obviously minor) of a wide net devoted to the most trivial entertainment, from cybersex and teleshopping to simulated

cyberwars, which transform this field into a cultural supermarket, into business-culture.

We would have to be completely gullible not to notice that, within the context of the information society, the media is a part of the structures of power and, consequently, of the dominant rhetoric. Geert Lovink was right when affirming that capitalism will never allow a "non-civilised" cyberspace after its own fashion. The myth of technology understood as an environment enjoying autonomy, enjoying a power almost natural and immanent is a way to conceal its condition of direct subordination to a political programme of property without borders and, therefore, a way of mitigating technological determinism. As if we were not fed up with being warned about the military origins of this cybertechnology!

It would be appropriate to bear in mind this assertion when interpreting and judging the hazardous affirmations of theoretical essayistics on cyberspace which tend to consider it as the last redoubt of salvation for humanity, its culture and its art, insofar as it is their technology which is "allowing us to transform our self, to transfer our thoughts and to go beyond the limitations of our bodies."(1) Sensationalism and fetishism seem to have transformed themselves into a daily event of the rhetorics of cyberart. An art which promises nothing less than to achieve a hopeful "classical/constructive Renaissance to the extent that it contributes to the development of the cerebral interface and the completely interactive global net."(Paul Brown) We agree with Siegfried Schmidt's warning that "experience shows us that a new medium does not immediately lead to a new creativeness or to energies and imagination suitable to exploit it". So would Oswald Wiener be right when affirming that "in all its applications known up to now, the computer does not change anything in the nature of understanding or in human creativeness"? (2)

A great part of this same cyberessayistics points to interactivity as the determining element of Electronic Art. Another myth arises from the possibility of active participation of the—transformed into the user—in the work of art. Interactivity becomes a sign not only of the contemporaneity of the work but even of its quality. Although at present the use of the concept "progress" is

avoided (because of the postmodern reasons we already know) it is as if interactive art meant an evolutionary step within the context of art history. According to the current belief, the mere fact of establishing a dialogue or interconnection in real time through the use of a medium of telecommunication is considered an interaction... So, the telephone should be considered the first "interactive medium"!

From the pretext that interactivity both online and offline opens "new worlds" to the user, who can make their creative contribution to them, a speculative wave is displayed around a presumed bigger complexity of interactive art. But, can the technique employed be "the" reliable parameter to measure the minor or major complexity of the works? It would be sufficient for us to remember some works (from Velázquez and Goya to Yves Klein or Francis Bacon) to realise that we are dealing with a particularly arbitrary vision.

Participatory art and interactive art begin to be, for the critics and the public in general, almost identical. The sensorial works of Lygia Clark ended up transforming themselves, because of journalistic marketing, into interactive works! The trend of interactivity has transformed even the simple action of clicking on a model of interaction, and the action—devoid of pretensions—of *zapping* through the Internet in the "art" of navigation, something which, in reality, in contrast to the promised interactivity, is cultivating parasites clinging to the net.

If we get back to the original idea of feedback, an idea which rested on the basis of the first cybernetic art, we immediately understand the possible difference between systems which we can define as participatory and those truly interactive. According to the cybernetics of Norbert Wiener, a feedback loop is a circular disposition of connected elements where a determined initial cause propagates through all the successive levels of the loop, so that each element has an effect on the following until the last feeds the effect back to the first level where the process was initiated. Therefore, the feedback works as a system of control inherent in the machine allowing the return of information to its point of origin through the development of a process. However, the interactive system appears as a real exchange of information between different

systems, such as the human and the digital; in other words, it offers the possibility that one element outside the machine becomes a part of the process through the introduction of information and may generate new information not contained in the programme.

Another aspect of marketing involves the promotion of any CD-ROM or any hypertext in the net as "interactive works". The mere fact that the user can choose the links offered by the text or the image is celebrated as interaction and this seems to favourably determine the quality of the work. In the hypertextual work, as Uwe Wirth points out, "the style of writing matters less than the style of reading" or the way of "working of a machine within the context of the multiple connections that the reader makes between the diverse textual levels and links".⁽³⁾ Flusser, without directly mentioning interaction, formulates an interesting hypothesis; he understands the hypertext as a possibility of generating an individualised reading, actively selected and, consequently, defined by the reader. Bernd Wingert, however, draws attention to an important aspect: the central idea of the type of organisation of the hypertext is the network; if the network is used to make up the contents we could talk of "strong" hypertext; the works which do not do this would be "weak" hypertexts.

The advantages of a digital archive of CD-ROM support are undeniable but one must not forget that the possible aesthetic value of a work produced for this support is not limited to the effectiveness of the non-linear definition of navigation. In the same way, the telematic network offers access, as many authors have already pointed out, to something similar to Jorge Luis Borges' "Babel's Library" with an almost infinite universe of information without a central point. The existence of an immeasurable quantity of bits of information also means an equivalent increase in relation to the difficulty of selection and, therefore, an obstacle to access to determined contents. It is enough to observe the present obsession for the development of knowbots and intelligent agents, which adopt the function of searchers in order to realise the scope of this problem.

However, unsatisfied with the "new worlds" of cyberspace and unlimited interactivity, the culture of persuasion ends with giving the user of hypermedia

the status of co-author and sometimes even of author of the work. We are now running up against the fourth myth: the disappearance of the figure of the author in the digital era. The seduction effect does not cease to be a stimulus: like magic, the author "disappears" behind the action of the user who is proclaimed "(co-)creator" of the work. But if we are talking about the implied disappearance of authorship, why then insist on transforming the spectator into artist? It is equally unquestionable that a possible co-authorship—artistic and public—may exist in a few rare projects. But it is also true that the majority of the so-called "interactive works" only place the user within a pre-arranged framework where their only action is limited to click the links or activate the sensors they are offered. To consider this action as an "act of creation"... is, in fact, a real discovery—and at the present time regrettably effective—characteristic of the entertainment industry. It is one more example of the trivialisation propagated by the gurus of digital culture.

Electronic art is not prolific and significant enough to submit to mercantile strategies of the multimedia industry. In the same way, it does not need to exploit a redundant aesthetic in order to achieve greater diffusion or a massive public. The "designers" of current political culture should have been conscious of the risk run when estimating the success or quality of an exhibition, a festival, a work of art, etc, only in terms of quantitative public values. That fashions sell—and the "new" technologies are currently a fashion—we already know. But this is no reason why we, from the cultural arena, must support technological determinism and media hegemony.

In some previous article, I cited the ironic objection of Stuart Dreyfus to the fabulous promises of the prophets of information technology: to believe that the developments achieved up to now are significant steps is to believe that someone who is climbing up a tree is on his way to reaching the moon. It seems to me opportune to insist again on the metaphor: to believe in the fact that to exhaust the capabilities of digital tools is significant for art is the same as to believe that someone learning how to manipulate machines is on the point of achieving aesthetic creation.

Notes

1. Roy Ascott, "La arquitectura de la cibercepción", in: Giannetti, Claudia (ed.). *Ars Telematica. Telecomunicación, Internet y Ciberespacio*. Barcelona, L'Angelot, 1998, p. 96.
2. Siegfried Schmidt, "¿Ciber como oikos? O: Juegos serios", in: Giannetti, Claudia (ed.). *Ars Telematica. Telecomunicación, Internet y Ciberespacio*. op. cit., p.112.
3. Uwe Wirth, "Literatura en Internet. O: ¿A quién le importa quién lea?", in: Giannetti, Claudia (ed.). *Ars Telematica. Telecomunicación, Internet y Ciberespacio*. op. cit., p. 60.