**Truth and the Possibility of the Image under Cybernetics**

Right now, we are dealing with the aftermath of over a year of lockdown, with the sequels of long COVID-19 physically, emotionally and socially. We are yearning for commonality, mutuality, something to share. The last culture that all of us are sharing is not the news as a set of agreed-upon facts, but as disaggregated and constantly refreshable cache of sensation achieved by engaging in digital platforms. How to flee the invasion of borderless images? How to distinguish image and reality, to affirm the opacity of the world, the ambiguity of language? How to resist through presence, embodiment, immediacy, human memory? How to reconfigure the eroticism of the other beyond pornography?

When art became immaterial, which meant that it can be made up of anything, leading to what it is called its “post-medium” condition, reflexivity and medium-specificity in art had migrated to the moving-image. This coincided with the coming into being of Spectacle as the apparatus of control societies, with images becoming capital, moulding subjectivities, desires, social and gender relations. Under this new regime, caracterised by the explosion of visualities, images were ascribed a critical function, different ontologies, tasks and politics, inaugurating the “art as image” regime. In a world devouring itself, exposed to its own systemic, planetary limits, Do the future and the potential for shared meaning reside in the invention of new critical languages? Does the image bear the power to disseminate counter-knowledges, undermine control or open up political imagination through particular strategies of visualization leading to a messianic image of a collective future of emancipation?

Enlightenment philosophy centralized vision grounding an epistemology based on the empirical determination of what is perceptible and cognizable in the world and on what can be translated to mathematical models or represented in images. In this regime, the visible is the true, truth is what is visible, and images are the memory of truth.

In other words, with the Enlightenment, vision became the main tool for research, verification, surveillance and cognition, positing a supposedly objective gaze at the basis of all knowledge. Modern epistemology, as well as liberal democracy are grounded on the belief or trust in the transparency and effectiveness of truth granted by vision.

Transparency however, is an illusion that lead to the double bind of modernity: if an image is truth, then the gaze is an illness and the secular image is a suspicious simulacra. Indeed, one of the dangers of the centralization of vision in our culture has been fascism, which historically led to the irrational mobilization of the masses.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The illness of the gaze, however, can be cured by conferring the image the power to reveal by restoring the capacity to appear and allowing it to become an epiphany announcing a collective future of emancipation. In order to cure the gaze, artists and filmmakers have experimented with different techniques like self-reflexivity or medium specificity, montage, voice and text, deconstruction, etc.

Not long ago, we found ourselves on what Spanish visual theorist described as the third era of the image: the electronic or e-image (this image was preceded by the secularized and mechanically reproduced image and by the spectacular image). According to Brea, the e-image lacks a fixed support and can land in any platform, including the human psyche. Beyond spectacle and the images’ status as a commodity, the e-image is of the order of experience and of the instant, the here and now. Disembodied and ubiquitous, the e-image, as the title of this event conceived by Sara suggests, traps us in a loop in which the future can only repeat the past. The critical potential of the e-image resided in the possibility of conveying meaning by appropriating colonized imaginaries of desire and individuation and instituting an image as the basis of a collective economic and political reorganization of the world. The point of departure of the emancipatory e-image were rhizomatic communities of media producers fulfilling the dream of equal participation producing social and emancipatory imaginaries parting from freedom of expression announcing the advent of different.

Until 2016, cyber-technology had been an alluring heterotopia that promised access to all human knowledge, unlimited exchange, self-expression, democratization, access, participation, opportunities to make money, connectivity, the speeding up of bureaucratic processes and the means for grassroots or popular power to challenge governments and corporations’ mass media power structures. The peak of this cyberutopia is 2010, when social media was given a crucial role in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements. But in 2016, with the involvement of Cambridge Analytica in the US elections that brought Donald Trump to power, our relationship to technology began to shift. We witnessed the worldwide rise of right-wing governments and populist movements supported by what we know as “post-truth,” which is the political use of deconstructed truth.[[2]](#footnote-2) This means that in cybernetized public space, discourse came to be shattered, truth indiscernible, relativism a norm. The public sphere –a bastion for pre-and global democracies, largely materialized in the mass media and cyberspace, began to shatter. Cybernetic leaders (Bibi Netanyahu, Donald Trump, AMLO, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi) started using digital communications to construct their charismatic identity and disseminate populist messages causing deep social and political polarization.

Indeed with cybernetics, politics profoundly mutated: while the speech of minorities and people at the margins was validated and redistributed, individualized propaganda became the order of the day, leading to new forms of intensified racism and polarization. News media, however, now function by monetizing user engagement by driving extreme polarization. This phenomenon has been called “post-journalism” and it means that since mass media outlets have lost publicity revenue, they need to monetize engagement on the internet and they are doing so by generating anger and hatred, usually directed at some other group of people. For many, the news is the way to access the world and rage has become currency.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What we are presently seeing is the formation of a complex form of authoritarianism linked to how digital platforms owned by “The Silicon Six” are giving shape to our realities and social relationships. Under the new authoritarianism, populations are no longer commanded: they are asked to participate, and 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.

After the e-image, which brings only individual revelation, comes the control paradigm of the cybernetic episteme. This implies that our relationship to technology and machines (which are inseparable from capitalism) is now giving shape to how we cognitively understand the world and relate to each other, instituting a new form of control beyond biopower called neuropower. Among other things, under neuropower the sensible takes shape by giving way to the proliferation of cognitive pathologies and to the consumption of content rather than the sharing of meaning. This has radically changed the structure of conscious experience creating a new form of waking consciousness that resembles “a mixture of dreaming, dementia, intoxication, and infantilization.[[4]](#footnote-4) Dissociated from our environment, alienated from each other, we have become oblivious to the challenges that are being posed to humanity by destruction of the conditions of possibility of the sustenance of life on the planet.

As Franco Berardi recently pointed out (on a FB post!), what is at stake is no longer a matter of “truth” or “fake news,” because truth is useless when social subjectivity is not capable of understanding it. Within the context of democracy, truth only has meaning when society has the strength to impose equality and peace. What is truth, moreover, in a regime of absolute speed and attention overload? The task at hand is to collectively elaborate meaning because the speed of the infosphere is taking away the possibility of consciously processing meaning.

To deal critically with neuropower, an anti-luddite critical paradigm has been proposed seeking to make digital technology progressive. This implies to re-program the meta-machine to socialize platforms so the planet’s cognitive workers can have free access to them. So that data and information are de-monetized. In this context, our short-term challenge would be to maintain communication beyond monopolist communication platforms in a sustainable and healthy way. The question that lingers is, How to acknowledge the imminent collapse of Western civilization in a positive way, opposing the transformation of life into data expanding forms of knowledge beyond the brain/reason paradigm that led to the cybernetic episteme?

1. In other words, the double bind of Modernity means that the explosion of visibilities and the centralization of vision bear both the potential for illumination and blindness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maruizzio Ferraris, La posverdad y otros enigmas (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Murtaza Hussain, “How to Understand the Rage Economy” The Intercept February 13, 2021 available online: [https://theintercept.com/2021/02/13/news-rage-economy-postjournalism-andrey mir/?utm\_medium=email&utm\_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter](https://theintercept.com/2021/02/13/news-rage-economy-postjournalism-andrey%20mir/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)