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Interrupted Realities

The present is not inherited from the past.
 It is borrowed from the future.
 Chief Seattle, Sioux Indian

Buckminster Fuller gifted us the metaphor of thinking of the Earth as a space ship, and our attitude as “pilots” learning to drive correctly this enormous ship through space. The way I see things: if we behave like aliens, we are doomed to push the wrong buttons.

Let me try to explain, briefly, a general portrait of the present of Latin America and how do I think there is a path to borrow from the future, to do this reflection, it is important the revision of the exact terms and definitions of a place that is different in time. This is in order to have a clear conversation.

I have chosen the quote of Chief Seattle in a very strategic way to be the start of this essay. A character that belongs to the Americas, but that does not belong to the term Latin America, even though he belongs to the original tribes of this continent. We fail to learn the virtues of Mestizaje, the attitude of incorporating, mixing and being able to see everyone. There is a need of tribal wisdom in a contemporary attitude that takes us out of a reality of fragmentation.

Latin America is a name, or a definition based on the language spoken, that excludes the original tribes or places like Belize that speak English as an official language. The term Latin America on itself has a problem of not being a good definition. As all things that do not start well, it fails to become a concept adopted by the people of Latin America and it fails to become a supraidentity, an interesting concept that appropriated could go beyond nationality. Latin America holds over 500 million people, nonetheless it is still fragmented starting by its own definition.

1971, Salvador Allende, Chile. An example of an interrupted reality.

Salvador Allende put in charge Fernando Flores of a project called CyberSyn (Cybernetic Synergy) a control center designed to require information from every corner of Chile. They hired Stafford Beer a British scientist to put this

incredible concept together. A room that was designed very much like a Star Trek command center. A theory designed to have the secretaries of state making decisions in real time. A room with no pencils just buttons. At that time there were no computers to handle information like today, so in a place far away from computers, a lot of the work of processing information was done by human interface. A lot of the work of cybernetics was based on the work of Binner in the USA. Nonetheless, the theory of administration of the information was taken by Maturana, a Chilean biologist that theorizes on the information transmission at cell level.

The government of Salvador Allende falls in 1973 the exact day that this control room was going to be inaugurated. To have a parallel of what was happening in the world, in 1969, Arpanet was being developed in the USA, the diagrams were three circles that showed the first three nodes, UCLA, Stanford Research Institute and University of Utah.

Latin America shows a problem of timing, we would like to see the region in its path to industrialization. There is a strange phenomenon in how industrialized countries have written a manual of how to become industrialized. That manual is outdated and badly written since very few things have to do with cause and effect, you have to take in consideration that at the time of countries becoming industrialized there were no others prior to them holding the field. It did not exist the strategy of countries dumping their excess of inventory in other countries in order to bankrupt their local industries.

Fragment of the speech of Stafford Beer for the inauguration of Cybersyn,

[...] modern science and particularly electronic computing offer the government a new opportunity to treat the complex problems of modern economy. We have found that in the advanced countries, the power of science is not used yet. We have developed a system in our own spirit, what you will see today, it is revolutionary, not only because is the first time it is done in the World, but because it is a conscious effort to give the power of science to the people [...]

This speech was never held, primarily because of the fall of power of Allende in 1973.

To speak of the term interrupted realities, tries to illustrate in a three-dimensional way how the world is divided in spatial interruptions, from highly developed and industrialized countries to countries that do not own a satellite. The artistic reality and the technological reality of countries like Mexico are linked to different political moves, economical crisis. All these elements cannot be separated of each other in order to understand something like a digital culture.

In the early 90s, Ernesto Zedillo, the secretary of education of Mexico (later on president of Mexico) decided to decline the budget proposed for the installation of the first node of Internet in Mexico: he said that this thing called internet was only a fashion that soon would pass, no need to put money into that...

The interruptions of knowledge, communication, information, hurt the capacity of dialog. The future problem of the wars over water will be a problem of lack of capacity of dialog and not of the absence of the liquid. How technology is approached in Mexico and Latin America is of the essence, since you cannot travel in a boat or a space ship with a very small hole, even if the hole is in your cabin. The sinking is a fate for the whole ship.

In the 70s there were many dictatorships in the region, and in some cases like Bolivia and Argentina, there were two or three coup d'état a year...

In my view, art added to technology has to have a different definition in a Latin American context. In which a digital culture is a different tool and an artist instead of a museum, he or she belongs in the building of a social net.

Not necessarily the envisioned net of the North, but a net that can be efficient and useful for the region that is originated and not only as context to an alien net, done only for imitation without prior thought of its usefulness.

In the year 2009, 70 scientists of the international community wrote to the President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón to complain about the treatment of Mauricio and Humberto Terrones, two nanotechnologists, working in San Luis Potosí in Mexico. Sir Harold Kroto came personally to talk with the minister of science and technology. One of the issues was the putting together of a very complex microscope. Mexico had bought it and decided not to take it out of the box for 6 years. Felipe Calderón never replied to the 70 scientists, the microscope is still in the box, and the Mexican nanotechnologists were fired...

Concepts like networking, communications, information, and community take a different dimension. Not for what they are doing, but for the potentiality of the window of opportunity. Talking about a future museum in Mexico should not be talked as an immediate parallel like a museum in Portugal. The reason, concepts of ethnicity, customs, essential reality, survival, resources and corruption draw a different outline. Reality defined as a picture and as a future. The creation of culture is of the essence. The right culture.

The Channel 6 of July, is a TV channel started during the 90s, whose only ways of distributing their programs was through VHS copies. The channel 6th of July sold at that time over 4 million copies. Most of the work of this channel was opposition to the political ruling power. Canal 6 de Julio is video and it is border work. It is unique as a global phenomenon and on the other hand it generates a sense of community and is able to model society. Not necessarily or strictly from the art that hangs in a gallery, but from the action within society in the novel use of technology and its capacity to be efficient. 4 million copies sold in a commercial field are equivalent to Michael Jackson.

McLuhan said, an artist in times of slow change is a luxury, in a place of quick change is in the control tower. In the Latin American context the society is in a process of slow change trapped among a global society of fast change.