

Interactive Integrated Media In the 'Agon' of Convergence

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MIT 3: Television in Transition

The characteristics of contemporary media demonstrate an evolutionary trend through the phenomenon of hybridisation, where text and context reflect the juxtaposition of 'classic' media and 'digital' media, creating not just hybrids, but a process of convergence.

The paper will analyse how contemporary media hybrids are shaping a new aesthetic based upon a materialistic and deterministic use of new technology. It will also evidence how the use of media in a multi-layered context creates phenomena of 'emergence'. These are based on a complexity theory system and are unpredictable because they originate from a causal agent that, in the contemporary media context, generates a complex and unpredictable chain of actions and reactions: the 'autonomous oeuvre'.

In this media structure, extrapolated from the ordinary life of human beings, the media product seems to have acquired an independent life. This is partly expressed as manipulation and repetition of the simulacral representation, and partly as phenomena of hybridization in software and content, which tend to generate, within the technological avant-garde, what Duchamp defined as the 'antimachine' approach.¹ Antimachine being a misuse of technology to deliver a different content or invert its functions.

Of great interest in this framework is the analysis of the shifting plateaus of Deleuze and Guattari, in which the language as a medium is the ever-changing constant.

'That is why Pasolini demonstrated that the essential thing, precisely in free indirect discourse, is to be found neither in language A, nor in language B, but "in language X, which is none other than language A in the actual process of becoming language B." There is a universal figure of minoritarian consciousness as the becoming of everybody, and that becoming is creation.'²

This paper, therefore, will discuss the implications of Gould's evolutionary theory and its application to hybridization and convergence in contemporary media. In this context the 'Technological Bauhaus' will represent a third order of media which is not simply given by the sum of A plus B, but by the new category 'X' in its process of becoming.

In this context X is a new media with its own aesthetic, creative input and elements, which are an original combination of diverse parts, not necessarily different and divergent from the progenitor parts. The technological element in the creation of the

codified aesthetic becomes a determinant in order to understand the aesthetic of convergence.

‘Though much journalism praises verisimilitude in fantastic scenarios (generally intending that the computer animation looks more like the old, hand-crafted animations of Chuck Jones and Tex Avery), for the algorithmists, the engineering is inseparable from the art, in that sense extending the trajectory from Russian and Bauhaus constructivism (in which Eisenstein holds an honoured place) rather than the anti-realist avant-garde of the autonomous signifier.’³

The contrast evidenced by Cubitt seems to be related to a constructivism conceived as an autonomous process based on the algorithmic re-engineering of a postmodern fragmented structure.

This deterministic approach, which conditions the media and media’s applications, also conditions the aesthetic. This is explained by Gombrich in his description of the collections of recipes from Jean le Begue, who borrowed it from an earlier manuscript by one Johannes Alcherius in 1431.⁴

In the contemporary technological context, the media convergence becomes a source of homologation in as it homologates the technology and its parts, consequently homologating the aesthetic, the approaches and the formats in which the new media can be expressed. These concepts are resumed by Gould, who raises a series of questions in the field of evolutionary theory, which could also be relevant for the field of media studies.

The concepts of homology and homogeny, retraced to their Greek etymology of *σμός-λογος* and *σμός-γένος*, can be used to evidence the media system’s process of transition from one aesthetic language to another, identifying the medium X as the evolutionary adapted product of a set of constrictions.

If a phenomenon of convergence is envisaged, with it also is expressed the concept of hybridisation and therefore of evolution. It becomes determinant then to understand some of the problems which may affect the evolution of the media using categories borrowed from evolutionary theory.

In the contemporary technological media structures the formats, i.e. TV, Radio, Cinema and Internet, having abandoned their structured framework, become open fields of convergence, which require new rules and approaches in a structure of merging technologies and integrated media. In this new structure, interactivity is not a phenomenon happening between audiences and formats produced by programmers, but is an interaction between media. The concept of the ‘autonomous signifier’ and the consequent theory of ‘open work’ developed by Eco, seem to have become obsolete. The concept of an ‘autonomous oeuvre’, therefore, becomes a reality when TV, Radio, Cinema and Internet are interacting amongst themselves, leaving the audience in a preformatted pervasive environment.

‘...All dramatizing apart, we have to ask what it is protecting us from, what kind of escape route it represents from an even worse evil (rational stupefaction, normative sociability, universal regimentation). We may say the same of terrorism: isn’t its secondary, reactionary, abreactional violence protecting us from an epidemic of consensus, from a growing political leukaemia and deliquescence, and the invisible transparency of the State? Everything is ambiguous and reversible. After all, it is by neurosis that man protects himself most effectively from madness. In this sense, AIDS is not a punishment from on high; it might rather be a defensive emotional reaction of the species against the danger of a total promiscuity, a total loss of identity in the proliferation and acceleration of the networks.’⁵

Baudrillard’s approach becomes just a dramatization of contemporary media structure. In fact he sees this structure as a media in-volutionary process of convergence with the deconstruction of text, context and meaning into the form of primeval Chaos, which he defines as the ‘implosion’ of our society.

But the proliferation and acceleration of the networks generate a new multilayered presence and entity, which is formed by simultaneous ‘existence’ on different media. The in-personification of ‘I’ self into multiple media technologies.

In this context the interactive integrated media are a new media structure that has a multiplicity of forms and codes interacting within a superseding structured content. These formats for old and new cross-platform media will be constructed in a single content producer, which assumes the amorphous characteristic of a meta-medium.

The production of content is multileveled, multilayered, and omnipresent. It is a permanent TV show of our reality expressed through the living existence, whilst the reality will be relegated to an ephemeral experience constrained in the virtual domain.

If this is the envisaged possibility of a future development of the media, where the nature of the ‘reality show’, the ‘dramatic reality’ or the representation of our selves is a continuous display on continuous displays, then the alternative lies in the intervention onto and into the technology, which is bound to shift between a total rejection or a total immersion.

‘Similarly, new media artist, including digital film-makers, should systematically explore the aesthetic possibilities of all aspects of a user’s experience with a computer, this key experience of modern life: the dynamic windows of GUI, search engines, databases, navigable spaces, spreadsheets, online chats, e-mail, and so on.’⁶

If Manovich aptly evidences the importance of this new aesthetic recognition process, he does not evidence the necessity for a non reduction of the artist’s practice to digitalization: a simple transfer of the aesthetic into the dynamic windows of GUI, search engines, databases, navigable spaces, spreadsheets, online chats, e-mail, and so on. The

artist's practice has to be not a representation of old structures but has to be based on the creation of new aesthetic content in the new context.

Certainly the linear concept of $A+B=C$ has been changed and the analysis of Pasolini, Deleuze, Eco, and Baudrillard, confirm that $A+B=X$. This has not meant the disappearance of the aesthetic, but a generative matrix, which, based on the use of old media-specific narratives, is interconnected. It creates a set of new narratives recomposed in the meta-language, constituted of visible and invisible technology, visual and textual, real and virtual. The new media hybrids are recreating the painting, sculptural and poetic language into the space allocated by different media: the electronic and the digital.

An example of this hybridization of communicating spaces is the video *Steps* directed by the Polish born filmmaker Zbigniew Rybczynski in 1987.

'Rybczynski connects three generations of fake reality technologies: analog, electronic and digital. He also reminds us [...] the possibilities of montage that continue to be explored and expanded by electronic and digital media. [...] At the same time, he emphasizes the artificiality of this space by contrasting the color video images of the tourists with the original grainy black and with Eisenstein's footage. [...] A "film look" is juxtaposed with "video look," color is juxtaposed with black and white, the "presentness" of video is juxtaposed with the "always already" of film.'

What is evidenced by Rybczynski's video is the aesthetic discourse which is not 'homologous' in the transfer from its original medium to the electronic or digital media. It preserves its characteristics and originality, which added to the other aesthetic 'λογος' generates a multi-voice structure: multi-λογος.

An example of an aesthetic multilevel discourse is presented in *The Tears of a Black Tiger*,⁸ a movie in which the meeting of film genres, mixed in an improbable combination and interpreted by Thai actors, delivers successfully the most kitsch popular aesthetic form of entertainment.

But if the materiality of the media were homogenous and with an homologous content, the concept of copy and clone would be the extreme end result. In this context the same text, visual or verbal, would be represented as the same in every genetic component.

These phenomena, if ever possible, would generate a reduction to total sameness but not an implosive collapse. We would be, in fact, in the presence of a macroevolutionary theory applied to the field of media, where the process of homologation is based on the homogenous and the homologous of the media structures as well as of the physical and social constraints. If everything is the same, then all is the same. This would exclude any form of transformation, process or evolution. A condition, which Baudrillard himself rejects in his analysis.

'The same ambiguity is operative in cloning: it is at once the triumph of a controlling hypothesis, that of the code and of genetic information, and an eccentric distortion that

destroys its coherence. Besides, it is probable (but this is left to a future story) that even the “clonic twin” will never be identical to its progenitor, will never be the same, if only because it will have had another before it. It will never be “just like what the genetic code in itself would have changed it to.” Millions of interferences will make of it, despite everything, a different being, who will have the very same blue eyes of its father, which is not new.⁹

The process of convergence is more similar to a process of translatability than the imagined one size fits all ‘telebox’. The originality of the medium and its aesthetic is left untouched in the transfer, as Curtis and Le Grice declared when speaking of the recent exhibition at the Tate.¹⁰ It is almost impossible to perceive the difference between the digital re-presentation of film and the original filmic representation, when the fidelity to the latter is total: until the last scratch and crackling ‘noise’.

The fidelity of representation is not a substitution, but a translation, transposition from one locus to another: from the organic disappearance of celluloid film to the preservation locus. This preservation is the key to the repetition of the experience.

Certainly it is more than that, it is the process of a continuation of an aesthetic language in a different locus: the electronic and digital space. In this new space the existence of a re-generative process allows either the ‘brilliant’ interplay of Rybczynski, as Manovich describes it or the ‘de-generative’ process described by Baudrillard.

An alternative to the ‘either/or’ process is the ‘and/or’, switching from a mutually exclusive proposition to a mutually combinatory and self preserving formula. The possibility of the electronic and digital convergence allows, in the field of content, the preservation of the original in isolation. It allows as well the matrix of its genetic structure recombined in an innovative form or mixed with either structures in a new visual product, X.

In this context of a combinatory evolutionary aesthetic process, the commonalities in the aesthetic, the phenomenon called homogenization, are attributed by some to the media technology, which instead appear to respond to ‘homogenous and homologous’ social and biological constraint factors.

In this respect it helps to recall the analysis of Baudrillard who, referring in particular to the meaning in a globalized visual context, states: ‘Today, it happens at the bottom, by a neutralization of values due to their proliferation and indefinite extension. This is how it is with human rights, democracy, etc. Their expansion corresponds to their weakest definition, their maximum entropy. Degree Xerox of value.’¹¹

The loss of meaning and the simulacra are seen as the resulting process of access, whilst they appear to be a ‘diminished’ content, diminished since inception into the technological process.

‘In one sense, this is to say that the software mechanism needed for mediating interaction and participation should editorialise only to the extent that they represent the wishes of the participants in good faith.’¹²

This process is better explained by Willemsen who writes: ‘Similarly, the BBC has taken to commissioning raw footage from “independent” film-makers, with the BBC staff reserving to themselves exclusively the right to select and shape the harvested images and sound into broadcastable commodities.’¹³

In England the reduction to a minimum common denominator has been seen as the easiest achievement for the masses. In a patronizing structure the “dumbing down” policy has become a self reassuring acritical expression for a “damming down” of the structures of society. This is presented as a media convergence of content to achieve standardization and homogenization in a globalized system.

‘The globalization of trade puts an end to the universality of values. It is the triumph of *la pensée unique* over universal thought.’¹⁴



Figure 1 *Fun in the Desert*, video project, Lanfranco Aceti, 2003.

In looking at the advertising image¹⁵ in Fig. 1 it seems that the hypothesis of Baudrillard is correct and with the disappearance of values, we are assisting at the disappearance of ethics and morality. It seems that we live in a society where the money of a ‘war economy’ as a source of wealth does not have ethical implications and is not bound to have repercussions from the abandonment of any negotiation with the real.

The resentment derived from the breaking of the moral and ethical code severs the social contract’s ties sometimes with consequences, which are all but unpredictable.



Figure 2 Text message notifying termination.

The news report¹⁶ of people ransacking their offices and charging company’s credit cards after having not been paid

for more than a month and being fired with a text message speaks volumes of the heights reached by contemporary civilization.

In this framework the abandonment of the 'universal thought' for 'la pensée unique' raises the issue of interpretation and emergence related to the "presence of the media object": which is related to the homogeneity and/or homology of the media itself. The distinction between the two concepts becomes the element that may permit a distinction between phenomena of emergence in the aesthetic and digital structure of media interaction. It is also important to evidence that the absence of 'la pensée unique' is negated by the presence of phenomena of emergence which, diverse and unpredictable, represent still the diversity of cultures and individuals.

In England, Big Brother could be considered the first example of pervasive media at national level. People would go online during working hours to view the contestants and check news updates about them. They could get messages on their cell phones for immediate information. Then they would go home and read the newspaper for reports in depth and finally watch the show.

The sponsoring of a reality TV show has moved into the sponsoring of a reality event, which far from being limited to entertainment is pervading any form of reality obliging a tele-technological gaze. In this context entertainment has been reduced to an imitation of reality events in *The Truman Show*.

Dreyfus describes this phenomenon. 'We see that the reality mediated by this tele-technology can always be called into question. Indeed, scepticism is increasingly reasonable in the face of the growing variety of illusions and tele-experiences now available.'¹⁷

In this context war itself has become as glossed as a fashion magazine, mediated for virtual consumption, and has lost referential and indexicality. The drama of reality has become the reality TV show¹⁸ to choose the new ruler of Iraq.

But we can't be sure that the fighters on the ground and their fights are real. The BBC has been working on a show for two years with a working title of "Fight-Box".¹⁹ It's basically a video game in which people can create their own avatar regardless of whether it is real. They will be fighting each other online, and the winners will end up on the TV show. It is a video game that will be translated to TV.

Will then the 'immaculate' war be the next interactive reality show? And if my army of avatars wins, do I get a million dollars? It is an intriguing concept, considering that it may be representing the projection of people who are actually fighting on the ground. In this context we would have a convergence of the meaning of the virtual and of the real, where a virtual death would be a real death and a real death would be a loss of an avatar warrior.

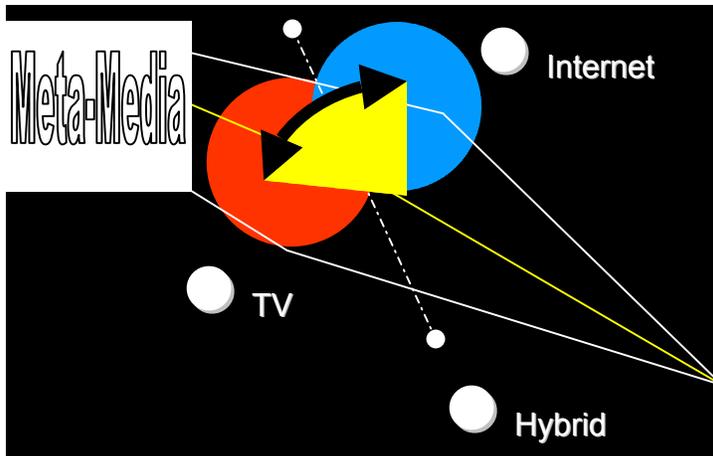


Figure 3 Representation of a meta-media structure with two media generating a hybrid.

The graphic in Fig. 3 shows that the relationship between the media is more complicated than expected. The hybrid has a specialized audience and the more convergent the two systems are in the hybridization process, the less the variety of interaction between the two originating systems.

The new audience created is the projection of a specialized system, which has to develop and either substitute or coexist with the previous order of media.

The radio has not disappeared and is part of our lives as much as cinema and television: they have a different genetic structure and their field of interaction, either due to content or social constriction may enlarge and shrink, but these media have not gone extinct.

Different is the relationship to the DVD or VHS tape: they are transferring and homologating means: the film, music concert, theatrical, videogame experience is extrapolated from its context and visualised on the television or computer screen.

Of course the difference in the aesthetic visualisation of the video content through VHS and DVD allows a different quality in the images and their aesthetic impact. Their role is primarily linked to the transfer of experience from one medium to the other, rather than generating the experience itself by setting both text and context in a convergent hardware tool.

VHS technology initially was linked to the problem of transfer and not to the creation of a new video aesthetic experience with its visual language. The transfer had a direction that went from the cinematic to the televisual. The video aesthetic was developed later in the avant-garde analysis of the medium; particularly interesting in the field are the contributions of Steina and Woody Vasulka, Nam June Paik and Bill Viola.

‘Like painters involved with the contents of their palette, these innovators probed the video medium in much the same way that abstract artists or colorists did. Distinguishing themselves from the electrical engineers of commercial television, they were interested in the mechanisms of video as they function artistically, not how they can enhance the

transmission of images of a commercial product. In a sense the Vasulkas embody the notion that video art was to television what studio painting was to early forms of drawn or painted advertising.²⁰

In this context of analogical relationships between media it is relevant to evidence how Gould in evolutionary theory, speaking of Lankester, pinpoints that the latter, in order to distinguish his newly formulated concept of homoplasy from the older notion of analogy, presents a broad definition of homoplasy that includes independent evolution by convergence.

‘Homoplasy includes all cases of close resemblances of form which are not traceable to homogeneity, all *details* of agreement not homogenous, in structures which are broadly homogenous, *as well as in structures having no genetic affinity*.’²¹

This concept, translated in the media context and in particular in the analysis of the analogical relationship between ‘fine art’ and ‘mainstream’, introduces the necessity to experiment and apply the category of homology to the field of media evolution.

‘This idea that we can assert a form of homology between two parts (in two organisms) because both express the same general archetype, rather than because one part can be designated as the “same” as the other part (as in special homology), does not translate by a similar criterion of descent from common ancestry because, as Owen noted, general homology records a “higher relation”.’²²

The higher relation in the field of media, according to Popper, is evidenced by the history of its development.

‘In order to comprehend how the new technologies fit into the context of Video Art, one should keep in mind that certain notions, like hybridization, metamorphosis, immediacy or interactivity, have already been dealt with in other contexts in terms of the techniques of the 1960s and ‘70s.’²³

This pre-existence of notion, or repetition of issue and concerns, is aptly evidenced in this passage reported by Gould.

‘In his Platonic perspective, Owen called this common source an archetype. We would identify such a generating source as a developmental constraint from the historical vertex of the aptive triangle – perhaps arising from homologous genes or homologous developmental pathways in the two separated lineages.’²⁴

In this context it becomes cogent to apply a similar discourse in the field of media where $\sigma\acute{\mu}\acute{o}\varsigma\text{-}\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ and $\sigma\acute{\mu}\acute{o}\varsigma\text{-}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ represent respectively the homologous aesthetic discourse and the homogenous ‘genetic’ structure.

This analysis would allow a process of convergence to happen in the field of media at two different levels: the aesthetic and the structural. This introduces a perspective of the

meta-media structures not just as hardware phenomena but also as social and/or biological constraints and archetypes.

In this framework fig.4 and fig.5 show that the structure of the meta-media, in order to exist, is based on the highest differential between media and not on the concept of convergence as merging of media.

It is an overarching structure which, based on software and hardware connectivity as well as content production, saves media specificity and fosters levels of hybridisation not in the structural format of the media themselves but in the 'connecting' structural elements. This connection may also happen just at a conceptual level and be realised at the content level.

Therefore a media convergence, interpreted as a merging of media into one single structural component, is a limitation to the meta-media structure which would achieve a new audience in the level of convergence point 'alpha', which would not necessarily be constituted by the sum of a + b, but it could be given by the % of a + the % b.

These percentages would not achieve a new media system where the sum of the components will be more than the sum of each originating medium.

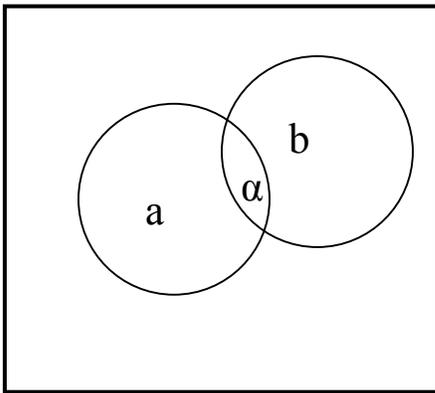


Figure 4 A percentual media convergence.

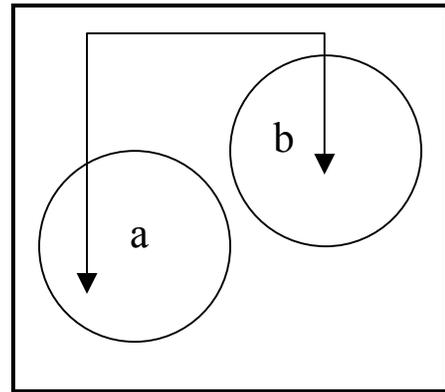


Figure 5 A Meta-media convergence.

Fig. 5 shows a group of separate audiences, with their media specificity, where it is possible for them to switch from one medium to another, in order to experience the diversity of the aesthetic language, which according to Baudrillard has the characteristics, in contemporary society, of an homologated 'σμός-λογος'.

But this hypothesis seems to be contradicted by the realities of the new media structure, which instead of fostering an homologated discourse, allows national and international presence and relevance to topics which could be otherwise relegated to the shadow of history.

One interesting contemporary topic to evidence this argument is the stream of news on the 'weapons of mass destruction' also called WMD.

The on line website of The Guardian, an English daily, has a series of links to ‘A Memorial to Those Who Died In the 2003 War.’²⁵ Internet memorial realised in a shorter time than that of Cassino, which took almost 60 years to achieve a final presence on the public eye for what has been considered by some historians as war crime, the destruction of the abbey of Monte Cassino during World War II in Italy.²⁶

The process of enlisting and recovering the memory and the witnesses of the 2003 War has happened almost immediately in the British press, which reported violations to human rights, giving relevance to the issue through newspapers, TV and Internet.

Weblogs have flourished on the Internet and other forms of expression have captured the collective imaginary.

From the academic concerns expressed by Jeffrey Sachs in the Economist with the article ‘Weapons of mass salvation’²⁷, to the satiric images of the Western administrations sent on the internet and video mobile phones.

Interestingly enough the critique which would have been reserved to the historians in a long academically debated discourse is now trashed into the gossip of the ‘fame’ where the true and untrue, equally mixed, appear to debase and undermine the debate.

It is probably in the forgotten difference between everlasting glory, symbolized by the laurel apollonian tree, and the ‘Fame’, the monstrous daughter of Gaia.

An example is the literary description of the ‘Fame’ by Virgil, which seems to resume the present stage in the process of the media. They look like and behave like the ‘Fame’, a loose entanglement of eyes, mouths and tongues. But the problem does not lie with the media structure per se but with the masses participating in it.

‘A monstrous phantom, horrible and vast.
As many plumes as raise her lofty flight,
So many piercing eyes enlarge her sight;
Millions of opening mouths to Fame belong,
And ev'ry mouth is furnish'd with a tongue,
And round with list'ning ears the flying plague is hung.
She fills the peaceful universe with cries;
No slumbers ever close her wakeful eyes;
By day, from lofty tow'rs her head she shews,
And spreads thro' trembling crowds disastrous news;
With court informers haunts, and royal spies;
Things done relates, not done she feigns, and mingles truth with
lies.’²⁸

The lies that the ‘Fame’ spreads are the lies that were fed to her, as well as the truths, and she mixes them, so that it is impossible to distinguish true from false. And if this becomes

a phenomenological problem, it is interesting to note that the 'Fame' can change her course and her story flying over past steps, past truths and past lies.

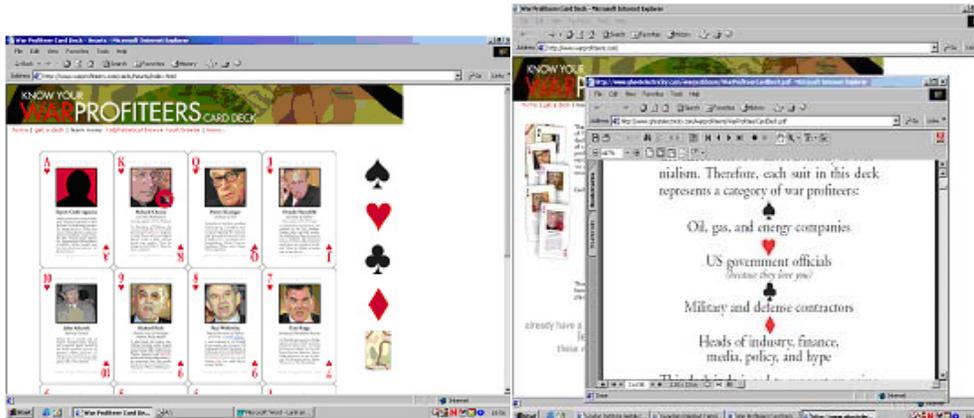


Figure 6 Two images of the website WarProfiteers.com offering for sale sets of cards.

An exemplification of this discourse is the media use of the set of cards to associate 'Iraq most wanted' with card symbols. In 'Cards on the Table' Duncan Campbell writes: 'It started with Iraq's 55 "most wanted" and now the deck of cards idea has caught on across the political spectrum.' And he also explains: 'Other decks have also been popping up both in cyber form on the internet and for sale. One deck entitled the Bush Regime Playing Cards features the president, vice-president Dick Cheney, defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld and adviser Karl Rove as the aces. John Ashcroft, the attorney general and the departing press secretary, Ari Fleischer, are two of the Kings. Those in this deck are said to be "wanted for taking the country to war under false pretences, eviscerating democracy and strangling civil rights".'²⁹

In this multimedia structure the request of an intelligent debate, an illuminate understanding, issued from the same people who have fostered in the masses a non-competent or, according to some analysts a propaganda debate, falls, as yet another meaningless message, into the void. The destruction and distrust embedded into the social structure is here to stay and the calls to reason by politicians don't seem to have effect because they are faced by the inefficiency of the resolution. The cathartic experience has not been delivered, no WMD have been found yet.

If the blurring between reality and fantasy is enforced to achieve an objective, to develop a plot, then the resolution of the narrative structure is in the delivery of the objective and in the conclusion of the movie. In this case the traumatic presence of WMD was the cathartic element of a Hollywood action kitsch plot.

The viewer, entertained, has now followed the war and the demise of Evil but needs to feel the sense of remuneration for its own active participation, the sense of safety and self-righteousness derived from the discovery of the unearthly risk which has been avoided. The 'Veni, Vidi, Vici' sequence has been broken into the Vidi, in a society bred on the phenomena of spectacle and entertainment with the 'Vici' as televised teleology.

The delusion is similar to the viewer who suddenly, in the middle of an action movie, discovers that the director has placed avant-garde images that require the viewer himself to participate and think!!! Or worse a movie where *Rambo*, interpreted by Sylvester Stallone, runs away with the Vietnamese soldier to get in touch with his inner femininity.

The fact is that the viewer will feel surprise (where is the movie I was here to see – ergo the weapons of mass destruction), anger (I didn't pay for this – the real and virtual shows), resentment (being tricked by the spinning/marketing exercise).

This resentment felt by the audience could generate a different kind of interactive media programme, where different media are contemporaneously and efficiently used to affect the unpleasantness of the 'virtual society' experience. The result is that after having trained the masses to push a button and vote people out, it may be hard to explain to them the subtle nuance that politicians are outside their reach and what they think of as entertainment is actually reality.

The result is that after having named the next ruler of Iraq on a TV show, the next successful TV show could focus on the search for the missing WMD.

This is an interactive show, which people are playing independently from the big networks on the Internet, mobile phones, email messages and advertising boards with more and quite often less polite jokes and images on the Blair administration.



Figure 7 The Economist, June 2003.



Figure 8 Easyjet.com, advertising, London, June 2003.

There is also an artistic example with the mock postage stamp series of images censored by the Royal Mail in the United Kingdom, as reported in *The Guardian*³⁰, exhibited by James Cauty titled *Black Smoke, Stamps of Mass Destruction*.



Figure 9 James Cauty's series of prints entitled *Black Smoke, Stamps of Mass Destruction*.

These images which are shown are embedded into the mainstream and are certainly not part of an isolated and politically suspect minority. They show a phenomenon based on content that re-bounds through different levels of society and media.

Far from being a political analysis, this is an attempt to show that the delivery of the message is important and the global network is accelerating forms of intra-action and inter-action in order to enable re-action.

The homologous social discourse is enacted not necessarily through homo-genetic media, but through homoplasy media, which share particular proprieties in the aesthetic and representation, allowing the development of a social discourse.

In this framework the enforcement of a low level strategy of narrative structure is linked to delivery. 'He is bad' because 'he has WMD' ergo 'we need to beat him' in order 'to get the WMD' wouldn't have had such a large cinematic influence if the viewers were not expecting an immediate resolution.

The journalistic writing has more than ever experienced this need for immediacy, finding itself up against weblogs, video, images and poetry, diaries and self expositions. This inundation of selves in the world empties journalists' activity of any 'witness' value, because the victims, the criminals, the relatives and all those involved in the event have already published in some form or another their versions. The journalist finds himself with a need to complement and integrate his own structure in those of a society where the 'drama of reality' is continuously invented and acted to correspond to the televisual.

The false articles of Jason Blair in The New York Times are part of the need to mix and blur the boundaries of reality and entertainment, operating in a society where reality is mostly seen and decoded as entertainment and where the structures of 'gravitas' have been eliminated. The Jason Blair scandal is actually a widespread practice in the journalistic profession which I witnessed personally in New York in the 1990's.

On this basis, having created a plot of 'short war', it follows that the delivery of WMD cannot be delayed, because this is the society of instantaneous gratification: may it be the delivery of fame, money or WMD.

‘The secret vice, already pointed out by Umberto Eco, lies in the way the media become self-referring and speak only among themselves. The multimediality is becoming the intermedium. This already problematic situation is aggravated when it is a single hypermedium – television – eyeing itself. All the more so as this tele-centrism is combined with a very severe implicit moral and political judgement: it implies that the masses basically neither need nor desire meaning or information – that all they ask for is signs and images. Television provides them with these in great quantities, returning to the real world, with utter – though well camouflaged – contempt, in the form of ‘reality shows’ or vox-pops – that is to say, in the form of universal self-commentary and mocked-up scenarios, where both the questions and the answers are “fixed”.’³¹

What Baudrillard and Eco seem to overlook is the ability of the audience to decode a narrative structure, to interact with ‘signs and images’, which are languages per se. It may very well be that there is a level of visual-analphabetisation and ignorance which is pushing humanity outside of the civilized text back into a medieval time of postmodern origins. But that would imply a media war of signs and counter signs, and traditionally institutions have not been able to fight off the evolution in social language.

Based on the success and impact of *The X-Files*³², in which the American government is represented as a set of evil conspirators, one wonders how many people who learned that specific narrative structure would not use it in the decodification of reality for a detoxification from the propaganda machine.

The blurring of boundaries is creating a blurring in the use of ‘decoders’ applied indifferently to the televisual and to the real. They may be applied unconsciously, consciously, ignorantly and meaninglessly, but nevertheless they are used to deconstruct the world applying a cinematic gaze.

What seems to have happened is the transfer of epic from the cinematic world into the real and not its disappearance. The cinema cannot keep up with reality; it is struggling to follow up a news stream which is becoming more and more an entertainment format, whilst the gaze for the entertainment is redirected from the virtual onto the real.

The virtual is attempting to deliver the real through the gaze and structures of truth and the real is attempting to deliver the virtual through the gaze and structures of the false. Illusion and reality seem to have swapped the places that they previously inhabited.

‘Through using and abusing events with images – to the point of coming under suspicion of conjuring events up out of nothing – television has become virtually disconnected from the world and has begun to turn back in on its own universe like a meaningless signifier, desperately seeking an ethic to replace its failing credibility, a moral status to replace its lack of imagination (once again, the same applies with the political class).’³³

What is derived is that the meaningless signifier becomes an institutional virus, further debilitating the failing credibility of media and institutions with the “dumb and dumber” masses.

Funnily enough, the calls to ‘a deeper understanding of the issues’, negated by the development of an acritical cultural policy, may be interpreted and read as *The X-File* experience. The eventual truth, presented by institutional sources in the event that a catastrophe may happen, may be perceived and deconstructed by the viewer in ‘a conspiracy theory’ context, as the necessary act from a corrupt administration to justify its own existence. In a filmic experience now the ‘shadow administration’ would deliver a false attack to justify its own existence and silence the opposition while rallying the population/audience.

But this is an already experimented visual pattern: known and culturally passé. If reality has to be treated as entertainment then there is a need for very good scriptwriters to devise an original plot, brilliant directors and credible actors.

Underestimating, in a meta-media context, the capacity and ability of the viewers of reading the narrative is dangerously short sighted.

It is for this reason that the next multimedia entertainment show could be based on the possibility of impeachment of the entertainer. Zapped and swapped immediately onto a more pleasant channel with a better presenter.

The convergence in the hardware and software modular structures doesn’t seem to have happened, but the convergence in the ‘agon’ of content seems to have created a new and different ‘space’ where the viewers can decide if the contenders live or die, stay or go.

It seems a familiar concept, almost like an ‘old roman circus’; a televisual interactive Colosseum, ‘Panem et circensem’.

And whatever one is watching, real or virtual, let’s just hope that the popcorn is going to be good.

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