

Radical Medi@crity Berlin 2005

Henk Oosterling (EUR)

(Lecture Transmediale.05 BASICS Berlin, February 5, 2005 Haus der Kulturen der Welt)

Although the emphasis in this conference is on biotechnology, I would like to broaden that perspective a bit and focus on the psycho-technological dispositive 3rd millennium man is conditioned by. To make a short cut: the human condition is mediatized by now to that extent that it is (nearly) impossible to distance ourselves from a media without fallen immediately into another mediatized position. As anti-globalists or better alter-globalists have shown: criticizing the system nowadays means using the very technology that is criticized. In that sense the critique is always already affirming the system. This unwilling collaboration cannot be understood with the modern discourse: if there is no outside any longer, then critique always already means hypocritique. In order to be critical we first and for all need to be hypocritical. Within this same strain of thought I prefer this current condition: radical mediocrity.

What is a medium? Is it hard to imagine a relation to be external to its term, to the relata, the positions or the identities that it connects. From a theological or metaphysical point of view such relationality is not hard to imagine, whether it is identified as the monotheistic God, Aristotle's Unmovable Mover, Adam Smith's invisible hand or its successor: Hegel's ruse of Reason as counterpoint of the World Spirit. Social cohesion has been warranted by these principles that all without exception in Western tradition had been reduced to the principle of Identity. The development of this principle engendered precisely all the dualities and dichotomies that constitute western thought.

We have to make a shortcut. Do not the different genealogies of communication and transport media show us that - at least in retrospect - each medium, after having established a relation, becomes a relation in itself that eventually disconnects its former relata from the reality from which it has been born in order to bind them together in a different way? At a critical point a medium becomes a relation that is external to its relata. And in being external it dictates however without any repressive forces, but - as Foucault showed - by stimulating productive forces.

1. Mind-body-medium

So, let's get back to basics. How basic can we be in analysing man's current state of being? According to me this research starts with a very broad question: How do mind, body and media in the broadest sense of this notion relate? My argument will be partly anthropological, partly ontological. I will analyse man's current human condition in terms of media as an in-between that enables an individual to relate to others, to the world and to himself. My focus will be the medium as an in-between, as an inter, in short: what is its inter-est or in German: its 'Inter-esse'? The English term indicates the ambiguity of the question: its ontological status - this being interested - already implies an ethical and a political position.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Michel Foucault presents the body as an 'intermediary': as a 'medium' that is disciplined by internalising modern discourse of human sciences in disciplining practices (nuclear family, hospital, school, prison as a 'savoir-pouvoir'). The focus of this discipline is a coherent identity or subjectivity.

[CAE: sightmachine]

A medium is not solely a 'thing'. It is materialized knowledge invested in the production of a specific technique or technology, knowledge that is transmitted in educational practices. These practical skills and scientific insights are passed on systematically to next generations that internalize these discourses during their social and cultural education. As such a medium is both theory and practice, *savoir* and *pouvoir*, *Wissen* und *Macht*. To experience the freedom of acceleration or sped up intimacy one needs a car, superficial technical knowledge and a driving license. Rephrased in terms of our information society: a medium implies information and formation, knowledge and education. In Kantian terms: *Erkenntnis* und *Bildung*. Or less quasi-transcendentally formulated: media are aggregates of social interactions. They connect individuals in their own medium specific way, giving coherency, consistency and continuity to social consciousness and therefore to self-consciousness. Identity could therefor be rephrased in terms of coherency, consistency and continuity.

However, Foucault's analysis does not concern information society yet. We have to be more informed and formed than ever. In Homer's time, verses and narratives sensibilized man. But after the implementation of writing these experiences could be transmitted in absence of the experienced narrator and realized and reproduced at any time by every handy reader. Printing transformed knowledge to free-floating information. Nowadays information has become digitalized data that are 'pushed' onto every interface. Our self-experience has shifted from incorporated wisdom via non-corporeal knowledge to freefloating information based on context ridden data.

This intermediary option is taken to its radical consequences by 'techgnostics' like Hans Moravec and the Extropian Max More. Referring to A.I. research they understand the body to be a medium that we can cast away after consciousness has been downloaded and uploaded in another medium. The main question is: is the body really that redundant? More's euphoric transhumanism neglects the more earthly positioning of the complex connection between body and mind. Rejecting the 'ICTheological' scope of More's enlightenment fundamentalism I prefer to focus on the intermediary role of the body in a different way.

In order to elaborate this option another understanding of the Enlightenment is needed. I should need to give a very concise historical sketch of the triple Enlightenment that characterizes the emancipation of the western subject. Triple because rational enlightenment of occidental self-consciousness has always been supplemented by a twofold enlightenment of bodies: a corporeal enlightenment (we became less heavy as a result of acceleration) and visual enlightenment (it became less dark). Next to Voltaire and Kant the heroes of Western Enlightenment are Ford and Edison.

However, I'll leave this analysis aside and concentrate on the paradoxical consequences of our current lightness of being that have become unbearable. By making our bodies transparent, i.e. by regulating and pacifying its subversive forces and intensities, the targets of modern emancipation – autonomy and freedom – are no longer the outcome of independence and distanced reflection. Nowadays western individuals feel free once they are completely immersed in the media. AS Claire And

Srteve already explained these do not only encapsulate them, but are even implanted in their bodies [CAE's **fleshmachine**].

I will qualify this human condition in psycho-technological terms: radical mediocrity.

[In the deconstruction of the modernist mind-body dichotomy other categories are transformed too. Next to enlightenment, subjectivity and autonomy notions as reflexivity, authenticity, and alienation have lost their explanatory impact. These notions have become – as I prefer to label it – *hypocritical*. This hypocritical position is best illustrated by the practices of anti-globalists: in fighting the unjust consequences of globalisation, legitimized by neoliberal marketfundamentalism, the insurgents, as Negri and Hardt call the protesters, nevertheless have to use the very media and tactics of the Empire they want to dismantle. The fact that they recently redefined themselves as alter-globalists at least suggest that this hypocritical practice is not about collaboration in the modernist sense. I'll come back to this later]

2. (Auto) Fundamentalism as radical mediocrity

In his book on modern mythologies from 1957 Roland Barthes describes the jet-man. This pilot, Barthes states, voluntarily becomes one with 'his' machine: in his autonomous struggle for weightlessness the pilot, paradoxically enough, has to place his autonomy in the 'hands' of technology. He subjugates himself to 'his' means and media. Of course, this 'his' is too instrumental a qualification. In order to survive the pilot's faith equals absolute submission to technology. Though he looks like a hero, in his absolute faith in technology-driven functionality he factually is radically mediocre. From a religious point of view his faith in frictionless, but nevertheless mediated mobility is nothing less than 'autofundamentalistic'. The ecstatic auto mobility of the Stealth-bomber pilot, who gave an interview broadcasted after returning from a mission in the First Gulf War of 1990, the ecstatic auto mobility of the Stealth-bomber pilot has this religious tonality. He survived precisely not by thinking. His body thought. Not his reflections but his reflexes were decisive.

[this reminds me of a remark made yesterday in the conference about 'gut-feelings'.

- who's gut feeling (audience, critic or artist)
- discourse and discipline invested reflexes]

Accelerartion and complexification are the keywords to underrstand the recent developments to radical mediocrity. Over the last decades life processes have been sped up. Following the line of argument of Foucault, Deleuze, Virilio and Sloterdijk – but also Agamben – one can easily see that mobilization has become autonomous. In spite of infrastructural immobilizations like traffic-jams, terrorist threats, tsunami's or physical and digital viruses, our mobility has become part of our selves (auto). When freedom still implies self reflectivity, the 'autos', implied in self-consciousness, is externalized by and in the media that connect us to everything else. That is why Sloterdijk compares Kant's transcendental subject with the present automobile subject, the last avatar of Aristotle's Demiurgos: the ultimate self (Greek: autos) mover (Latin: mobilis).

In the meantime, we are hectically busy. Physically travelling around the globe as tourists, traders, terrorists or theorists. Actually we get around, but virtually we stay home, linked by laptops, communicating our presence telematically to others via e-mail, SMS, MSN, MMS or whatever digital data device. Within this mediated mode of being - actual and virtual, local and global at the same time – reflectivity is situated

in the tensional relation between both terms: we are glocal and – to use a term of Derrida - actuvirtual. The same goes for presence and absence. These are no longer oppositions, because in risk society we are continuously anticipating our future presence. Disciplining has its own anticipation, internalized as conscience and normality; camera surveillance has its anticipation in internalizing the eye of the camera. What we are anticipating in the current situation is our datalife: all possible connections of databanks, from our mobilephone, visacard to the irisscan. (Minority report, presentation)

As Peter Sloterdijk in his trilogy *Spheres* rightly states, as a result of the acceleration and complexification history and by implication time, is no longer an issue. The issue is space: sites as dynamic (dis)positions. That may well be one of the reasons why we are able to rewrite our histories into genealogies, as was more than once suggested yesterday in various meetings.

Subjectivity has become a trajectory. It all about roads not roots. Not about roots but about routed rhizomes. Not about id-entity but literally about di-versity. To update Friedrich Nietzsche: modern man is not an individual, but a dividual: a split, cross-eyed person (di-videre) whose life is a contraction of at least two vectors: global and local, virtual and actual, presence and absence, and in the final instance, precisely because of the connectiveness of the medium: private and public.

- privatization of public space: semi-public shopping malls
- publication of the private: weblog, data from digital devices, visa to chips in the well defined upper arms of visitors of discotheques

This counts for both transnational CEO's as it counts for dish antenna and mobile phone owning immigrants and their offspring.

Life of Western individuals has become very mediocre. There are no more heroes anymore. A working class hero was something to be, but now it is an anachronism. We can be heroes just for one day or at least for a Warholian fifteen TV minutes. Even heroism has become mediamatic. Being 'mediocre' in a psycho-technological sense is different from the ideological quality that modern discourses has bestowed on average man and woman. A radically mediocre life differs from an average life that is full of boring routines in need of being counterbalanced by the thrills of visual culture with its entertainment, infotainment and politainment. The fact that the senses of the average TV viewer and festival onlooker are continuously triggered, stimulated and enhanced in order to maximize ratings does not suffice to call him mediocre in a psycho-technological sense.

What this notion addresses is the acknowledged fact that media in the broadest sense - from transport media like planes and cars to communication media as computers and cell phones - are not only ruling (Greek: *kratein*) our daily lives, but moreover determine our deepest needs. Anthropologically spoken the needs of prosumers in information society are no longer reflexive but reflective. That is why freedom, autonomy, responsibility and negatively spoken alienation, even addiction have become such problematic categories. These still presuppose an anthropology that defines man in its fundamental needs: eating, drinking, sheltering, protecting, talking and reproducing himself. But all of these fundamental needs have become reflective. Critically referring to Ulrich Beck, Slavoj Žižek provides an explanation: all consumers' activities - eating, drinking, sex, and amusement - "are increasingly 'colonized' by reflexivity." Philosophically the second modernization of postmodernity - Kant's first (the questioning of the conditions of possibility) has already loosened the link with material reality – has cut loose reality and made every

attempt to fill the gap between need and deed experimental and preliminary. Minding the gap is not about conditions of possibility, but conditions of impossibility. As a result of global reflexivization “even our innermost impetuses ... are more and more experienced as something to be chosen”(TS 336). Dasein has become design. Due to the acceleration and complexification of information and communication processes (IT), and the rationalization of technological competence and performance, we got out of touch with the world and ourselves. The manifestness of our needs and deeds is lost. There are only productive and counter-productive addictions. When this condition is internalized 'mediocrity' gets a psycho-technological quality.

3. Xs4all instead of autonomy: paradoxical freedom.

In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century freedom was gained through collective self-knowledge, that empowered subjects. The will to know, as Michel Foucault extensively argues, produced an inside: modern man's self-consciousness or subjectivity, with Bildung based emancipation as its goal. Emancipation was the result of a class struggle for knowledge, unveiling and dismantling ideological power structures. However, in information society, as Manuel Castells coins out times, knowledge has been fragmented into information. As a result different desires are triggered. Spam creates choices. It makes us want what we could not even imagine. Telling is selling. Information pays off, because it connects. The will to be informed turns modern interiority inside out: We do no longer enjoy knowledge, but sheer access.

Access being the main topic in information society, as Jeremy Rifkin claims, autonomy becomes secondary. Enforcing your own (auto) rules (nomos) on your self – modern subject - is now overruled by the media exposure. Our freedom consists of inventing these instruments for enhanced comfort. But once we start using these media, they take on their own life. Once a car or a cell phone has become an integral part of my social life and as such an inextricable quality of my being, disconnecting feels like cutting off a healthy leg or piercing an well functioning eye or ear. Once the medium has become the message – an experience in itself and no longer an explicit means to an end - refusing auto mobility feels like crippling, blinding or deafening oneself. The impossibility of stopping the ecologically catastrophic impact of massive car use through international cooperation is indicative of this paradoxical logic.

On the level of everyday experience we are confronted with other paradoxes, such as the paradox of freedom. Emancipation and autonomy are related to freedom. I have gained freedom when, as the most famous American song goes, I did it my way. Freedom of speech - or whatever constitutional liberty - cannot be restricted by religious or ideological dogma. Modern man should not be determined by heteronymous powers: church, monarch, capital or non-specifically identifiable, but unmistakably misleading ideas that obscure the individual's autonomy. For the modern subject, so ingeniously constructed by Immanuel Kant in his three critiques, behaviour and thought is always checked by rational reflection.

4. Cultural and political implications of radical mediocrity

What are the consequences that can be derived from the awareness of our radical mediocrity? It goes without saying that the implied problems are immense. But given the specific context of this conference in which the work of CAE is focused upon, I will restrict myself to two aspects:

- 1) cultural pedagogical infrastructure;
- 2) the relation between art and politics.

For both policies the core notion is 'intermediality'. In the USA this notion is more focused on educational projects concerning the influence and use of new technologies¹, while in Europe – and Canada – is broadly used to redefine the interrelations between different artistic practices. Education in media literacy is paired with the artistic experiments based on interdisciplinarity, multimedia and interactivity.

a. remapping radical mediocrity: inter-esse

Is it possible to sketch an affirmative approach to our radical mediocrity? As long as mediocrity is defined by and has to be defended against the allegation of having a negative quality, each approach is bound to fail, because it is measured by standards that still favour unique identity as final aim of our lifestyle.

Self-esteem, based upon acceptance of one's limits more than exploring one's impossibilities, will be the ground for liberty. I'd prefer the more legalist term 'liberty' to the more universalistic notion of freedom.

b. new ethics: from accountability or responsibility

Given the above mentioned primacy of differences over identity the intentional focus should be on the core business – so to speak – of differences, that is: on tensional fields. These fields all have their own scale. It is obvious that the tensional field of the glocal asks for a different awareness than the one sens(a)ble body, although they are interrelated. As to the first one, acknowledging that our orientation should rather be on routes as vectorial orientations than on roots as the origins of a specific culture, a nation, let alone a dynasty.

The paradoxical logic of radical mediocrity – being independently free in being completely dependent - economically boils down to reasoning like: the more we spent, the more we gain. Savings and property are old-fashioned assets; investment and speculation are highly rewarded. Ethically this might mean that in risk society responsibility is no longer an issue. This ethical notion is jurisprudentially recycled in terms of accountability and justifiability.

I already stated that in risk society we are continuously anticipating our future presence. This has consequences for our ethical stance. In information society every contact is secured and insured by a contract. Micro political radical medi@crity as the total in betweenness of self-consciousness is geopolitically mirrored in a free market ideology. Once individual freedom is secured by markets, freedom can only be gained in terms of contracts in the in between world of free enterprise. Neo and ultra liberalism are the politico-economic legitimizations of this geopolitical medi@crity. And, to close the circle by referring to critical voices like Georges Soros and Joseph Stiglitz - or should we say: hypocritical? – market fundamentalism is the hidden 'religious' agenda of the free market ideology. Within this religious perspective freedom of speech is both a market value that is directed by the imperatives of a technocratic flexibility that, being a religious dogma, overrules all other considerations.

c. scaled politics

¹ Ladislaus Semali & Ann Watts Pailliotet, *Intermediality -- The Teacher's Handbook of Critical Media Literacy*,

Every medium has its scale in time and space. Of course, every concrete medium – a car, a mobile phone, a TV set - in space has a certain expansion, and range and over time it will wear out, so it has to be replaced. But as a technological dispositif it also has a spatiotemporal exposure, be it that this can be enhanced and changes over time. After having deconstructed universalism and acknowledged the irreducible quality of the singular, the smallest scale of identity appears to be a tensional field, a difference, a relation that is external to the relata.

Signification is a function of scaled context. If there is an imperative to be formulated it is: “Find the scale of differences the contraction of which constitutes a sense of identity!” Finding your scale also implies drawing the line and abolishing the ideology of scarcity and annihilating negativity as the driving force of desire and by implication of subjectivity.

