THE METAPHOR OF TOUCH -

IDENTIFICATION, PERSONALITY AND CONTACT WITHIN THE SCREEN

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I am currently teaching in a film academy in Germany which has a very long tradition in the narrative and documentary film. My task and my aim is to bring the subject of new media closer to students, who research mainly the classical ways of creating a media work, like a movie or a TV feature. But not only under this educational aspect I try to establish in my teaching and research an evolutionary line between early media works and actual developments. The early avantgardist film theory at the beginning of this century offers in its excitement about new ways of expression a lot of parallels to the discussion at the end of the century. From the technological experiments the way to the drama had to be found, trying to gain the viewers participance and mental involvement. I will attempt to sum up a very wide and challenging field in brief main thoughts:

For Rudolf Arnheim the creation and reception of media and art is a very subjective action - as there is the subjective eye of the camera and in the following the difference between the "real" image of the world and the "constructed" image of the film - and the montage as an intellectual appeal to inner discussion and combination. Bela Balász talks of the imaginary immersion of the viewer with the help of subjective camera means, change of perspectives, the viewer is identifying with the hero, is falling over the cliffs. Walter Benjamin completes this intention of building up an exchange between media work and viewer, when he constates the loss of the aura of an art work by the mass orientated technological apparatus. Facing fascism he saw a democratic potential, because the distanced and menacing effect of the divine art work is dissolving and a link between the work and the viewer can be established. The unique object of cult is replaced by the innovative search for acceptance, as an offer or request by the author.

Formgiving, subjective construction, involvement and democracy are the early words and the metaphorical dialog between film and viewer finds an echo in the contemporary creation of artificial realities, virtual worlds and interactivity. That sounds easy, but it's not. The nowadays metaphores of participation and involvement within the screen can be complicated, naive, manifold and overloaded, all in one. There is still a certain euphoria, which is in danger to generalize the subject of new media, interactivity and virtuality. The terms even seem to be empty and misdefined before they have been researched properly. The film avantgardists longing to get the people into their

work in a literal sense helps to formulate questions: The more a constructed media room offers sensual body functions and subjective influence, the more it can be perceived as selfdeterminent or even as true? Could the former identification with the screened movie turn into a virtual consciousness in a cyberspace?

A hierarchical abstract shows some state of the art: Closed systems of interactive Multi Media - keyboard based applications, are based on touch and sensoric action to a certain extend, but they represent still a front-position and distance between medium, virtual drama world and observer. The more information based, structural and playing aspects and the possible parallel montage and navigation system are the real advantage and far more interesting for a dramaturgical discussion, then the interactive potential, multi media works are mostly advertised with.

In a second step the artificial world of the computer generated cyberspace allows a highly immersive effect and a conscious sensual movement to enter a space. It destroys the classical attitude of the spy hole, through which we perceive the world and opens alternative places of being. But at the same time the instrumentarium and apparatus being involved by headsets etc. and the artificiality of the perceived space restricts a real identification. So the immersion as it is often described, is far more based upon troubling the balance feeling of a body than upon the prickly mental shiver of marching into an undefinable space. The ideological gap between computer generated world and real world is even reinforced.

An interesting interim are experimental forms, I like to call "borderline-works": The interface which allows the involvement in the media surrounding, on the first glance seems to be very banal, like changing a computer generated painting with eye movements, creating images on a screen by touching a plant or turning round in a chair. Basic sensual movements are extended to interfere, the interface is an absolute part of the non-technical daily life. High technology is hidden behind the most simple object and the activity is based on reality, but throwing a virtual shadow. Or even more, the reality is reflected and projected into the virtual (consider Lynn Hershman's work for instance).

We walk a step further ahead in the field of telepresence. The participants act together from very remote places, but find themselves in the same blue box projection space, instead of facing each other they share the same virtual room. The environment becomes a meeting-point and its inner design is characterized by the fact that he is just another room we are transferred into for the time being involved. We forget about technology, we just sit on a sofa in New York with a person may be from Brazil and we act in New York and Brazil at the same time. The point of concentration is how we interact with each other as individuals on a virtual stage. Contrary to computer generated figures and objects, this artistic method of telecommunication is based on a high social meaning and on emotions.

Together with the shift of body senses through virtual touch a reinforced sensual perception and immersion seems possible. The joint of subjective reality, communicative competence and emotional social exchange in a virtual space leads to a very important factor of the term interactivity - how far can we bring in and develop our personality and communicate with each other by entering a virtual interactive media surrounding.

This symbiosis of real and virtual presence, reality and fiction leads to the metaphorical meaning of the net itself and its virtual cities, communities, discussion groups or flirts. Communication fields and meeting places are created spontaneously and together with the open contents they get their own structure. Access is individual and possible from everywhere and the performing and still isolating effect of installation works seems to dissolve. As in the projects mentioned above, personal contact in a selfconstructed cyberspace is in the center of attraction. Subjective experience and knowledge is brought from the personal room to change autodynamically the data room. Nevertheless in this the term online is very important to make the distinction between a just simpler and faster plop in your mail box and the metaphore of the inhabitants of the global village.

In a first conclusion we find out that instead of communicating with a machine to discover informations, an effective interactive work has to be a media based surrounding which offers the most highest level of involving the viewers personality. Like the symbolic immersion by taking over the identity of the film hero in a dark cinema for two hours, also the virtual room has still to be based upon the participants imagination and creativity to find more intellectual and complex ways to interact. The technology has to disappear as much as possible in this, to make the sensual shift of real and virtual worlds possible.

The more a viewer is able to integrate his body and mind and establish a communication, the more an interface turns out to be "interhuman" - as a projection field of the viewers world - the more a cyberspace changes from a place of escape or observation into a place of reflection and momentary reality, so that we might talk of a virtual consciousness as a metaphore. As a consequence It is necessary to question the terms a bit more in the theoretical discussion. Interactivity is no more an exciting phenonema, which garantees anyhow the new kick, it is even nearly a hundred years old and was called identification or intellectual dialog, as I tried to symbolize at the beginning. Within this evolutionary process of taking more and more part in a media work, "interactivity' has to be replaced by new terms like the potential of access, activity and interference, to clarify the steps ahead for a more decent analysis. The virtual room and its interaction has to split up into new categories and a catalogue of esthetical means. Like in the beginning of the century the formgiving drama in the technological experiment is not found yet. Therefore a more detailed and critical evaluation of the dif-

ferences between actual narrative structures, fictional meeting-points, symbolism and at least effectiveness in new technologies is necessary and interesting.