PERSPECTIVE/ PERSPETIVA

The Cybernetic Episteme, Authoritarian Neuropower and the Loss of Reality
O Epistema Cibernético, o Neuropoder Autoritário e a Perda da Realidade

IRMGARD EMMELHAINZ*[1,2]

[1] Independent translator, writer and researcher based in Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico

[2] Editorial board of Scapegoat Journal

"The new ordinary is a collective search engine, not a grammar.
The world not as something we inhabit, but something we see; life not something we live, but something that we have."

Berlant L, Stewart K. The Hundreds. London: Duke University Press; 2019

Nowadays, we access reality through technology and social media. Our experience of the world and others is mediated by our Smartphones, and this means that things are not immediately given in experience, but that we consume technology in order to relate to others and that experience and even perception are individual and completely mediated. The face-to-face encounter has been substituted by screens, which are mirrors that deliver a second self through a portal that enables us to live parallel lives in virtual realms. An extreme example of contemporary forms of mediation, are the fixed digital cameras scattered through the Mayan Riviera Resort, Xcaret called "Xelfie Points". The "Points" blur the distinction between surveillance and tourist cameras, and they were carefully placed to capture the best views of the resort. Whenever a guest encounters them, all they have to do is scan a code with their Smartphones, pose in the designated place, and the perfect photograph will be uploaded to the cloud where hotel guests can later access it and share it in social media. This hyper-mediated experience of the resort translates to a homogenized ready-made image disseminated and consumed in social media.

Mediation as a means to access reality and others, is grounded on the logic of representation, which is a renaissance invention to bring the absent –which can be a memory, someone, or something far away –present. Representation presupposes that you can detach and dislocate something from its site of origin and reproduce or copy it somewhere else. For example, the earliest moving images were prototype engravings of saints –therefore, 'true' images – that traveled in galleons from Europe to Mexico and the Philippines to be copied in religious art. This is the case of the Immaculate Conception at the Agustinian Metztitlan Convent in Mexico, which is painted after the engraving by Flemish artist Hieronymous Wierix.

In the 19th Century, when photography was invented (but was not yet available to all), people would by booklets with "vistas" or postcards from European cities to bring back home with them. Eventually, the experience of the world as mediated through travelling images became massified, grounded on the possibility of detachment and dislocation of things and people, but also on capturing, naming, moving, and archiving images of things and sites themselves. Mediation or simulation as means to access the absent or far away, delivered a sensible order in which that which is produced as artifice, gradually became the reality of experience.

The logic of mediation grounded on the possibility of dislocation and detachment (and thus archiving, capturing, naming, and moving things and people) is grounded on the modern desire for control and mastery. In order for modernism's two core tenets to be fulfilled: humans quest to exercise agency over history, and to pursue their emancipation, the environment had to be mastered them, that is to say: human surroundings had to be made visible and

* Autor Correspondente/Corresponding Author: Irmgard Emmelhainz | iemmel@hotmail.com | 52 Landsdowne Avenue. Toronto, Ontario. M6K 2V8, Canada

intelligible. Therefore, Modernity means the (European, male) quest to investigate and harness the natural world through image-making, science and technology.[1] This quest culminated in the 21st Century with digital computational systems, through which humans have now mastered the world by means of networks, databases, algorithms and simulations. This quest can be called the *cybernetic episteme*. The origin of the cybernetic episteme is the acquisition of experience or knowledge about the world as it is delivered through a technological or aesthetic apparatae and by the inscription of the world through applied mathematics. It also means translating the problem of chaos and uncertainty into a problem of information. Mastering uncertainty occurs by representation and by preserving the memory of the past, which now returns as information to the world.

The digitalization of everything, in other words, is grounded on the modern belief that it is possible to formalize all knowledge, to transform everything that is given in experience into images and data and by giving primacy to vision. In the present era, cybernetics implies the naturalization of "mediated selves" and the reconceptualization of social worlds as information-processing systems. This has given way to a world in which human life on earth is sustained by the overlap of computation and infrastructure, facilitated by digitalization In the computational era, the apparatus has "dematerialized," in the sense that physical and digital space are now interdependent, in as far as computers redefined spatial perception, if you like, amplifying human mind.

The era of computation begins in the early 1980s with the creation of Apple and IBM computers, and in the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated in 1985 for the Centre Georges Pompidou by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput's (director of the Centre de Création Industrielle in Paris).[2] The organizers experimented with the progressive assimilation of technological objects and how they changed human lives. The feeling of novelty was traversed by anxieties brought about new forms of communication and scientific innovation, by the association of immateriality with instability and unmasterability; by the replacement of space by controlled digital space; by the oppositions of vision and hearing (as image and language) and space and time**.** Cultivated synthetic skin, fast food, and the essentials of nutrition for post-industrialized humans, the transformation of aromas and scents into images, the relationship between an architectural blueprint and an actual building, the first clunky IBMs, the absent body, the concentration of human perception into sight, were some of the features of the exhibition. *Les Immatériaux* dealt also with the implications of the informational and digital milieux in terms of dematerialization and the inhuman. Lyotard posited a new ontology based on epistemological and cognitive changes, as the end of a modern relationship to the world based on the domination of matter and the consideration that "everything speaks" to humans. This means that, in so far as we can connect to reality to capture it, translate it, and interpret it, there is no fundamental

difference between data and a phrase, or a phenomenon of displacement in an electromagnetic spectrum and a logical proposition.[2] In other words, in modernity, everything is a message that can be decoded: What does it speak of? How does it speak? What does it speak with? What speaks and what does it speak to?[2]

Differently, in the informational and digital milieux, interaction meant that the human is not the origin or the decoder of a message, but that the human is sometimes the receiver, the referent, the code, or the support of the message. What Lyotard was thinking of, and he called that "the postmodern," was a kind of ontology of the endless transmission and translation of messages to each other. Simulation had overturned modern epistemology, displacing humans as producers of meaning transforming mastery into disorientation and making identities fluid. *Les Immatériaux*, moreover, performed the disappearance of the body both, in the presentation of the objects in the exhibition and in the viewers' experience: the new postmodern body and mind *materialized* in the form of codes, and the visitor was posited as wandering eye with no overall view of the whole, immanently circulating in the space trying to find her way, mapping, through the maze of the exhibition. To sum it up, for Lyotard the postmodern is the decentralization of the human in exchanges of mediatized communication, something that was celebrated but that also caused fear and anxiety. A contemporary instance of the becoming autonomous of language is the DALL-E 2 AI image generator available as Apps, in which robots have become artistic digital creators. Completely bypassing human imagination and skill, machines can create any image conceivable in seconds from text input in a natural language. AI image generation works with two neural networks: the first creates an image and the second judges how close to the real thing the image is, based on examples from the internet.[3]

In retrospect, forty years ago the new technologies meant normalizing novelty and change and their incorporation to a cycle of consumption designed to fulfill the modern ideal of individuality, entrenching the capitalist libidinal drive toward pleasure and rendering effortless the lives of walled-in *jouissant* subjects isolated from the rest of the world. This is the origin of the networked individualist mindset, the desire for capitalism and Apple, and commitment to desiring living within the capitalist world.

By the third decade of the 21st Century, our lives and societies have been transformed by mediation technologies, including the fabric of our social and emotional relationships. Machines and machine-readable communications radically changed the world to the point that, the new normal, according to Hito Steyerl, is not seeing intelligible because information is passed on as a set of signals that cannot be picked up by human senses.[4] In other words, the power to harness the world through the mediation of aesthetics, science and technology, was used to build an increasingly incomprehensible, complex world that we are now struggling to cope with. Human vision and language have gradually changed status to the point that they have

been replaced by filtering, decrypting and pattern recognition. Language, transformed into communication between technological devices, has mutated to a sphere that is isolated from control through techno-biological automatisms making communication opaque, exterminating common sense, and substituting it with redundancy, repetition, prefabricated intimacy and intransitive communication. Meanwhile, reality is burning forests, melting ice caps, air pollution, pandemics, mass migration, gender violence, epidemics of depression and other inflammatory diseases. Yet, real life has been replaced by digital networking, and being together is substituted by machine connection.

Sociologist Sherry Turkle has done empirical research since the 1990s to explore how machines have changed humans and society. In *Alone Together* (2011), she delves into how computers have changed and shaped us. She discovers that the network is with us all the time because we believe in technology's promise to meet our own human vulnerabilities, to offer the illusion of companionship but without the demands of friendship. In other words, technology remade us and our relationships through a newly found intimacy with machines, with the hopes of eliminating solitude. People now come together without speaking to each other, a condition that she describes as "tethered but absent." We use our devices as portals to be connected elsewhere and to get a neurochemical high from it, causing a major empathy crisis, isolating us from each other, cultivating perfect grounds for authoritarianism.

"Immediacy", or the feeling of the immediately given from people or objects, the fact of their existence here and now in a particular way, appears to be secondary and subjective, making that everything that binds and connects us disappears. Our current cybernetized "public" space is the consummation of postmodernism foregrounded by Lyotard's exhibition at the Pompidou: discourse is shattered, truth is indiscernible, and relativism is the new norm.[5] We are losing faith in the possibility of a shared, consensual reality. We lack common narratives that could unite us, because digital communication spreads information creating private spaces with no public,[6] breeding the contemporary form of authoritarianism. Today, authoritarianism is a power formation in which content does not matter. What matters is that content circulates. Populations are no longer commanded but asked to participate. In this simulation of involvement, the "ideology of connection" replaces the idea of social relations, neutralizing the democratic demands for control over our own lives, rights and data. At the same time, through engagement with the platforms, people are being led to passivity.[7]

According to Italian Philosopher Franco Berardi, the digitalization of communication not only has political, economic, communal, or societal consequences. It acts upon the neural plastic potential of the living brain as well. The urban environment sculpts the plasticity our brain but so do the newly conscripted forms of information in the infosphere. As Thomas Metzinger wrote, the Internet has become an integral part in how we model ourselves: we use it for external memory storage, as a cognitive prosthesis

and as emotional self-regulation. Platforms live on through engagement and thus exchange, not of information, but of triggers. In this sense, the ideology of any social media platform makes it easy to misunderstand that what one is doing is highly individualized, and to forget that the platform is set up to enable and disable certain communicative maneuvers, instituting neuropower.

Among other things, under neuropower, the sensible takes shape by giving way to the consumption of content rather than the sharing of meaning, and to the proliferation of cognitive pathologies.

As an apparatus of power, cybernetics operates on working memory by rearranging its contents. That is to say, the new focus of power is not only the false reproduction of the past (which means manipulating an archive as the grounds for authoritarianism), but the reconstitution of the working memory, elaborated by the forebrain in implicit decision--making processes. This means that cybernetics did not mean the humanization of machines as the proliferation of androids, but the surrendering of human consciousness to AI, and thus obedience and predictability. In other words, 21st Century machines have blurred the distinction between artificial and human mind, not because machines can imitate human functions, but because humans have become inert as we are now subject to neuropower.

Neuropower also means that lived reality has incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation: we live within the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality,' centered around individual desire and self-exposure. The entire world is disintegrating into data, as we are gradually lose the capacity to collectively see what is going on in real life.

Dissociated from our environment, alienated from each other, we are oblivious to the challenges that are being posed to us by the destruction of the conditions of possibility of life on the planet: massive extinction and the imminent collapse of the political, social and even industrial and technological systems that sustain human and non--human lives on earth. Instead, cybernetics has produced loneliness, competitive behavior and aggression leading to a massive epidemic of psychic suffering, sadness, impotence and suicide. According to Canadian physician and writer Gabor Maté, dislocation, which is one of the foundations of the cybernetic episteme, implies a loss of connection to self, to others, to a sense of meaning and purpose. It conjures a "being lost" or out of joint (like a dislocated shoulder is from the body). Not only does our individual and social health depend on being together: also, our physical health. Because we are biopsychosocial creatures, Maté argues, the rising loneliness epidemic in Western networked culture is a global and public health crisis. Physical resources and our nervous energies are exhausted; economic growth now means destruction and producing excess and waste, illness and disease. Our current challenge is how to address this mutated environment and consciousness, bearing in mind that the complexity of nature is beyond our reach and understanding, and that the chaotic features of the world are also beyond our ability to harness them.

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