

Ars Telematica: The Aesthetics of Intercommunication¹

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Telecommunication technologies, such as telephone, radio or television, have made it possible to overcome territorial distances, have solved the problem of communication between geographically separated individuals, and have opened up the possibility of sending 'disembodied' messages; all this has been based on one fundamental concept: the conversion of space into time. Long distance verbal communication in real time has been solved by the telephone, and long distance audio-visual communication has been achieved with the invention of television. Whilst the structure of communication via radio or telephone is limited to speech and bi-directional hearing, the structure of televisual communication has widened the range of communication to include vision, but has reduced the direction of information flow, given that broadcasting is unidirectional.

Artists interested in telecommunication problems soon find themselves face to face with this tremendous challenge: the need to overcome the barriers of the monological structure of audio-visual media. Most of the art projects via satellite that were first developed in the Seventies, as well as those telematic (data transmission) art projects that first got off the ground in the Eighties, were in fact attempts to transform television into a participative medium. Different paradigmatic experiments carried out over those years involved a search for new techniques and processes that would get across the idea of interaction: *Nine Minutes Live*, by Nam June Paik (Kassel Documenta 6, 1977); *Two-Way Demo*, by a group of artists organised around Carl Loeffler (New York and San Francisco, 1977); *Terminal Consciousness*, by Roy Ascott (a pioneering networking project carried out by eight artists connected both to each other as well as a data base in California, 1980); *Electronic Cafe Internacional*, by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz (Los Angeles Olympic Art Festival, 1984); *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, by Nam June Paik (Centre Pompidou, Paris and Channel WNET-TV New York, 1984); etc. Robert Adrian, Norman White, Jean-

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Marc Philippe and Roberto Barbanti are also creators who, starting at this time, made use of telecommunications in multilateral or intercontinental projects.

Without a doubt, the intention to transform discursive media into participative media can be seen as a major turning point. The technology necessary to bring about this change already exists, Internet being a fine example of this. But the fact is that a communications revolution does not depend exclusively on technology, but also and above all, on interpersonal communication; that is, it does not depend exclusively on the mass and flow of information available for circulation, but rather on a broad-based unrestricted access to these media and their use as a genuine means of communication, and not simply as one more carrier in the Information Age. It is about the creation of new models, and not about trying continually to adapt and adjust past ones, as postmodern rhetoric has tried and continues to try to do. We will look now at models related metaphorically or directly with the telematic system, that point the way to a different vision and a new interpretation of what it means to work on the Net.

The development of hypertext theory has made it possible to recover the thoughts of the literature theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). However, in those circles dedicated to hypermedia-related themes, only one of the aspects of Bakhtin's theory is really known at all well: that which refers to the concept of dialogic and polyphonic literature, derived from his study of Dostoievsky's works. His notion of polyphonic language has qualified him as one of the main precursors of hypertext theory.

But it is possible to discover another Bakhtin, an author interested in the world of popular culture, with its customs and practices. It is in his book dedicated to the study of Rabelais, translated as *Rabelais and his World* (1), that we can find some relevant basic theories which, extrapolated into our current context, allow us to define a new model relating to telematic culture, that we will here call – after Bakhtin – the "carnival model". It may certainly "sound" festive, and a more rushed interpretation might even indicate a personal interest. In spite of this, if we go deeper into the philosophical, aesthetic and structural foundations of carnival, especially in the sense interpreted by Bakhtin and based on his studies of popular events in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we can see the different ways in which this model can be of use

to us as a theoretical inspiration when evaluating the aesthetic aspect of art on the Internet, or web art, as it is known. This being a highly complex model, we will focus on four main points or concepts: interpersonal communication, the notion of ambivalence, the metaphor of the mask, and the relationship between art and context.

One of the most important aspects of carnival lies in the human contact and relationships to which the event gives rise. It is an open, multilayered type of communication, precisely because the model in question makes a complete break with the hierarchical or pyramidal structure that dominates most societies. In other words, it makes a clean break with the rigid notion of social class and background. And this is precisely because carnival is not based on a power structure, nor is it the product of a bureaucratic, institutional or official system. Within the context of the carnival, everybody appears to have, at first, the same rights and the same position or status. The system involved is not of an orderly or pre-established nature, but grows out of an apparently chaotic form into which people allow themselves to be pulled or involved, thus creating a network in a free and open fashion.

Another characteristic of carnivalesque communication is its plurimedia (or, as we would say in artistic terms, intermedia) nature. That is to say, it is a form of interdisciplinary communication that involves the body and all its functions – voice and hearing (or audio), images and context (vision), dance and rhythm (movement), musical texts (language) –, all of them interrelated in a creative, active and fragmented (that is to say, non-linear) manner.

The carnival experience is, on the other hand, an ambivalent experience. Although it involves each person as an individual, it is not something private, but open to the world in the sense that anyone who wants to can take part. This integration depends on no norms or rules of access, but rather on the ability of participants to incorporate and adapt themselves to the game. It is clear that carnival has its own criteria and rituals, but its defining factor is the power to integrate absolutely all of the participants with each other. We are therefore talking about a network communications structure.

Its ambivalence also extends, in similar fashion, to other aspects: in a carnival context, people take on a dual role: they both spectators and actors at the same time. As an example, Bakhtin uses the notion of "laughter", something

inherent in carnival, as a factor which makes it possible to describe the ambiguous nature of participation; the people who participate "in" the carnival are equally the object and subject of laughter. On the one hand, they are the observers of the spectacle taking place, they are consumers of all the circulating information, but they are also an integral part of the spectacle (and the information) experienced by all in a more or less synchronised form. For Bakhtin, the carnival, as a nucleus of medieval culture, "does not have the purely artistic form of theatrical performance and, in general, does not pertain to the world of art. It is situated on the border between art and life. In reality it is life itself, presented with the characteristic elements of a game. In fact, carnival ignores all distinctions between actors and spectators. It also ignores the stage, even in an embryonic form, since a stage would ruin the carnival."(2) Establishing an analogy with current telematic strategies, we might say that the observers are both the users and creators of the same network. It is here that the affinity lies between the participative, active and interactive nature of the carnival and that of the telematics network.

Bakhtin confirmed that "the carnival has no spatial frontier"(3). In a similar way, in the field of Internet data, the absence of spatio-temporal limits and of a real place is made up for by the simulation of an immaterial space, a hyperspace characterised by virtuality and temporality. This electronic space makes it possible to substitute the time-distance relationship through the use of instantaneous presence, thanks to the synchronisation and ubiquity of data. Dynamism and action thus provide the essential focus of these complex, open and multidimensional systems, in which the user plays a fundamental role. In the Internet context, this participatory position is reinforced by free access to any item of information, which makes it possible to overcome the unidimensionality of analogical language and its link with linear structuring systems. This break with Western models of textual sequentiality and centrality can thus be seen as an transformation which is inherent in the process of network digitalisation and communication.

The carnival model provides us with another unusual approach regarding the ambivalence which exists when apprehending the concept of reality. As we have previously pointed out, the carnival, as well as the data transmission network, involves a powerful dynamism which has an influence on the

experience of the medium or context itself. This dynamism is directly related to the notion of reality, which becomes more flexible, mutable, virtualisable. The Situationists spoke of the "Society of the Spectacle" as a society of appearances, dominated and manipulated by the powers that be. Here, this "Society of the Spectacle" to a certain extent is able to outwit these powers, and transform itself into a society which can destabilise, diminish the importance of, infringe upon and overcome the limits of existing notions of reality and truth. According to Bakhtin, the rites and performances of carnival marked a notable, basic difference with established forms of society, since "they offered a vision of the world, of mankind, and of human relationships, that was totally different and deliberately unofficial, that lay beyond the reach of Church and State; they would appear to have built up, alongside the official world, a second world and a second life to which the folk of the Middle Ages belonged to a greater or lesser degree, and in which they lived on determined dates. This created a form of duality in the world."⁽⁴⁾ "This vision, opposed to all that was anticipated and perfect, to all pretension to immutability and eternity, needed to be manifested in changing (Protean), dynamic, fluctuating and active forms of expression. It is this which impregnates all the forms and symbols of carnival language with an understanding of the relative nature of truth and the powers that be."⁽⁵⁾ The carnival, as well as the telematic network, are clear examples of a plurality of realities and of the tendency to their disintegration in a virtual space (*virtual* here understood as a suspension of the real). It is a space-time whose fluid, playful strength gives rise to the feeling that it is ubiquitous.

The metaphor of the mask is inextricably linked to the idea of the unstable nature of reality. The mask, a typically carnivalesque emblem, is, likewise, not without a certain ambivalence: it both hides and reveals at the same time. The mask is an object which either hides or conceals its wearer. The person behind the mask is all but anonymous, even though he or she may be recognised by the type of mask used. On the other hand, the masked person gives him or herself away through the choice of mask in question. The mask can be used as a metaphor for the relativity of existence, affecting both the concept of identity and the equivalence between mind and body, between the personal subjective world and the unattainable exterior world. The mask plays constantly on this contradiction; as Bakhtin would have it, it is related to

metamorphosis: that is, transformation of or rupture with the limits imposed by nature.

Some of the most expansive forms of Internet, like chat forums, MUDs (Multi User Dungeons), cities or virtual places, can be seen as platforms for the development of a mask-based aesthetic. The technology of data transmission networks and of virtual reality in general make it possible for artists to explore other dimensions of a ubiquitous nature, such as telepresence. On the one hand, current telematic and tele-robotics systems enable us to create virtual doubles, changing the form of or giving life to different characters, so that they can function in cyberspace. They also enable the user to teletransport his or her virtual clones, to control them from a distance, and animate them in real time: in this way they can carry out their cyberperformances. Themes such as dual personality and subject-body relationships take on an unusual perspective, given the possibilities inherent in virtual cloning. A good example of this are Stelarc's telematic performances, in which the role of technology is to either mask or liberate the subject.

In his well-known Internet-based projects, such as "Fractal Flesh" or "Stimbod", Stelarc proposes that the body be used both as subject and object. The body thus acts as a host to other bodies and remote agents. In his own words: "a body that can extrude its awareness and action into other bodies or bits of bodies in other places. An alternate operational entity that is spatially distributed but electronically connected." (6) His proposal is to transform the body, not in a place of inscription, but in a medium in which remote agents can manifest themselves. This type of activity could also change the very way in which we conceive the Internet. According to Stelarc, it is possible to structure the Internet in such a way that we could scan, select and set up interface connections with online groups of physical agents in real time. The Internet could thus be turned not only into a means of transmission, but also into a "mode of transduction – affecting physical action between bodies. Electronic space as a realm of action, rather than information", concludes Stelarc.

We would thus be talking about a model very close to that of the carnival, in which the body ceases to be a closed and private entity and becomes something open, expansive, public. Bakhtin subscribed to a personal notion of the "corporal whole" and of how its limits were transgressed at carnival time:

during the carnival, the borders between the body and the outside world, and between different bodies, are completely different to those marked by classical and naturalist precepts. This carnivalesque body, this masked body, serves as a metaphor for the body connected to the Internet, given that it places emphasis on the loss of 'natural' identity and – more notably – indicates that it is possible to adopt multiple identities, such as Stelarc's host body. In the carnival, as in cyberperformance, people and their bodies are turned into a field for action, manipulation and transformation.

Here we enter on the final theme concerning the carnival model: the relationship which it makes possible between art and context. Clearly this type of total abandonment, in an environment that is also global and all-enveloping, narrows down the relationship between art and environment: an aim pursued, as we know, by a whole series of artists in this century, particularly from its second half.

One artist who has investigated this connection in a fashion that is particularly *sui generis* has been Helio Oiticica. His work also fits in perfectly with the carnival metaphor and the complex multimedia link between the double contribution of the subject to the process (both as spectator and participant), as well as interpersonal communication, the destabilisation of reality and the function of the mask. His theories and writings on art form part of his artistic output and must be understood as activities which are inseparable from it, consisting as they do of a broader system of creation, a kind of "program in progress". This should eventually lead to a unique artistic system which will reach out and connect at all levels, from object to body, from music to architecture: an "environmental whole" which links the "given" with the "created", nature with culture. Especially interesting regarding this subject are the proposals which Oiticica began to develop at the beginning of the Sixties, and which culminated in a series of different pieces named *Parangolé* (1964). These dealt with dresses, capes or banners which could be worn, danced in, or used to relate to others as well as the environment. The spectator becomes the central figure and, dressed, must "carry out" the work (action) and at the same time must "be" the work (its nucleus). Oiticica regarded *Parangolé* as a "structure-action" requiring direct corporal participation: according to the artist, the act of dressing the work brings about a transmutation of the spectator. "The

creation of the 'cape' does not only involve the consideration of a 'cycle of participation' in the work, that is to say, a 'participation in' and 'dressing of' the work so that it might be seen in its entirety by the spectator, but also involves consideration of the problem in space and time." (7) *Parangolé* thus shows itself to be, at heart, an 'environmental structure' which has a main nucleus: the participator-piece', that divides into 'participator' when it takes part and into 'piece' when it is approached from a point outside the space-time environment. When these participator-piece nuclei relate to each other in a given environment (in an exhibition for example), they create an 'environmental system', *Parangolé*, that can in turn be attended by other participators from outside." (8) Bakhtin said, in reference to the carnival environment, that it was "our world, which suddenly transforms into others' world." In Oiticica's case, the act of dressing the *Parangolé* represents this "location of oneself in" (another reality, environment, etc): acting from within the system in the context of a broader external system, in which other observers also take part.

Logically, Oiticica's next step is directed against existing art systems. In a manifesto put together in June of 1966, he defined his "anti-art" as a complement to the collective need for latent creative activity, which can be motivated in ways determined by the artist: "Current metaphysical, intellectual and aesthetic viewpoints are no longer valid: there is no existing project designed to "raise the spectator to a creative level", to a "meta-reality", or to impose an "idea" or "aesthetic model" which correspond to such artistic concepts; on the contrary, the spectator is simply given an opportunity to participate so that he or she might 'find' something which inspires him or her to create". (9) For Oiticica, an artist's work only has meaning and only become complete when confronted with the viewpoint of each participant, a figure he prefers to call "participator": some things have been foreseen by the artist, but the meaning with which they are imbued derives from the anticipated possibilities to which the spectator gives rise and which emerge thanks to the latter's participation.

Oiticica almost certainly did not know Bakhtin's writings, and even less his theory of carnival. Nevertheless, each proposal fully complements the other. Oiticica has rediscovered elements such as the cape and the dress typical of carnivals, as well as dance and collective public performances, and has

developed his "anti-art system" based on dialectical-social participation (a sign of protest against the system), playful participation (games, environments, appropriations), participation in the environment (public and/or street performances) the creation of a network of collective participation (dressing in disguise and dancing in groups); that is to say, a system of total participation that is not reduced to the simple mechanism of acting or to following an artist's pre-established guidelines. What Oiticica is looking for, in a nutshell, is communication on a grand scale, a system in which people can gain control, generate, experiment and interconnect with each other. Consequently, we are not far from the ideal of the telematic *network*, from its forms of interactivity and the transformation of the user of the network into an active participant.

Parallel to the carnival model, it remains for us to take note of another model, which should not exactly be seen as an alternative, but more as a pragmatic complement when referring specifically to the telematic model. The name of this model is 'Lampsacus', and it is, in effect, a proposal concerning Internet communication and the possible changes in store as far as human relations are concerned. This proposal was formulated by Otto Rössler (10). Now that the Internet is fashionable, countless attempts to comment on how it works and on its potential have mushroomed, resulting in a lot of tiring rhetoric. Despite this, Rössler managed to define the Internet in a few precise words: "The Internet is a bomb". A phrase which he then qualified by saying: "It is a beneficial bomb, a gift. And it shall be called Lampsacus. Lampsacus is the second Internet of the future, the free Internet." (11) Lampsacus will not only become the "birthplace" of everybody connected to it, but will also be the space in which everybody, and all cultures, will enjoy equal rights.

According to Rössler's proposal, Lampsacus should be a vast laser-based training and cultural centre, in which people can access all existing information without exception, be artistic, or enjoy themselves as they please. Lampsacus can be a means of survival and also the means that will guarantee the future of most human beings, especially the young, when threatened by the next war or the next ecological catastrophe. And this is because Lampsacus follows the insubordinate philosophy of "the great artist of the XXI century" – as

Rössler called Ghandi – summed up in the eloquent phrase: "Imagine what would happen if a war began and nobody joined in."

Without a doubt, Lampsacus is an inspired model: given the current period, in which discourses involving freedom are being increasingly discredited – a spacing out from those idealisms which define themselves as a process of breaking away, but which, as Lyotard puts it, "we suspect is more a way of forgetting or suppressing the past, that is to say, of repeating it, than a way of overcoming it" (12) –, close attention must always be paid to any contribution that is intimately related to our immediate condition as social beings. In the increasingly complex, relentless systems that are continually generated by our postindustrial society, altruistic and intelligible solutions – such as Lampsacus – might appear to be a blend of ingenuity, madness and incongruity. In Lyotard's words: "(...) an insistence on simplicity has sprung up everywhere nowadays, like a promise of barbarism." (13) At the present time, the term "Internet" itself begins to have this generic yet ambiguous connotation. As Umberto Eco noted in his book *Apocalypitics and Integrados*, "...if culture is an aristocratic, jealously cultivated, assiduous and solitary action derived from a refined inwardness that is opposed to the vulgarity of the mob (...), the mere idea of a culture shared by all, produced in a way that is adapted to all, and produced as a measure of all, is in itself a monstrous contradiction." (14) It is clear that a model of open telecommunications and the ramification of the Internet could destabilise (as happens in the carnival model) the hierarchical power structure of our society, and, as a consequence, can also subvert cultural elitism, to the extent that it is established as a (cyber)space in which everyone, *in principle*, has equal user status. Thus it will depend, above all – as in the carnival model or the Lampascus model – on the access of all societies to this medium, on a broad, egalitarian basis. Looked at from our current perspective, the possibility of bringing about such a project (or the will to do so) is very remote.

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Notes:

(1) Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984. [Spanish transl. by Julio Forcaat and César Conroy, *La cultura*

popular en la Edad Media y en el Renacimiento. El contexto de François Rabelais, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1987 (4th ed.), 1995.]

(2) Ibid. p. 13.

(3) Ibid. p. 13.

(4) Ibid. p. 11.

(5) Ibid. p. 16.

(6) Stelarc, "Visiones parásitas. Experiencias alternantes, íntimas e involuntarias", in: Claudia Giannetti (ed.). *Ars Telemática. Telecomunicación, Internet y Ciberespacio*. Barcelona, ACC L'Angelot, 1998, p. 132.

(7) Oiticica, "Notas sobre el Parangolé", in: VV.AA. Hélio Oiticica. Barcelona, Fundación Antoni Tàpies, 1992, p. 93.

(8) Ibid. p. 96.

(9) Ibid. p. 100.

(10) Rössler, Otto E., "Una utopía realmente factible", in: *Ars Telemática, op. cit.* pp. 17-18.

(11) Ibid. p. 18.

(12) Lyotard, Jean-François, *La postmodernidad (explicada a los niños)*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1996 (6th ed.), p. 90. (Orig. ed. *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Éditions Galilée, París, 1986.)

(13) Ibid. p. 92.

(14) Eco, Umberto, *Apocalípticos e integrados*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 1995, pp. 27-28. (Orig. ed. *Apocalittici e integrati*, Bompiani Editore, 1965.)