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Fragments of Network Criticism  
By Geert Lovink

"What is good is what is new, in both form and content. A product of the eye, not of mind and habit. What is good forgets whatever form it might have had, and is unexpected." (V.S. Naipaul)

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Media are about archiving. Endless life castings are soon becoming unbearably boring. Nothing anymore happens if cut the feedback to history files. During the entire 20th century the techno-modernist movements have been obsessed with revolutionizing the standards, the computing and storage capacities of the technical media. Engineers were not focussing on how to conserve the cultural heritage which these media are carrying. Technical media are self-referential, specially in its stages of development. The fight over standards and ownership is a passionate one, quite different from regular industries. Why identify with a commercial standard in the first place? If you cannot stand its overload emptiness, stupidity, if you don't like gambling and debating, then stay away from the computer topic. Only very few can treat it as a tool. One never knows if an idea or concept will ever be further implemented. So do not even start looking for a sustainable communication standards. Computers are not made for eternity. Only in fifty years or so we will be able to evaluate the premises and promises of new media, then sunken into the sediments of popular culture. Future generations will look down on our time and think: why did they all use these crap Microsoft products? Why did not they revolt against the stupidity of its interface and the corporate take over of this once so public and open Internet platform? Will anyone understand the holy wars between PC and Mac? No. They will be full of nostalgia about the utopian aspects of our 'universal' machines and the primal Net.

Media, these days, are still partial media, with a promise to reach an ultimate moment of synergy, the medium to end all media. That utopian moment, to invade, and connect all senses has a particularly strong, irrational, mythical drive. WebTV is a current buzzword for this.

Multi-media is a more general term, referring to a general device to see movies, watch TV, listen radio, read books and newspapers, make telephone calls, send e-mails. Will the data reach us via telephone cable, the TV cable, via the ether, via satellites? Will we indeed have seamless bandwidth, eternal conversations? This digital Gesamtkunstwerk' is creating bizarre structures, hilarious failures, crippling interfaces, tragic bankruptcies, brilliant monsters, invisible eyes that will watch over us. It is actually all existing, and already history, driven by ordinary commercial interests. Nothing special about this e-goldrush. What is the driving force behind this Inclination to Synergy? Is it the good old 'claim on an absolute totality' (Kant)? Why this obsession with standards? Who could care less about PC or Mac? It is perhaps just a curiosity, to look into the future, besides the all too human hunger for power and profit. Where is the totalitarian aspect hidden in the architecture of these Gesamtmedia? And what could be its possible negation? Little is yet known of its radical opposition to the digital utopia, except for some forms of fundamentalism. The attitude of indecision has lost its supreme position long ago. Consumer choice rules, the option to reject and boycott certain products is presented as the far more powerful follow-up of voting, the only left weapon of 'civil society' to influence global markets.

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Why there is such a lack of ironical distance in new media? Few can afford to look down on this pumping techno engagement, not being obsessed, overworked, without ruined bodies -- and free of ignorance. Show us your joyful pessimism, supreme neglect, your spiritual wisdom, over all this hollow data trash! Today's neo-luddites are unable to disdainfully detest technology, driven by their apocalyptic chimera. Forget them. Their scientific ecology lacks any outrage. The rage against the Machine will be ignited by proletarianized 'knowledge workers'. A meta-techno intelligensia is on the rise, transcending the primitive social darwinism with its winner-loser and adapt-or-die logic. The organized stupidity of e-commerce will be challenged. Being a 'virtual intellectual' understanding today's tools, working within the Net is not enough. "The concept of intelligensia must not be confused with the notion of intellectuals. Its members think of themselves as united by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceive themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude to life, something like a gospel." (Isaiah Berlin) Sociological categories, such as the intellectual, are dull and static, lacking any style, direction, conspiracy. Active social vectors are essential components, otherwise all network(ed) efforts deteriorate into lifestyle design, and inward fights. We will come up a new elegance and comfort which is openly hostile to the global managerial class, and its New Age cults, necessary to compensate the massive damages caused by their commodity culture. The cultural

studies strategy, to embrace ambivalent feelings towards pop(ular) culture fulfilled its role, and liberated many from rigid and dogmatic anti-positions. But this creative impulse was still operating from within new social movements which have long gone. It crossed borders, to return safely. Today's customized luxury is cheap and predictable, no matter its prize -- and thrives without alternatives. The 80s model of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, as a mysterious, flexible response, could now be stripped of all its lifestyle aspects, and be connected to the technological contradictions and social struggles of 2000 plus.

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The autopoiesis of the new media is exhausting itself in total self-glorification. Regression into an aristocratic *laissez faire*, *laissez passer* gesture of the outsider has its dramatic qualities, but even the snobbish rich and famous can no longer afford non-involvement. The logic of the new has to be abandoned altogether. A first step could be the acceptance of technology being in a phase of permanent revolution (not out of control). The second would be to build in feedback loops on social, political and cultural level regarding the endless repetition of the R&D-introduction-acceptance chain. One day the new itself will be worn out concept.

There is an ultimate moment of synergy: the medium to end all media. In these serious dreams, senses are shortcut, having become suspicious about the eye, ear, nose. They fail to register modern invisible phenomena such as the psyche, electricity, radiation, radio waves, computer data. It is from this real existing discontent that the desire arises to directly connect the body's nervous system. Today's interfaces are too slow, too clumsy, too rational. An example of this common discontent is David Kronenberg's *eXistenZ*, where a slimy biopod gets plugged into the bioport, positioned at the low spinal column. Nothing in this classic VR-genre film reminds of the grey plastic office machines, or their opposites, the decayed, open cyberpunkish gadgets. In *eXistenZ*, the clean modernity of highrises has disappeared altogether. What is left is a freaky universe, a return of medieval environments where US-Westcoast subcultures have gained all but world primacy. Foucault's bio power has finally triumphed over the cold and dead, metallic mechanisms. Kevin Kelly's rules have been followed up: "Move technology to invisibility." His vision to "mimic biology" has literary whiped out the current computer hard- and software culture. As a result of this, relations between the realms of the Real and the Virtual have altered. In the *eXistenZ* computergame *Virtuality* no longer is an archaic or futuristic setting. Instead, the Real gets subverted, implanted by animated game characters, almost indistinguishable from nominal participants. Hyper reality is sold here as the ultimate drug: social, interactive, intelligent. Reality as playground seems to be most addictive, compared to all secondary, escapist phantasies. We don't need

no Disneylands, our existantial Reality TM is weird enough. Where are the de Beauvoirs, Sartres and Camus of the Digital Age now that we need them?

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"They discuss why new money doesn't give to charity. There are nine new-moneyed men sitting in this room, trying to tell they'd rather invest in startups than donate to modern art museums or Unicef. Technology is modern art. Technology will save the world, they say." Wired, 7.07

Are the venture capitalists, young entrepreneurs, lonely coders of Sillicon Valley, obsessed with their first 20 million \$, the only role model for the Network Society? Kevin Kelly's opening sentence says it all: "No one can escape the transforming fire of machines." Technological determinism claims to have history on its side. "The mighty tumble, the once confident are left desperate for guidance, and the nimble are given a chance to prevail." According to Wired 7.07, one in 1000 business plans will finally get enough money to be further developed. It's a "digital gold rush," like the heroic episode at the close of the 19th century. Sudden wealth for a few, based on luck, more than anything else, like today's business plan lottery. This migration was based on the gold standard, which started to thumble a few decades later. But this historical analogy, or prediction, is not what the "Generation Equity" is eager to hear. It is not encouraging to face the fact that all their tiny software applications, after the hype has faded away, profits have been taken and profits been made, will just be a cog in the machine of the Third Order.

Corporate America by now has digested the preachings of Kelly, Peters and Gilder. It has installed its ethernets, intranets, its web servers and e-commerce, and gears up for the next phase: e-business. Concepts, models and technical features have been incorporated, while stripping off redundant libertarian elements. Wired is still brilliant catching this ideology: "Markets should be fair by design, so they don't need regulation or monitoring, democratic (the more participants, the better), and rational. Usage fees should be reasonable and encourage participants to behave in ways that are good for everyone." But then the sad part. Josh Levine, a programmer of on-line stock trading software, "remains unimpressed by the progress toward this ideal marketplace. So far I haven't seen anyone do anything strikingly bold or brave," he says. 'Most are just reacting to the changes that technology forces upon them. Myself included.' Finally, a pragmatic confession of the Digital Situation, from Brooklyn, that is. The Wired Generation is not in such a fortunate situation to face actual developments. It had to cut all ties to 'European' ways of thinking such as negation, critique, deconstruction, scepticism, etc. Until they passed all exits. From there, only one discourse was left: the how-to management sales talk. The road ahead, can

only lead straight into Paradise. Or we might all be struck by the Apocalypse... In the early days, it was enough to project some trends into the future, without any solid analysis of the present. But these days, with the digital revolution well under way, the future is becoming much harder to predict. There is a much more dynamic, complex image, with culture, economics and politics interfering into simplistic, linear out-of-control creed which merely states that "iron and lumber will obey the laws of software." In the case of Kelly's New Rules even the basic reality checks fail. Writing the book in late 1997, early 1998 he manages to blind out all references to the financial crises in South-East Asia, Russia and Brazil. The very cybernetic notion of feedback loops does not even exist. In this child-like vision there is only seamless growth, and some "creative destruction" of old institutions. Reckless, early victories have not resulted into a more sophisticated knowledge of the workings of the global economy. No collapse of Baring Banks, no hedge funds crisis, no Japanese recession.

The global, intangible, interlinked networks lack any awareness of their surroundings. Just self-regulating, self-optimizing swarms, killed in a second by some corporate spray-dose poison, due to failing self-defence mechanisms. What would Nietzsche have thought of the Californian Uebermensch, preaching to embrace the herd?

It could be useful to have a heretic psychology of the virtual class. The lack of 'techno realism' is now turning the sixties generation of computer visionaries into tragic, even schizophrenic figures. On stage, in their publications, on their web sites they have got to praise the non-existing economy, to all costs. They are performing in front of ever growing hoi polloi of 'baby suits', switching to auto-pilot, having lost all idealism. There is no way to express even the slightest doubt -- it might influence the portfolio of you and your friends. The obsessive believe system makes it hard to drop out. There are few renegades when it comes of the New Economy of Silicon Valley, and its spasmodic turnover of start-ups. Richmond can be proud of its dissidents.

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Slogonomics: "One Planet, One Network, One Leader" - Job Opportunity: Mobile Phone Assistant - Reclaim the Net - "In cyberspace no one knows you are an artist" - Nobody Comes Close TM (Firm slogan) - Open Monopolies for an Open Society - After the Culture Clash (book title) - "Virtual companies are paper tigers. In appearance they are fascinating, but in reality they are not so powerful. From a long term point of view, it is not the New Economy but the users who are really powerful" (Genc Greva) - Kybernetik der Tat - "We Want Your Ideas!" - "The Global Province" and Rethorics after Heidegger: "Why do we remain in the Internet?" - Virtual Failures (conference title) - Know Your Wired Enemy - Virtual Empire: its Golden Age, Conceptual Renaissance, Nihilistic Moment.

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It is being said that self-referentiality is a sign of emancipation. Discourse growth within the media context would then be the ability to transform from an applied set of ideas, taken from other disciplines, into a higher set of complex concepts and references. Can we already speak of a General Media Theory? Or have we passed the media age, without proper theory? Perhaps history could answer. Detailed, critical historical studies, going back to the birth time of 'new' media, the period between the two world wars, modernism, the hay days of film, and then the period straight after WW II. We can't have enough of them. And there is still too little known about the early history of the Internet. For many this remains a mythological, pre-historical period, dominated by this one image of the behemoth of the Pentagon (ARPA), mixed with some Kittlerian premisses of military techno-determinism, including its cult of secrecy and paranoia. Since the 1991 Gulfwar 'Paul Virilio' has entered popular culture. Kittler for All: media are of military origin, and nature. But with this theory myth, one will never understand where today's drive towards a synergy of text, sound and (moving) images into one streaming medium is coming from. The dark world of the conspiracy thinkers, such as Thomas Pynchon as his followers, is primarily text based. It can only interpret the mystical world of imagery (of film, tv, etc.) as a secondary distraction. It may therefore be important to develop a civic post historie(s) de media(s), to balance the hermeneutic reading of media, which can only 'lay out' the essence of phenomenon (software, interface etc.) through its roots. Popular use of technology has the power (or ignorance?) to neglect the military logic and twist its given formats, still remaining conscious about the titanic forces, residing within the technologies, which may return one day as an accident. A deep, and widespread knowledge of this accidental nature can help to take the magic away from casting/Sendung, the authoritarian power which attempt to dominate the subject, either through seduction or repression. One day, origins and basic structures will no longer be dominant. Media can grow, and transform into something different, more playful, open, with modular architectures. Breaking the magic spell of meaning and casting will create democratic structures in which truly flat channels prevail.

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It is said that visual arts are playing a creative role in the R&D of the visual languages for human-machine interfaces, shortly before they leave the high tech laboratories. For decades now the paradigm of the interdisciplinary approach, mainly between engineers and visual or media artists, has been promoted, yet remains unfulfilled. This is the actual idealism of the media arts system. It dreams of the fusing of all relevant disciplines, contributing to the fundamental research and development of new technologies. A second Manhattan Project for the (WW III?) computer.

With the aim of nothing less than shaping the final future of mankind, presuming that the quality of communication is determined by the functionality of the bio-adaptor. The utopian interface is a holistic environment in which the body-machine synthesis have reached the highest state of perfection, disposed of all clumsy mechanic and graphic fittings. Here, the artist is seen as the genius, envisaging ways to 'capture' the spiritual world, in a metaphysical attempt to overcome the rather sub-human model of the cyborg with all its heavy glasses, datasuits, touch screens, implants, trace balls, etc. But for the time being even to get rid of keyboard and screen seems not such an easy task. The technology is getting smaller, is still speeding up, but the R&D team remain reluctant to have any outside involvement. The only labs which operate explicitly outside of arts and culture, such as MIT and Xerox Parc, manage to gain some significance. Most of the high end in new media arts is being done outside of industry and remains invisible, excepts for some art shows. They lack continuity. The logical consquence would be to take off the 'art' label altogether, be frank and call it entertainment. But that would question the way of funding and therefor it's legitimation. Electronic arts, incapable of taking a real avant-garde stand, has maneuvered itself in an impossible position. It is neither participating in fundamental research, nor does it have content, compared to 'regular' websites, videos or audio pieces. At best they are form studies, esthetic explorations, in search for a visual language, done by arts students and their teachers. Media arts have been going back and forth between the gallery-museum with their curator-gatekeeper system, and education, with the festivals as a middle ground to present works. Research and commerce have been the exception. With the rise of commercialism media artists these days are no longer needed (skilled people with a conceptual sense, yes). Web design has democratized the landscape rapidly, creating a new class of htm-slaves and pixel pushers. Still, human-machine interface design is stagnating, despite all brilliant concepts. One thing is sure: prices go down. Within these developments, artists no have a special status (if they ever had one...). They can easily slip back into the role of decorators, with Richard Barbrooks figure of the "digital artisan" as a maximum option. But where are the guilds? An on-line, translocal trade union for digital workers is another option. Lose, temporary collaborations, sharing resources within free associations of programmers, designers, critics and organizers could be another. Running websites, servers, (net.)radios, tv-programs or a magazines is yet another. Developing software goes one step further. So does exploiting the hidden gold of content. These are all models to leave the dilema of new media arts behind.

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In today's popular belief systems, it is being said that media have replaced, or at least overruled, politics. On the opposite spectrum, we see the naive idea that politics can be renewed by the active use of (new)

media. But if we just look a bit closer to the relation between specific policies of the nation states, or particular parties regarding to the development of cyberspace over the last ten years, we can see a remarkable influence of the state on the media sector. It is obvious that politicians need to pay a lot of attention towards their mediated image. Who doesn't? There is no need to redefine politics for that reason. The media activists and their concept of the 'image pollution' are just reacting on this tendency. With the spin doctor comes the net.activist. But relations between the political hackers, corporations and state differ from country to country. Specific technology policies generate different media (or net.) cultures. In some places there is a very direct media control, focussing on content and ownership, like in many East European countries, resulting in 'independant' media. In Nordic countries we see a much more subtle, structural approach, whereby the state is influencing cultural parameters, using indirect financing to secure a limited number of 'open' channels. Deregulation of media access has not resulted in actual public access. Nor did it boost innovation. Most companies are not into fundamental research. The corporate world would never have invented the Internet. The time spam to develop such a centennial tres grand project is simple too long. The growing drive to get an immediate return on investment might even slow down the digital revolution on the long term. Today's inventions of Internet startups are fake applications. What is needed are new spaces for reflection and critique, free zones where researchers of all kinds can work without the pressure of sponsors and administrators, free from short term commercial pressure. The same can be said of the 'digital Bauhaus' concepts, which lack any negation of mainstream digital utopia and are hardly different from average photoshop plus HTML-courses.

The computer as a machine will disappear anyway, and will be dispersed into our daily environment. So it be quite an achievement to negate and ignore these devices. I do not blame anyone for anything. Let us overcome this universal protestantism and instead concentrate on the architecture of these new media, now that there is still something to decide. Time is running out. Future generations will look down on our time and think: why did they all use these crap Microsoft products? Why did not they revolt against the supidity of its interface and the corporate take over of this once so public and open Internet platform?

Amsterdam, July 1999

<http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet> (text archive)

<http://www.nettime.org> (list archive)

Isaiah Berlin, Russian Thinkers, London, 1978

Kevin Kelly, New Rules for the New Economy, London, 1998

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