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TOGETHER IN ELECTRIC DREAMS – THE COMPRESSION OF MAN

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## TOGETHER IN ELECTRIC DREAMS — THE COMPRESSION OF MAN

Our nuanced language and emotional qualities are compressed as the packaged data we exchange. Compressed as in shortened, fragmented, limiting our human expression and characteristics. We're pouring ourselves into a collective stream of information, be it in the form of text, video, images, symbols and game avatars:

*The externalization of what was formerly interior — our thought processes, the information that courses through our personalities, now that's all becoming external because it's so easy to communicate.*"<sup>1</sup>

We live in between utopia and apocalypse. There's a dematerialization going on in society; in economics, in production, entertainment and in the circulation of imagery:

*Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production.*<sup>2</sup>

We forgot about image as representation of a subject and became image-quality connoisseurs. The quality of the image is locked in a dichotomy, it's either sign of the image's social status or its immediacy (though it may also reveal a location or temporality). We are constructing a reality that seems to advance in the quest for life-like representations, just short of the hologram.

*It's almost like a new species emerging, we're not changing in our biological form, but we are almost a butterfly emerging from our caterpillar cocoon, because of this liberation of information, and it's no telling what that's going to do.*"<sup>3</sup>

Do not be fooled by mesmerizing memes. The world appear rich on the surface – it's a trap. The glossier it gets, the more essential qualities are squeezed in the back end. The overall naive auto-acceptance of streamlined techno-evolution is a natural side effect of a new ontological landscape on the horizon.

The existence of further extensions of our capabilities has a profound effect back on us — we are no longer able to recognize the compression of ourselves as the bandwidth got better and the experience more immediate. We are content in our own comfort zone made of crystals, electricity and connectivity:

*A desire to become this thing — in this case an image — is the upshot of the struggle over representation. Senses and things, abstraction and excitement, speculation and power, desire and matter actually converge within images.* <sup>4</sup>

More than ever we look to escape our shortcomings, to live vicariously through fictional characters whose names are intensity, passion and self-empowerment. Once we were quite familiar with these imitations of human qualities in the shape of contemporary pop-mythology. They existed in a separate space from our own social environment, except every so often when someone reached across to a protagonist. The new age of enlightenment has numerous extensions.

Fiction looks like the real thing but it's ontologically different. But one could use traits of fiction to describe and navigate ontological landscapes. The ultimate task is to maneuver the different landscapes, between media paranoia and the escapist adventure — It seems we interact with fiction-like characters everyday. In this space we are the compressed versions of each other. It's the convergence of our self-created fictional worlds with the external collective one, in the form of our preferred ways of communication. It's where we're haunted by the history of our own visual ideas and imagery. There are a surplus of poltergeists in this space, but we can draw apart two types of imagery; *entertaining images* which hypnotize and numb the sense of self, as opposed to *poetic images* which heighten existential awareness and make tangible the boundaries among our surroundings and us.<sup>5</sup>

*When the subject identifies with the image as an object, the distinctions that are necessary for representation blur: the dichotomy between objects and images, between subject and object, between the perception of the living and that of the lifeless material dissolves.*<sup>6</sup>

There's a struggle to conceal engaging imagery that could activate political thought and action. Not necessarily by censorship, but rather by pushing ideas out into the void of the non-involving fictitious space. They're assigned with certain properties, tagged with the passive, detached, and the non-involved. The aria's alluring chant makes a lulling hymn, conflating all active realms into a submissive sleep.

Listen to the heart of darkness. The rhythm of the underground, the voodoo drums of the slacker, for he is not completely asleep. Hear the subculture pounding beneath the glossy chassis, it is not fooled nor impressed by cheap trickery. The slacker live in the crack between the unaware and the hypnotized. He is in a state between wakefulness and sleep, a lucid dreamer with a true passion.

Our western sci-fi plots usually seek to tell a dystopian story of technology gone wrong, turning on its makers, going haywire or used by the state for surveillance. This is not the case for many *Mangas*, where humans evolve together with their techno-environment<sup>7</sup>. Technology left to its own devices free of government control tends to work well with human beings as an evolutionary process.

## THE RITUAL, THE RUMOR AND THE MYTH

The garage- and hobbyist culture that once launched the techno-revolution now has subordinated role in society. They are the reason we can communicate like today, raising awareness on a collective level and threaten existing power structures.

When smaller groups collude, exercising their own rituals asynchronous with the collective norms, they are ostracized and tagged as misfits. The idea of young people getting together over anything passionate that is not mainstream has a sinister edge. When they find their solidarity in the garage-tech-culture, they are seen as outcasts in our social framework. Passiveness suits a shared consensus within society. Affection does not. Lack of passion and neutrality it is widely accepted. People are deaf to their own accent, and overly sensitive to other's.

*There is no such thing as a fast modem...Quickness has disappeared from our culture. We now only experience degrees of slowness.<sup>8</sup>*

Our entire cognition is being transformed by our technology and its environment. We've constructed a new disorder. Attention span is shortened by media culture and its rituals. It's a style of thinking — manic, constant wide, but shallow. It's what internet culture trains our minds to. A result of our dependance on technology to do cognitive tasks. There's no going back. We have collapsed into a huge rush of irrelevant information. Unsystematized facts are pouring at us, mostly prepackaged, prerecorded and from the past. Our new capability ignites rumors — they spread fast, but dissolve quickly. All visual records are born rumors and thus become myths.

*...That people in order to break through the anonymity of the information overload have to turn themselves into a commercial, a commodity, a brand or a product. They are much more interested in franchising themselves, getting themselves spread out and distributed, than they are invested in cultivating themselves.<sup>9</sup>*

There's an overload of sources on how to better be a commodity. It's some sort of tune telling us we need to flatten in order to fit. Our rituals creates rumors and merges with our mythologies. There's heaps of waste and debris floating around in the external image space.

*...On the other hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.<sup>10</sup>*

## LESS CIRCUITRY — MORE SORCERY

As the global village became blatantly apparent, technology itself was evermore invisible. How electronics look and work was the new scarcity of information. It showed its true face for a brief moment, only to shrink in size and retreat back into itself. It has disappeared, maybe into our nervous system, making us unable to see it. It's become one seamless experience, concealing the milieu it creates.

Technology is carefully covering its trails, leaving only behind negative connotations of its former, inner self; boards, circuitry and cables — in essence its vital organs. These are present only in niche-fiction and reports on illegal activities. Visibility is now the language of the obsolete. Like the Phreakers exploring the telephone system in the early days, anyone enquiring about the inner workings and logics of technology are driven underground, left to a subculture. The rogue exploration of the telephone network gave birth to a new social habitat on line – on the phone.

Conference circuits were used in order to host virtual seminars and discussions. They gathered in smaller groups to practice their interests. These men all know that their behavior is abnormal. They are outliers. Misfits. Technophiles and information addicts, motivated by the search for a deeper meaning through group solidarity.

In the past, the electronic social scene had a very edgy, underground flavor. Many were *strictly* underground – dedicated exclusively to malicious code and anarchy recipes (articles on fraud, bomb making and drug chemistry). “Handles” or online pseudonyms were the norm and real names were closely guarded and generally only revealed to real-life friends. This was a time of strong awareness of the new climate, founded on secrecy and mutual trust.

## SCARE TACTICS SUPERSTAR

Language is yet another layer of detaching oneself from our dull realities. So it's basically an element that does not correlate with our day-to-day social framework. It's a portal into a different landscape, but it can also be a black hole for negativity — assigning words, jargons and entire languages with a twisted subversive social status.

There's a strange intrinsic relationship between authenticity, and the representations of triumphant events. The archaic space programs delivered the poorest image in broadcast history; black and white filmed off of a projection screen. Shifting between the immediacy of the on-site and authoritative studio imagery — creating a synthesis of blurry and sharp images — it eludes any ecstatic truth.

The authenticity of these are thus strengthened and contextualized by numerous space westerns, squeezed through the anamorphic lens of its present system. It wishes to merge the poor and the high-end image under the same agenda. It fills in all the gaps, leaving little or no trace behind.

It's the name for a process whereby a certain kind of culture — a life-form that grows in a substrate — is treated. All life is destroyed much the same how life-forms are terminated in a pasteurization process. Squeezed through the filter of centralized power, all the complexity, the diversity, the differences, the shared ownership and intelligence, the wisdom of that diversity is squeezed out — it becomes *televised*.<sup>11</sup>

*It never mattered that these high-end economies of film production were (and still are) firmly anchored in systems of national culture, capitalist studio production, the cult of mostly male genius, and the original version, and thus are often conservative in their very structure.*<sup>12</sup>

Conspiracy culture thrives on fuzziness. The imagery is always intense and quick to reveal its illicit status within the economy of the system. If the image was clearer less would be left to imagine, associate and explore. Less mystery, no conspiracy.

*Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images.*<sup>13</sup>

The Slacker does not believe the conspiracy tales, nor does he believe the official ones. He lives in the crack. He will not fall prey to the productionist society; he is not a sheep but a quiet beat.

We're dependent on technology not only to do cognitive tasks, but also to transfer our fears, desires and existential angst up to the cloud. Has this become a wasteland of emotional baggage, a means to ease our conscious or doing penance? Is it the final resting place of hate speech, spam, paranoia, flaming and trolling? Will it all return with a vengeance like in countless Sci-Fi sagas? Or indifferently wander among us as zombies chanting the tunes of the past?

## TECHNO-BABBLE

*...What gets lost when a channel is lost...is a node in that set of connections, and each channel represents millions of those...all interlinked in this vast network of social connections. A matrix in the proper sense of the word matrix, as a kind of womb-like environment out of which things can emerge — and those things have more connections and more locations for content to evolve — but once these are gone — the media itself is damaged. All of those actions...Adds a connection, or changes the nature of a connection in this vast network. The fact that we work together to do all this stuff — it's incredibly valuable.*<sup>14</sup>

It was mass deception as enlightenment. The steady stream is the most illusive, it feeds on contemporary cognition. But there are worse things lurking inside electronic devices.

*..If algorithms are going to curate the world for us... We need to make sure that these algorithms have encoded in them a sense of the public life, civic responsibility...<sup>15</sup>*

The algorithm alchemist created a self-governing system that separated history from time and thus actuated time travel:

*Most video compression algorithms and codecs combine spatial image compression and temporal motion compensation. Motion compensation describes a picture in terms of the transformation of a reference picture to the current picture. The reference picture may be previous in time or even from the future. When images can be accurately synthesized from previously transmitted/stored images, the compression efficiency can be improved.<sup>16</sup>*

The Bubble is your own "personal" algorithm-defined interests. The image-world you live in is distinctly curated and quite comfy. All is selected by spiraling algorithms — magic on the surface, scriptures inside.

*I do think you are very right about how all these connections can be lost like tears in rain to a careless machine.<sup>17</sup>*

## MASS AGE MANTRA

There's a long tradition of mainstream representations that superficially deal with technological concepts; Interfaces, implications and terminology are romanticized. The algorithm appear as a helpful tool "...with the right combination of /state of the art algorithms..." one is able to endlessly clear up low resolution footage. It gives to the illusion that pausing and enhancing video "peel away truths protective layers". Zoom in far enough and you will find truth, usually in the form of the perpetrators face in some odd reflection. This fable is forever retold and remixed, chanted as motto or mantra, left to echo in the halls of the haunted mediums.

*I do not intend to speak about - Just speak near by.<sup>18</sup>*

The mission was to reach out to an intimate social environment and bring back a subjective visual record. Using the the high-end of the image hierarchy as a buffer, fully knowing its agenda and corruption. The documentation would be inherently flawed, with interpretations open to associations. Extracting some parts of the language — use the idioms and leave out the grammar. Employing banal conventions in retelling relationships between people, technology and people, and their identity as a group within the social framework. Organize these diverse, sometimes dissonant elements in a dynamic that pulls them together.

Making use of the seductive experience of cinema, while slipping some extra information in there that might revise a notion of the contents representation.

Somehow let the material echo the lack of a longer attention, similar to skipping, clicking or pausing. Let the voice of the narrator illuminate how conversation about one's surroundings possessed a gravity towards dystopian science-fiction.

*"I use a foreign accent to get with the groove, as a means of detaching myself from the familiar, it opens doorways to cathartic release."<sup>19</sup>*

It's like children adopting the regional accent from tv-cartoons when playing with action figures. Assigning a language to a certain fictional estate in order to move and be part of it. Using a fictional property as a key to enter or escape a specific space. Impersonation can make a good cloak. But something is mimicking us, too. Human animation and spontaneous everyday life has a reality that is easily emulated.

Shifting between worlds, we bring across the local meaning of a certain jargon, word or idiom. We use it to describe something at hand in a current state. Idioms can activate thought patterns, carrying the sensory apparatus of one realm on to another - it leads to a cinematization of the senses. We always think we know the idiom, that we're sure we know what we're seeing. A small disjunction between what is being said and the translation opens up an investigative space — a crack between two ontological realities. It exists only in a state of movement, sometimes recognized as a worn subtitle.

## JUDGEMENT DAY DIVA

An omnipresent, synthesized female voice leads the way through alien terrain.

Material drawn from the different sources of our "collective stream of information" are the basis of short films. It's a collage of established narrative techniques, collected personal data and videotaped conversations. We are in a story of the non-telling, with the ever-intriguing absence of a plot.

In the films the tech-savvy protagonists are constantly struggling with electronics. A small group conspiring together on some grand device. We see the circuitry and recognize the terminology, which make us aware of it's technical implications and omnipresence. They're very concerned about shaping something — an object that is not yet present.

It is the absence of a device or an idea. The brief glimpse of a knife, cables, circuits and ports. They are unable to find justice within common pictures.



There's no plot, still there's a strong *sense* of a narrative, and that's very disconcerting for our expectations. We're starting where you missed everything and it ends before you figured it out. There's an intensity about it, a passion drive. Whatever moment you stop, it's the always the wrong moment, the most exciting moment.

*Though it may seem like a paradox, mystery is what sheds light on reality, what does not let itself be led astray by the seemingly obvious.*<sup>20</sup>

There's a strong theatrical aspect to their rituals, like believers gathering to play out a strictly scripted set of actions. The characters gather round their curiosity and affection for technology, they're combining their intellects to build something greater than themselves. They conspire. Their actions are justified by the goal of greater good. By devotion and affection they seem to be wafted on into a world of enclosed private experience.

For the majority it shifted from spectatorship to usership. Collectively users constitute an enormous continuous force, one that wields an unmatched capacity of hundreds of millions of minds. But users are prone to becoming electric sheep, more eligible wander and snack on information junk. They are shifted, moved and grouped by the robotic shepherd. The collective search for existential questions was diverted by a continuous enchanting tune:

*We'll always be together, However far it seems,  
We'll always be together, Forever in Electric Dreams.*<sup>21</sup>

We are torn between media-constructed paranoia and the comfort of the fictitious adventure — the presence of technology got lost in science-fiction. It dissolved into an external image-space, one that exists both as a contemporary and as a distant childhood memory. It represents a contemplative comfort-space, turning to the realm of the private dream. This is the forensic scene. This is the place to investigate. The films are reaching for this space, through the alienation of the familiar, by the means of the science-fiction narrative.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Levinson - Interview on Digital McLuhan (1999)
- <sup>2</sup> Hito Steyerl - *In Defense of the Poor Image*, E-flux Magazine (2009)
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Levinson - Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Hito Steyerl - *A Thing Like You and Me*, E-flux Magazine (2010)
- <sup>5</sup> As stated by Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (2008)
- <sup>6</sup> Marit Paasche - *The New Protagonist: On the film of Hito Steyerl, Urban Images: Unruly Desires in Film and Architecture*, Synne Bull, Marit Paasche (Eds.)
- <sup>7</sup> A prime example of this is *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)
- <sup>8</sup> As stated by David Shenk, 1999
- <sup>9</sup> Professoranton's Channel - *More Thoughts on New Media (Re- Is the Internet Making us Dumb?)*
- <sup>10</sup> Hito Steyerl - *In Defense of the Poor Image*, E-flux Magazine (2009)
- <sup>11</sup> Concept based on Conferencereport's Channel - *The Revolution will not be Televised* ( 2012)
- <sup>12</sup> Hito Steyerl - Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Hito Steyerl - Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Conferencereport's Channel - *The Messages are the Medium* (2011)
- <sup>15</sup> Eli Pariser - *The Filter Bubble*, TED (2011). Discussing personalization algorithms, Google's 57 search signals etc.
- <sup>16</sup> Wikipedia article on video codecs and compression, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codec>
- <sup>17</sup> Comment left on the video "*The Messages are the Medium*" by bikemessenger7
- <sup>18</sup> Trinh T Minh-Ha - *Reassemblage* (1983)
- <sup>19</sup> From a discussion in the seminar "Vernacular Modernism" at KHIO (2011). Blues guitarist Knut Reiersrud reflected on his consistent use of english words and utterances when playing. Not an exact quote. Reconstructed from memory and translated.
- <sup>20</sup> Chiara Leoni – *Scaling Mount Analogue*, Mousse Magazine # 15 (2008)
- <sup>21</sup> *Together in Electric Dreams* (1984), hit song produced by Philip Oakley and Giorgio Moroder. It was made for the 1984 flop film *Electric Dreams* about a PC that accidentally gets AI and interferes with its owner's love life.