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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Human Consciousness and the Postdigital Analogue

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As Stephen Wilson points out in his review [1], the book *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future* is “a marvellous resource that will be much appreciated by artists, critics, historians, and anyone interested in the convergence of art and technology.” Among other things, the book provides a historical record that catalogues the changing perceptions of the emergence of digital technology as a popular medium. For example, Gene Youngblood reminded us 17 years ago that the computer translates the continuous phenomena of the world into discrete units [2]. In the same year Peter Weibel pointed out that, whereas the analogical follows principles of similarity, congruency and continuity, the digital uses the smallest discontinuous, non-homogenous elements [3]. Five years later Roy Ascott, with characteristic visionary insight, appealed for a restoration of the metaphor to the agenda in order that the undivided whole could once again be regained [4]. It was a call that Nick Herbert responded to a year later in a lucid and accessible account of quantum physics, and concluded with some irony that holistic physics would erase the distinction between subject and object and there would be a real danger of getting lost in space [5]. *Facing the Future*’s history lesson ends in 1998 with Friedrich Kittler’s confirmation that in the realms of electronic warfare we resisted this danger, since copying a “hostile CPU is easier, cheaper, and therefore more likely to proliferate than copying a hostile phase radar” [6]. This is more than the carry through of old technology into the new (as for example film and video) but a return to the ideal of the analogue. According to Kittler’s analysis of warfare, in less than a decade digital media recovered the relevance of the principles of similarity, congruency and continuity. The apparent persistence of the analogue invites us to consider that the morphological resemblance between modes of expression pre- and post-digital (industrial or Enlightenment, for that matter) could be significant symptoms of the hesitance of users to abandon felt experience in favor of the éclat of seductive technologies of description.

At the distance that *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future* allows us, it becomes apparent that empowered users negotiating with digital media found themselves engaged in the recurring cycle—one in which the idealization of



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representation was in conflict with the dominant technology, which disavowed daily experience as an undifferentiated circulation of metaphors for desire and resistance. As much was at stake in the pre-cinematic age when Etienne-Jules Marey, for example, inquiring into the nature of movement, regarded the new techniques of chronophotography as inferior to graphic methods using smoked drums and scribes attached to pneumatic sensors. Photo-technology used shutters that insisted upon the moment as an event of finite duration, an insistence that consequently ruptured the flow of movement as experienced in a flux of time. The pseudo-guarantees of objectivity that this scientifically acceptable idealization could offer, however, outweighed the deficits, and the representation of movement as an incremental sequence in a small, finite and discontinuous moment became an acceptable norm to the extent that the subject was indeed collapsed into the object and temporarily “lost in space.” However, whereas chronophotography chained vision to the materiality of the body, in the post-chronophotographic analogue the principles of similarity, congruency and continuity found new life in the cinema of narrative integration (the movies), which rescued the subject in a seamless reality of infinitely malleable virtual bodies for whom the eye was transcendent.

The intellectual project of *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future* leaves little doubt that the digital revolution was, from its technological and conceptual inception, always destined to become the postdigital, in which similarity, congruence and continuity found new applications. At stake in the postdigital analogue, however, is more than the recovery of the subject: it is nothing less than whose vision of paradise prevails. The postdigital analogue points to a version of paradise that is neither a finite, discontinuous place nor a non-homogeneous moment of time; not Eden in a nostalgic future, but a thick membrane in which local conditions, desire and resistance are constantly stabilized to form a whole identity. Where the digital proposes the perfect finite conditions for a perfect existence regardless of matter (as for example in the human genome project), in the postdigital analogue (as for example in the ironies of genetic and wet biological art) human consciousness is regarded as almost infinitely malleable, able to shape its identity in response to local (and technological) conditions, while aware all the time of the range of possibilities (digital and analogue) that are not developed



Endnotes

1. Leonardo Digital Reviews, August 2001 <<http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/reviews/books.html>>.
- [2] G. Youngblood, "A Medium Matures: Video and the Cinematic Enterprise" (1984), in T. Druckrey, ed., *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) p. 45.
- [3] P. Weibel, "On the History and Aesthetics of Digital Images," in Druckrey [2] p. 51.
- [4] R. Ascott, "Gesamtdatenwerk: Connectivity, Transformation and Transcendence," in Druckrey [2] pp. 86–90.
- [5] N. Herbert, "Werner Heisenberg Has Looked on Reality Bare: Proposal for a Really New 'New Physics,'" in Druckrey [2] pp. 101–106.
- [6] F. Kittler, "On the History of the Theory of Information Warfare," in Druckrey [2] p. 175

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