

## MULTI-CHANNEL IDENTITY

What is more difficult than to talk about changes in times of change - and is not the epistemology of our century permeated by concepts of change. The surrealists were among the first to show that our knowledge of the world is just a drop of grease floating on a boiling subconscious. We cling to our conceptions, which are not more than a freeze frame of the infinite tape that is stopped every now and then to throw out images of continuity. As a matter of fact, we are afraid of changes which we anxiously avoid. Even the most experimental artists and the most caustic critiques are hardly ever destructive enough. Not to look out for signposts of endurance and recognition in a universe of infernal parasitism. So big is the fear that we rather take for granted the assumption that the media transfer information like an armoured car-carries banknotes, without doing damage to the sign value. But as silently as the value of the banknotes changes even in the best-guarded safe information changes. Passions turn into misunderstanding on their satellite-transmitted odyssey. TV-stations are defended against unauthorized intruders like banks, which keep the images of the thieves; hundreds of engineers are busy eliminating any possible distortion.

Frankly, we would not need a video-vanguard, were we capable to do away with all these secret services of distrust, were we capable to watch a TV-program the way we watch experimental videos. Who keeps us from switching between French, Italian, Swiss and German channels, to program our own exploration of the electronic image? Why don't we break out into laughter, watching the nightly newsshow? This is not a question of technology, it is not a question of different standards, say, between Secam and Pal. It might be a question of buttons available to be pushed. But these standards have its source in the restriction imposed upon our imagination, which limits our perception to national boundaries, to traditional semiotic strongholds. We would well be able to expose ourselves to all the different informations as we confront ourselves to multi-channel installation. It is not a question of technological capabilities, whether or not and which kind of innovations are carried through, but of priorities determined by an imminent inhibition of imagery within the media itself.

We are not educated or trained to believe our eyes. We believe, what we read and follow the track of the TV-programs, the narration of the script, the teletype lines of the newscast. We are forced to believe that we know what we see, and that we do not see, what we do not know. We prefer to see pictures, before we get to the images: recognition ranges before exploration. Even before we fall victim to, let us say, an internationalized data system that places each and every one of us under control, we already are intimidated by the inhibition of imagery: we are intimidated by our fear to lose ourselves, and this fear is the very first step of depersonalization.

A post-renaissance painting is a picture. A photo is a picture. TV consists of pictures. What is an image? Technology is an image - a metaphor for the process of production of symbols like cars, the hydrogen-bomb, or computers. These are ultimate symbols of our 20th century society, merging fears and desires at the same time. Computers may be supervising robots, they may be humanizing aids. A hydrogen-bomb may be looked at as a death threat as well as a security guarantee. Their meaning remains open to interpretation. But it is impossible to explain these symbols without turning them into images, without transcending the stalemate of rational meaning. An image is something that consists of connections - like "Europe", or the "Artist's world", contradictory within themselves. The technical facilities that make these images perceivable, are secondary, unless we see them as images themselves, as something that can be misused, as something that can be played with in times where everybody keeps serious. You can have images in a ritual, in a novel, or on a video-clip. The machinery - like recorders - does not explain the images it produces, but it explains the production of imagery.

What is special about video, is not the electronic beam, nor is it the projection, we perceive on the screen. In fact, these projections can be determined to be read, rather, than to be seen. What is special, is not even the real-time-factor of immediacy or other such often mentioned qualities of video. The particular thing about video is its subconscious response, something we might call random access to our archetypal semiotic structure, were this structure not void of history and of semiotics. Video imagery contains an analytic quality. Well known to psychoanalysis, and Juan Downey once talked about the fact that people saw things on his tapes. He never produced, or never meant to produce. The new visual technologies contain this quality which lays bare a visionary dimension of language or of communication, and it is not enough, to explain the spreading movie and video culture by economic or cultural dependence.

By analytic qualities I do not refer to those hyperbolic expectations of some video-producers or performers. Who intended to enlighten the public immediately. In fact I would like to draw attention to the lack of immediacy. The more important works expose aesthetic, dramatic, or simulating dimensions, without causing immediate noticeable response. Or quite bluntly: they make you think. These dimensions or let us call them images are not special to video, but they are made conscious, they are made perceivable by video. Of course video-technology plays a part in all these video-productions. If we look at The Vasulka's experiments of image manipulation, of Bill Viola's settings or of Klaus von Bruch's phantasmadocumentarhythm.

Technology is not only present in wipes, sequencing, mixing, colorizing, synthesizing. In many of the tapes technology is a Leitmotiv. Technology, information technology avant tout discovers itself as a metaphor instead of claiming to be an unambiguous representation of reality as does Television. TV transmits pictures without distortions. Video - that is, the same electronic beam - includes distortions as part of the message, and the loss of information of part of the imagery.

On a small scale, so to say, images are playful, far from the order given to the official media by society. The official media are much more obstacles to communication, than a support to the initiation of new relations. Technology is there to be explored - like a multi-faceted image. This is not a question of high or low technology, 1/2 inch or computer graphics. On a big scale imagery has a subversive meaning. Unfortunately I do not know of a similar example as far as TV is concerned, but I should like to refer to the mushrooming of free radio stations in France a few years ago.

An obstacle to any imagery is the respect payed to the reality of the pictures. The stern and obstinate pursuit of truth within the field of media among the critics. But the truth cannot be serious enough, not to be experimented with, the result of which would be the truth of images as compared to an ethic of the letter that distinguishes an event, let's say a plane crash, that happens in our own country, with our own fellow citizens, from one in a remote area, with muslim pilgrims. The images of death. However, are the same, no matter where they originate from, no matter what nationality the victims belong to.

What is identity? Looking into the daily and weekly papers and magazines. I read a lot about therapies. All kinds of therapies, that promise to lead you back to yourself, to confront you with your true self. But where do I find my self. And how do I know that the one I meet will be my self? First of all, there is a culture, post-industrial culture, that feels this lack of identity: too many foreigners in Switzerland, the threat of national downfall in European federal state, saturation of a society that is looking for new desires and so on. The media do their best, to fill this gap, to make up for the loss of identity, to stimulate desires or surrogates for desires, to make up for boredom, to make us feel familiar with a strange world. But what is identity? If Identity is the circulation of the same, if it is the projection of an outer space on a screen, a canvas or photographic paper, identity is an "endangered species". Identity stands for a guarantee that the word - and for that matter, the world, stays the same, like the word of God, carried down from the hill by Moses to the people of Israel; that this word remains the same throughout time and space and all changes of concepts of time and space and throughout all changes of the media, transmitting, handing down this word: manuscripts, word of mouth, books or films, repetitions of the first word, each one of them. In our sense, the medium works like an instrument that distributes a copy of the same letter to all of us. But not only history shows that we see with different eyes each time, even within our own biography. Linguistics have proven that there is no definite meaning to one word or sign, that there is no identity in the true sense of the word. There is more than one God.

The question is, how do we recognize "our" God; where are the witnesses to the original. How do we know that an answer given is an answer to our question. The answer is: there is no guarantee. That is the reason for all the fear of media and computers.

Who do we talk to, who are we considered to be, when there is an outprint of a data-bank? It takes some time to learn the language of the machine, which is a metamorphose of signs and thoughts as well. Empathy is needed: what does the computer do, when I do such and such a thing. On the level of reactions human beings and computers act on the same level.

Our identity has long been questioned. Instead of being looked at as personalities, we are looked at as roles; segments of us circulate as partial objects in mailing list catalogues, in nation statistic records, in the minds of fetishists, in opinion polls. A description of what we are, should list what we eat, what kind of movies we see, what kind of contraceptives we use. During the 19th century authors like Lewis Carroll used the metaphor of the mirror. Some thirty years ago Jacques Lacan discovered that there is a mirror stage in early childhood, when a person perceives itself as one whole body. However, I would suggest that the metaphor of the mirror loses its sense as far as the new media are concerned. A video-image is not to compare with a mirror. A video image, rather, represents, what is going on between us, between our question and the answer, between an information. Put into a system, and the returned message.

There has been a big illusion about immediacy of video and all electronic media, because of speed, which allows for a signal to travel through a hundred devices of an installation without noticeable delay. There has been an illusion of reality, based on Newtonian assumptions of cause and effect, where as information is not based on the principle of cause and effect but of probable and redundancy. The illusion is a fixed picture produced by a constantly moving beam.

Let me come close to the end. Technology changes society, but technology also changes all our standards of change. Our biggest problem is that conceptions like identity, consciousness, truth, morality, reality are conceptions of what we have - and this, too, is a metaphor - left "behind". All these conceptions could be represented in an adequate way, like in perspective painting, or in narrative literature, or in scenic dram. These forms of representation comprehend more than just images, stories or fictions: they define a cosmologic order of outside and inside, of positions, for example in cartesian graphics or of stable time-space relations.

New situations ask for new representations, which do not necessarily re-define old rules, but set up new sets. The function of the artist is, as Gene Youngblood wrote in Expanded Cinema, to create a new language so that old facts appear in a new understanding. How unimportant video art in its separate reality may be, and how short it may live, it will become famous as the representation of a multiply split identity in a society of continuously changing realities.

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