TENTATIVE INSTRUMENTS
Artistic methods and the crisis of linearity

Nils Röller[1]

Abstract:

Building on concepts advocated by Vilém Flusser covered in what he calls the *Crisis of Linearity*, the author examines the relationship between humans and media technology and how this influences the meaning of the media instruments and their proprioception. Through the works of three artists, Herwig Weise, Yves Netzhammer e Valentina Vuksic, the author articulates hypotheses to overcome the crisis through new mediations between man and machine and how this can cause the appearance of a new intersubjectivity

Keywords: Media Theory; Communication process; Body; Time
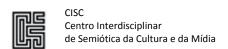
Resumo:

Partindo dos conceitos defendidos por Vilém Flusser abarcados no que ele chama de *Crise de Linearidade*, o autor analisa o relacionamento entre os seres humanos e as mídias tecnológicas e de que forma isso influencia nas formas de significação dos instrumentos midiáticos e sua propriocepção. Por meio das obras de três artistas, Herwig Weise, Yves Netzhammer e Valentina Vuksic, o autor articula hipóteses para que a crise seja superada por meio de novas mediações entre homem e máquina e como isso pode provocar o surgimento de uma nova intersubjetividade
Palavras-chave: Teoria da Mídia; Processos comunicativos; Corpo; Tempo

[1] Nils Röller é doutor em Teoria da Mídia e pesquisador do Arquivo Vilém Flusser. Em 2003 publicou junto com Silvia Wagnermeier *Absolute Flusser*, uma seleção de textos do filósofo. É autor, também, de *Ahabs Steuer – Navigationen zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft,* obra lançada em 2005 que trata das relações entre artes e ciências. Desde 2006, Röller edita o blog "Journal für Kunst, Sex und Mathematik" (http://www.journalfuerkunstsexundmathematik.ch) com o apoio de Barbar Ellmerer e Yves Netzhammer
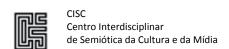
"Don't go! I am not finished", are the first words spoken by actor Johnny Depp in Tim Burton's film *Edward Scissorhands*. Edward, played by Johnny Depp is an artificially created person, a grandson of Frankenstein, who remained in an unfinished state on the death of his creator. The production-line where Edward was meant to be completed is equipped with the attributes of the electromechanical age; the conveyor belt installed in the hall of a neo-Gothic castle is flanked by transformers and sturdy metal gadgetry. Edward has been living there in the attic ever since the death of his inventor. The unfinished artificial man makes his first appearance as an Avon lady is drifting through the property in search of customers. Her world is that of the superficially perfect american dream. It is a world of pink detached houses where bored housewives languish between electric appliances while their husbands are driving to work in their sedans. This is the world into which Edward the unfinished stumbles. He is a relic of the pioneering days when inventors, mechanists and scientists laid the groundwork for the technologies that today make middle-class life in the suburbs of America possible. Instead of fingers Edward's hands have scissors. His "unfinishedness" reveals the unsimultaneous nature the effects of civilization have in the *crisis of linearity*.

Burton uses the figure of Edward to explain the crisis of simultaneity which is currently having such a virulent effect on the reception accorded to artistic practices. This are practices which tentatively explore instruments by feeling and use them as feelers. Regarded in terms of mass media distribution, Johnny Depp's work as an actor who has frequently allowed himself to be placed in machine-related contexts, can be seen as drifting through a range of spatio-temporal orientations and asynchronicities produced by instruments and media technologies.

Image – writing – number

In his essay of the same name, Vilèm Flusser describes the *Crisis of Linearity* as a revolt of numbers against letters, in other words as a fundamental tension between the cultural technologies of numerical and alphabetic codes. His construction of the crisis is based on a three-stage model of history in which a image-based or magical phase is succeeded by writing-based or abstract phase. The writing-based or abstract phase is thrown into crisis

by computer-assisted modelling leading to changes in the way people think, feel, desire and act. In his text from the year 1988 Flusser imagines the crisis as leading to a new intersubjectivity: our grandchildren will sit in front of computer keyboards, manipulating binary digits. They will discuss models via monitors and agree upon which models they wish to see realized. Their realization is just one variant of interhuman play with codes that can potentially manipulate particles, atoms and electromagnetic fields[2].
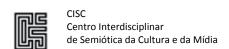
zgodlocator

Artist Herwig Weiser created his sculpture *zgodlocator* at the end of the 90s, realizing certain aspects of Flusser's vision[3]. Visitors sit on a dais around a plexiglas circle. A grainy landscape made up of particles can be seen under the glass. It comes from the recycling of computers, in which hardware is shredded to produce a mess of materials which then can be separated into reusable resources. In Weiser's installation the visitors can use magnets to move the mixture of particles about. With the help of controls and knobs they can change the strength and direction of the magnetic field and thus interactively modulate the movement of the material. Weiser depended heavily on intensive support from scientists and engineers for his project. The success of this cooperation rested on a recognition of the difference between artistic and scientific-technological practice. A further part of Weiser's successful strategy can be seen in his observance of the differences in social status between the artist and the participating scientists. Weiser's practice refutes Flusser's suggestion that differences between artists and scientists will gradually disappear.

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[2] Vilém Flusser, "Krise der Linearität" (1988), in *Absolute Vilém Flusser*, (Ed.) Nils Röller and Silvia Wagnermaier, Freiburg 2003, p. 93 f (English: "Crisis of Linearity", translated by Adelheid Mers, in *Boot Print* Vol. 1/1 (2006) p. 19-21)

[3] Herwig Weiser, »zgodlocator«, in: *LAB – Jahrbuch für Künste und Apparate*, Cologne 1999. For the various versions see: www.zgodlocator.org.

Subjectivation of Repetition B

Yves Netzhammer's work addresses the imputed crisis from another approach. A comparison between his latest works Subjectivation of Repetition *A* and *B* (2007)[4] and his *Die Anordnungsweise zweier Gegenteile bei der Erzeugung ihres Berührungsmaximums* from the year 2005 shows[5] that Netzhammer repeatedly returns to an instrument which is basic in its archaism: the stick.

The stick, which can transfer force from the hand to an object, is a central subject in Aristotle's physics. His theory of physics based around the mechanics of impulse. Transmission of force here is always direct. It is only possible, when a close contact between bodies happens[6]. It is this which scientific historian Joseph Needham describes as being the fundamental difference between ancient western science and that of China[7]. Ancient Chinese science developed differently and concerned itself with magnetism, a phenomenon inaccessible to human senses. It favoured ideas of the continuum and thus of fields and waves whereas nascent western science preferred to deal with discrete, indivisible elements. Western science thought up the idea of atoms, whose motions were long envisaged in mechanical terms of impulse and pressure. The artefact Aristotle uses to explain the laws of close effect is the stick. He imagines it as the means whereby force is transmitted. It is in this context that the idea of causality was developed. It is a product of writing and the phase of linearity which according to Flusser is currently in crisis.

Descartes radicalizes the use of the stick in his 1637 description of the physiognomy sight[8]. People who have been blind from birth, Descartes writes in his *Dioptrique,* see with
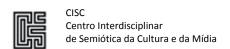
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[4] Nils Röller, "Die Subjektivierung der Wiederholung Projekt B", in: *Vision-Audition – Begleitausstellung der Evangelischen Kirche zur documenta 12*, published by Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck, Kassel 2007.

[5] Yves Netzhammer, *Die Anordnungsweise zweier Gegenteile bei der Erzeugung ihres Berührungsmaximums*, Nürnberg 2005.

[6] Aristotle, *Physikvorlesung* (German translation: *Physik-Physik* by Hans Wagner), Darmstadt 1967, 256a 4.

[7] Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* Vol. IV (Physics and Physical Technology), Part 1, Cambridge 1962 , p. 236.

[8] René Descartes, »La Dioptrique« (Leyden 1637), in: *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Paris 1964, p. 83f.
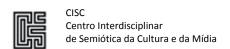
the help of sticks and their hands. He thus epistemologically equates optical and haptic impulses. He can thus also reduce different human perceptions to common quantifiable magnitudes and describe them geometrically and algebraically. Neither the ancient Aristotle nor the modern Descartes are interested in the stick as a medium sui generis. It is simply a medium to transmit impulses and conceived of as being frictionless, in other words it is not considered as a medium with any qualities of its own. The stick is regarded merely as an extension of the limbs.

Ernst Cassirer's discussion of the philosophy of technology in his 1930 essay *Form und Technik* examines this paradigm more closely. For Cassirer, the instrument becomes a means of distantiation and with that something that qualitatively shapes the relationship between man and his environment. Cassirer developed this thought in a time polarized by technological euphoria and technological phobia. In epistemological terms there existed a sense of the crisis of western thinking on the concept of causality. Cassirer does not propose a vision to overcome the crisis but provides a concentrated tour of basic principles.

Netzhammer's art is characterized by an apprehensive deepening rather than a visionary overcoming of the fundamental relationships of the technological conception of the world. The relationship between man and his tools appears implausible. Again and again a stick is shown. But the faceless and thus also blind figures do not use the stick to orientate themselves in their surroundings but thematize it as an artefact that leads them to their actions. As a result, Netzhammer's figures feel their way through manmade spaces, spaces belonging to the world of civilization and not that of nature, either alone, in pairs or in disorganized groups. All of these computer animated creatures move hesitantly, as though searching for instructions on how they ought to behave in these artificial spaces, the use of which is determined by things (the stick, a skipping-rope, a wheelchair, a record player). Netzhammer's figures suspend the relationship between means and ends in a specific way. For them the stick is not a tool to move a stone. That would be a relationship between means and end that would need to be defined in terms that would differentiate it from two factors. From the means (in the improper sense) used by the refugees

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mentioned by Agamben[9]. For example, they use tin cans they find to scoop up water or as mirrors. The way Netzhammer's figures act is diametrically opposed to such improper usage. The tools are not used by the people, the tools use the people, and thus help them to discover themselves. This presupposes the suspension of the relationship between means and ends, and is thus an act of reflection and distancing. The means become means in the "proper" sense, in other words they become opportunities for speculative use. They encapsulate a range of human habits reflecting the development of civilization. Epistemologically, Netzhammer's figures are tentatively feeling their way. By trying out the instruments and letting themselves be carried along by them, they discover how they themselves operate successfully and how they fail.

Netzhammer uses the computer as a tool to produce his image worlds – a questionable practice. Closer examination of his work shows that computers are also of relevance to Netzhammer's aesthetics too. However he himself is not made visible.
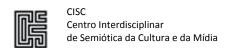
Harddisko

While Netzhammer addresses mechanical artefacts by using the computer, the artist Valentina Vuksic turns to the computer as a medium in itself. In *Harddisko* (2004) she presents a set of hard drives, each of which receives electricity and begins operating at different intervals[10]. Vuksic amplifies the noise made by the hard drives, thus allowing the sound which hard disks produce to be heard. The work demonstrates that the hardware itself creates sound. Its rhythm and tonality is puzzling to the viewers and listeners since the sound seems structured and therefore to stem from something that is ordered yet not immediately obvious. The computer is thus experienced as an ordered but alien system, leading to a sense of awe similar to the astonishment evoked in archaic times by the

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[9] Agamben, Giorgio:"Marginal Notes on Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle". In: means without end – Notes on politics. Minneapolis 2000: University of Minnesota Press

[10] Margarete Jahrmann, »Valentina Vusksic: Harddisko«, in: *Server 1*, Studienbereich Neue Medien der HGK Zürich. Zurich 2005. For more on current work by Valentina Vuksic: www.sei.personaggi.ch.vu

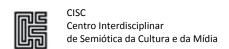cosmic order of the moon and stars.

Crisis as an opportunity

Netzhammer and Vuksic's approach to the relationship between means and ends makes clear that mankind's dialogue with his own artefacts is far from being over. Each artefact bears traces of the spatio-temporal order within itself that challenge the perception of discrepancies and spatio-temporal diversity. Seen against this background of individual artistic practices, the crisis of power over spatiotemporal orientation which the linear alphabetical code and its conception of causality are facing can be seen as being both permanent and a constituting element of mankind's relationship to his tools and to technology. The twofold impact of tools emphasized by Cassirer becomes obvious. Technologies change man's relationship to his environment and develop a new perspective on his inner nature[11]. This can be seen from the fact that the human brain is always spoken of in terms borrowed from the leading technology of the day[12].

This implies that every leading technology will lead to a crisis. This agrees with Flusser's thinking. Unlike Flusser, however, the artistic practices of Weiser, Netzhammer and Vuksic appear to imply that the crisis is also an opportunity to address the subject of technology beyond the relationship between means and ends. Unlike *Edward Scissorhands*, who can at times make his "unfinishedness" seem an attractive feature, Netzhammer's figures are constantly faltering. Their awkwardness is a matter of principle. It is hopeless to think of overcoming it. For the same reason, Netzhammer does not offer any kind of vision of life after the crisis. The sole element of comfort is provided by the fact that the instruments and artefacts of human culture still promise many as yet unrealized possibilities for strange new uses. The relationship between the figures and technology in Netzhammer's

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[11] Ernst Cassirer, »Form und Technik« (first published: Berlin 1930), in: Cassirer, *Form, Technik, Sprache.* Hamburg 1985,p. 70f

[12] Claude Shannon and John McCarthy, Preface to *Automata Studies,* (Ed.) Claude Shannon and John McCarthy. Annals of Mathematics Studies No. 34. Princeton 1956. p. V

works is a strange one, unfinished, incomplete; it is shown as representing a chance not a deficiency. For it has become possible to imagine a permanent state of crisis, leading to constant adjustment of human ideas. The consequence of completion and triumph would be standstill and with it an absolute crisis of humanity, since the question of how humanity develops reciprocally with technology would no longer be raised.

Johnny Depp's work as an actor successfully demonstrates this kind of openness towards penetration by technology and media. Depp highlights it in the role of the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow (*Pirates of The Caribbean*). In this trilogy the actor develops a characteristic figure who allows a compass to point him towards what he most desires. The actor thus becomes a perceptional body. This body enables one to grasp a range of spatio-temporal orientations caused by instruments and cultural technologies. The "unfinishedness" of man, an animal whose very nature is, according to Plato and Herder, incomplete[13], is essential to the opportunity so charmingly highlighted by Johnny Depp: to understand and to create technologies as opportunities for humans to occupy themselves with themselves for evermore.

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[13] Plato, *Protagoras* (trans. into German by Friedrich Schleiermacher), Darmstadt 1990, 321c, Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Stuttgart 1985, p. 20. See also the postscript there by Hans Dietrich Irmscher, p. 149.

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