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Portrait of the virtual intellectual
On the design of the public cybersphere

By Geert Lovink

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Much has been said here about the changing role of the artist, the designer and the architect (for example, from Rem Koolhaas) in the age of cybertechnologies. Clearly, aesthetical professions are undergoing profound changes. However, little has been heard in this context of the intellectual. Are intellectuals condemning themselves to manage the vanishing Gutenberg galaxy? Is the whole idea of the intellectual disappearing altogether, as Russell Jacoby's book 'The Last

Intellectual' suggests? Most writers and researchers are by now familiar with the computer as a tool, but this says nothing of the theoretical concepts they may harbour around the internet, multimedia, or hypertext. It is a fashion amongst intellectuals to be sceptical about the so-called 'digital revolution' (who can take those ugly screens seriously anyway?) One perceives a silent wish that with the fading away of the cyber-crazes and net hypes, the technologies themselves will also somehow disappear.

A new distinction between highbrow and lowbrow seems to be in the making. While the 'true devotees' of culture apply themselves to books, opera and painting, the grey, uncivilised classes are to be kept busy with primitive and juvenile 'new' media. The lonely crowds are lured into a state of permanent numbness, resulting in dazed and confused packs of couch potatoes sitting it out in ever lasting zapping-, clicking-, chatting- and surfing-sessions. Digitisation takes command: electronic solitude creates a Cybernetic Waste Land. Included here is a new aristocracy harbouring a deep hatred towards the on-line masses. To rephrase John Carey: "The crowd has taken possession of media which were created by civilisation for the best people". The fooling around with immature, 'beta' media stands in sharp contrast with the "sensual perception of the wholeness of the artwork". The elitist, usually government subsidised/state sanctioned and exportable forms of expressions are slipping into open warfare with vulgar and commercial cyberculture. Even to-day, very few intellectuals are

prepared to take the digital media seriously. While photography, film and video are now accepted art forms, the hyper-commercial, constantly changing software landscape still lacks substantive intellectual and cultural critique. This is the case even within so called 'art and technology' circles, where many established theorists seem to suffer from techno-ennui. Into this field one can either become like a visionary salesperson or assume the role of moaning defender of established art values.

"Paris, where are you, now that we need you?" Who will finally manage to initiate Paul Virilio so that he will give us a more precise, nay, a more radical, interpretation of the social impacts of the new technologies? Who will critique the neo-liberal cyberhallucinations of Pierre Levy and his 'collective intelligence'? Who will finally stop Baudrillard's tragic complaints? Paris -- once the intellectual capital of the world -- seems to have fallen prey to moralistic debates about the 'most favourite victim status' (as in the case of Bosnia). Here we are seeing most clearly what the current crisis of the intellectual is about. The production of attractive role models got us nowhere. The cultural climate has gone into the defensive mode. The growing anxiety is fluid and can take many forms: sometimes xenophobic, sometimes against the European Union, or just against the State in general. Both the emotional and the rational calls for political engagement are melting away, just like all other information. The intellectual as TV personality (for example, Bernard-Henry Levy) seems to be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. The need for spokespeople and experts, producing opinions on a day-to-day basis has become an integral part of the current Society of the Spectacle. But the intellectual of the Media Age should not by definition be identical to the figure of the media personality. What Paris of the nineties (as an example) is showing us is the urgent need of 'media literacy': intellectuals who are aware of their real position within the rapidly expanding media landscapes.

This is partly a generation problem. The generation of the sixties (known in France as "les quadras"), equipped with the Gramscian political definition of the 'organic intellectual' closely tied to the Party and social movements, is now at the height of its power. It has conquered all possible positions and marched into all possible institutions. But there is no one leading anymore. Policy implementation has replaced avantgardism. The Leninist question: SHTO DYALATSH?" (What is to be done) nowadays lacks both subject and object. The 68-generation have become parents, worried by the senseless escapism of their children. Autonomous subcultures (like the 'travellers' in the UK and Germany), though thriving, have become far less visible even when they are not reeling under severe state repression. The remaining political groups seem to have locked themselves in antagonism towards each other and lack the hedonistic, seductive aspects of the rave and drugs culture. Protests against the Euro-policies at the Amsterdam-summit of June 1997, however effective, also illustrated the current crisis in oppositional culture: marches were held both

against unemployment and in favor of a jobless way of life. New issues of protest, voiced by street-ravers, soft-drugs users and art-porn enthusiasts were unable to connect with the 'traditional' forms of contestation of the established (new) order.

Back to the intellectual. Take for example Eduard Said, who still sticks to the old, well known definition of the intellectual. In his 1993 Reith Lectures, 'Representations of the Intellectuals' he insisted that the intellectual is "an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced to being a faceless professional". Said warns of the dangers of specialisation and professionalism and instead favours an amateurism which is "speaking truth to power". Against specific knowledge, Said highlights general concern. The intellectual should be endowed with "a faculty for representing, embodying, and articulating a message to, as well as for, a public". Arguing against rigid sociological class definitions, which define intellectuals solely through their profession, Said turns them into moral agents, defined by their attitude". The intellectual belongs on the same side with the "weak and unrepresented". This requires a "constant alertness" and "steady realism."

This sounds touching and noble, and Said is right when he is stressing that the intellectual and the public are inextricably intertwined. What is missing here is an analysis of the dramatic changes of the public sphere itself. Some cultural pessimists have stated that the public itself has already vanished altogether. The daily reality is that the so-called public domain in the urban realm (for example, streets, squares and parks) is under permanent surveillance and control. More and more of it being privatised. This holds not only true in real, but also in virtual', electronic space.

The essay 'Electronic Civil Disobedience', from American group Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) states that, as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital. Even though the brick monuments of power still stand, the agency that maintains dominance is neither visible nor stable. According to CAE, the only groups that will successfully confront this new form of power are "those that locate the arena of contestation in cyberspace". The methods of civil disobedience, like picket lines, demonstrations and petitions are largely ineffective and empty rituals. With neither spite nor disdain towards the remaining traditional attempts to question the current world system of global capitalism, it should be stated, in public, and as clearly as possible, that "contemporary activism has had very little impact on military and corporate policy."

The same could be said of the intellectual that is still living in the paper world. The days of Foucault's discursive power are over. The system without alternative does not need the magical power of words anymore in order to rule. It is this sense that we are actually witnessing the much-vaunted 'End of Ideology'. The realm of 'ideas' as such is not dangerous or subversive anymore.

Ideology has migrated into other spheres. It morphed itself into software, e-cash, and data.

Rationality successfully besieged religions and all other metaphysical expressions and turned them into pure, cold functionalities. The return of fundamentalisms, nationalisms, regionalisms, etc. is not a serious threat to the New World Order. Benjamin Barber's endless variations on the dialectics between 'McWorld' and 'Jihad' are only expressing temporary, and very marginal, conflicts. These conflicts may be bloody and affect the lives of millions of people, but the current catastrophe zones don't make any impact on the Capitalist Condition. A Black Monday on Wall Street might. The war in Bosnia has not disrupted Western economies, though it proved nearly fatal to Bosnia. This time for sure Sarajevo won't throw us into a world war again. That's it.

Alain Finkelkraut's 'Ode to the Croatian State', Bernard-Henry Levy's use of the Siege of Sarajevo as a stage for his media appearances, or Peter Handke's late and profoundly touristic discovery of the Serbian countryside all marked the end of the intellectual as a public figure with any significant impact. The cynical competition for the 'most favourite victim status' amongst the different ethnic groups made all known methods of outrage and engagement irrelevant overnight. Unlike the days of the Vietnam War, it has become more and more difficult to choose sides. This again is drawing us deeper into a status of passive consumers, bored by the overkill of undistinguishable strains of infotainment. Intellectuals who are only expressing opinions, in the belief that the media-industry (particularly television) still produces common sense content which shapes public opinion, should simply desist -- they should boycott all talkshows and instead engage in fundamental research on the 'state of the media'.

Samuel Huntington, with his 'clash of civilisations', overstresses the role of culture within today's global capitalism. This reflects, in my opinion, wishful thinking about the return of the old style intellectual (or priest) who will have the last say in entire societies. Their will to power is of a highly resentful nature. These conservatives are defending a model of the West which no longer exists. The 'clashes' they are predicting might in fact take place in some decades, when, for example, China will have reached the level of the Western economic powers. Within the current situation, we can only interpret these scenarios as a collective, deeply nostalgic re-hash of ideological, cold war-like conflicts that will not come back.

In fact, the intellectual as opinion leader is slowly losing ground. What we see is the rise of the VI, the Virtual Intellectual. These knowledge workers are thoroughly familiar with the 'virtual condition'. They have also come to terms with the declining power of book culture and the public sphere as we have known it. Before we try to outline the shape and task of this upcoming social category, it might be useful to make a distinction between what I call 'Theory Fiction', and the description of a new sociological phenomena.

In 'Theory Fiction' terms, the virtual intellectual might very well be an 'Unidentified Theoretical Object', a UTO, like the ones we described in Adilkno's Media Archive. We could then compare the VI with categories such as the data dandy, or the human body as 'wetware'. Just as the cyberpunk, or the Generation X slacker, or the computer-nerd, the VI might even leave the realm of literature or theory and enter popular culture in order to vanish again after a while. The power of the VI is a potential one: s/he might turn up as a virtual creature, but could as well remain elusive and never leave the conceptual, beta stage.

We need to examine the context of the emerging VI -- the relationship between the computer-literate intellectual and the hard- and software industry. Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein did so in their remarkable description of the 'virtual class' in their book 'Data Trash' (1994). This emerging class, with its own 'Wired' ideology, might also have its own 'organic' intellectuals. However our VI is more than just a spokesperson for the new media industry and the battalions of 'digital artisans' infeodated to it.

The playful, ironic, and imaginary categories and the critical socio-political analysis of new class formations are two different ways of theory production. In my lecture 'From Speculative Media Theory towards Net Criticism' I contextualized both by putting them in a personal, and at the same time historical, perspective. Here I just want to point out that the virtual intellectual has elements of both: a will to design, to construct the public part of cyberspace, to be 'radically modern', combined with the ability to reflect and criticise the (new) media from all possible perspectives. In both cases it is important to overcome the widespread resentments, cynicism and elitism such a position attracts on the one hand, and over-hyped salestalk on the other. This implies that all forms of technological determinism should be condemned.

What is it that makes this type of intellectual 'virtual'? Like all earlier professions that are now migrating into cyberspace, these new figures will be constituted through their specific mixture of local and global cultures, digitised and non-digitised source material, real and screen-only experiences. The VI is conscious of the limitations of today's texts, without at the same time becoming a servant of the 'empire of images'. Since s/he has been educated in the heritage of the text, the VI now will now be confronted by the problem of the visualisation of ideas. Text-only systems can no longer be auto-poetic. The self-referential tendency of all singular media needs to be corrected and expanded with crosslinks to imagery, audio files and hyper-links -- all embedded in on-line databases. Virtual here also means open, ever changing, in constant contact with other e-writers (and readers), no longer focussed on the closed, hermetic Magnus Opus that defined the 'Age of the Author'. So, on the whole, we may state that the nature

of virtual intellectual a technical one. Unlike its predecessors, s/he is no longer defined through the relation to the political sphere in a classical sense. The 'public sphere' itself will more and more be a product of technical media and lead a true virtual life of its own, no longer connected to places like the coffeehouse, the salon, the boulevard or even the more abstract realm of the newspaper and television discourse. The global capitalist "(wo)man of e-letters" is part of the on-line masses, but does not feel a need to speak on behalf of the internet or some virtual community. The VI also lacks any sentimental drive to represent unprivileged off-line groups. The goal of the democratisation of the media should be the elimination of all forms of mediated representation. We now have the possibility to let people speak for themselves, even if they have little or no bandwidth. Public access to a variety of communication tools and the world-wide support of independent, tactical media might ultimately make the political intellectual redundant.

Thus, the virtual intellectual should be located in the sphere of the negative. Even in the pragmatic work of programming, designing interfaces or the planning of network architecture, the negative should be our starting point. The main threat to a critical praxis nowadays comes from the positive, 'humanistic' intentions, or what Calin Dan the 'dictatorship of good will'. Intellectuals might not so easily commit 'treason' again (Julian Benda, 'The Treason of the Intellectuals', 1927) and might not again be attracted so easily by totalitarian ideologies. But will they be able to resist the current free-market way of thinking, Ignacio Ramonet's now famous "One Idea System"? The majority of the knowledge workers are no longer employees of the State, nor are they be members of the Party. Today's danger is lying in the growing sector of the NGOs and their anti-intellectual pragmatism in the name of the Good, locked in a unholy alliance with the real-time mass media.

Our answer to this will be a gay data nihilism, joyous forms of negativism: resisting all reductive and essentialist strategies, connecting all streams of data from either side of the old and new media, in both real and virtual spaces. Media freedom in this context means leaving the whole media question behind us. It means mixing and sampling the local and the global while flying through our own, selfmade and hybrid data landscapes. And they, just as we, will always remain under construction.

(edited by Patrice Riemens and Linda Wallace)

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