

NEXTENSION: THE ADVENT OF THE NETWORK-SCREEN

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The expansion of the current media-environment due to user-generated content, portable media and social networks has changed the very notion of citizenship. We live in a post-Web world and the network-screens are extensions, they perform as portals to digital space. This is the Next Tension.

1. MEDIACENE

There was a time when there was no media-environment. As technology became part of our culture so did media. One medium after another we have woven an entire environment out of media. It began with print and it did not end on the iPhone.

The society of our time worships contents according to their activities and hobbies. Today there is no fence separating users from programmers, culture men from technology women. Indeed there aren't borders between technology media, structures, patterns and contents anymore. Perhaps we could call it the Mediacene, the moment in history in which Man changes his environment, based on media.

This is the thing: The corporation world of the 80s and the wired world of the 90s have merged into one entity alone: a user-driven techno-cultural economy. Such new media-environment is what we may call now the "post-Web" world. Yes, the World Wide Web, the Grid, cyberspace, the Internet, provided ways of functioning and entertaining we cannot disregard. Thirty years ago everybody thought we would get inside the computer world. Twenty years ago we were supposed to interact with media by means of helmets and datagloves. Ten years ago computers were supposed to run vehicles. Today we use touch-screen media, we drive GPS-guided automobiles and we have declared war on depth with 3-D cinema. If there was a border between images and reality now it is gone for good. Augmented Reality is an example of this.

We carry several portable media with ourselves and computers update themselves on their own. We speak to our GPS interfaced cars and rely on Google Maps. This not anymore the planet inhabited by Man in the once Anthropocene age. It is simply the Earth from Google Earth, a media-feature used by Men in the Mediacene age.

Lev Manovich said once that "for the first time, space becomes a media type". Such statement is so much daring and true. Since cyberspace appeared on early videogames that virtual worlds, digital cartography and electronic mapping became a fact. Behind most of our media-environment's innovations over the last decade there is map technique. Now high-resolution maps take place because of the Web's appearance. As I have said previously, this is a post-Web world. And in this moment of history, each second counts and the clock is still ticking. Should we examine better these change we should mention the advent of the "network-screen," something only possible due to the awareness of our living in a "civilization of the screen." [1] Put another way, we may understand the whole media-environment thesis by comprehending first how instead of a screen we had a network-screen. Rather than being just a computer-portal to the Web world, screens and networks got married in the 00s following a similar trend as in the 80s computers were attached to telephones.

Wherever we are standing, the network-screen grants access to data, helps us finding things and eventually reminds us of things we once were looking for.

At the same time, the Mediocene establishes that media are futuristic, as if the imagined tomorrow is today's idea. In fact, most by-products of our time are simultaneously futuristic and rely on ergonomical designs. They're a sort of prospective concepts.

Of course it is not much to highlight that in the Anthropocene, Man is believed to have changed the landscape for good. Once we understand what is at stake in the media-environment we notice that most of things surrounding us, consumer products and images, resemble "post-relief" artifacts. After three decades of hard digitizing and databases' enlargement the desktop computer became a tiny netbook, mobile phone, a smart appliance useful for using everywhere, any time. It is getting harder to distinguish as times goes by what exactly belongs on the other side of the screen and what does not. So far maybe unfortunately we are creatures of screens. Computer after computer we have built a Matrix, a real one, a high-end computation network, a media reservoir for hybrid images, the very foundation of the computer as a "metamedium." [2] After this development a computer is not seen as a household appliance, office hardware or geek gadgetry. From this moment a computer is an open portal to a network, a vast world of data. So one should not think of Gibson's characters in *Zero History* novel as being awkward whenever they're "Decked." [3] Everyone is "decked" these days.

2. APPLIED SPACE

Our next range of possibilities in working performance and entertainment features fits in the new media-environment. Computers, networks and communication sciences become one universal recognizable entity, something every person notices on media screens, in the media space, which is an "applied space". Once a person uses software and triggers information commands, a new bridge is set between the screen-world and real-world. The space where we step in and out is an applied space, and interaction happens across media-screens, henceforth becoming limit-surfaces. As users make these media their world-center all options are set on them, every track record, each choice, all things to share and recollect. On the other hand we are witnessing a transition from a pre-digital world to a fully-digitized world. What else is left to scan and digitize? What else? Right now we are for sure living in a cyborg place, since we still know we are mostly human, modern progress believers. Yet, living in pre-cyborg places was a very different experience. You really had to be there. People connected online across the Web in their limit-surfaces try to search and be found, to collect information and to belong to a larger collective. It looks like we too have a match between the collective and the network. Yes, we have. It's called "social networks", a new 21st century phenomenon.

Our time is positioning us in a new condition, for we feel like we are hostages in a liquid present. An ever-expanding media-environment digests, changes, reconfigures any element that comes across its ventures. Multiplicity became a rule of the data world. We have to understand that in this media age reality becomes multiple. It is imperative this "multiplicity", it corresponds the endless range of options that Chris Anderson mentions in the *Long Tail* book (2007). Multiplication is also a characteristic of the media-screens, video-windows, multitasking, chat dialog boxes, and so on.

A new context is available and it forces us not to choose resignation. Choose options. Create options. Citizens are now equal to consumers, and they have to be global consumers and global citizens if they do not want to face oblivion and time standing still. Thus, we are left with two new elements: cities

have to be full of new citizens, and cities have to be global. From people's point of view a new character emerges: a citizen of the world. Greek-Hellenic culture had a term for this: *philoxenia* (love thy self, the other, and long live the art of travelling). Our sole condition is to embrace the eternal adventure, the trip into an environment where we stay in touch to our network of friends on a global level. Media change the city and society. Suddenly the urban world and the media world seem to be the same world, a "big neon city", in the gibsonian sense. After all, it is true that "cyberspace" resembles a city, and we cannot stop noticing that metropolises and sprawls look like the cyber world of rendered icons of data flowing in every direction. Digital Las Vegas, perhaps.

Evolving digital space has made many things possible, mostly customization. Users, players, workers, programmers, artists, designers and technicians opt each one for their favorite elements. Our digital world is the applied space, where applications follow user's expectations and motivations, skills and preferences. A bridge could be linking both the excess by-product of supermodernity and the customizable media-environment surrounding us.

A massive array of new brands (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Twitter, Netflix, etc) makes us more and more dependent on this applied space. Our eyes are glued to media-screens everywhere we go. Once Manovich defended that "We still have not left the era of the screen" [4] and so far it is still true. We haven't left the screen. In fact it is going that way. Some things only exist inside the screen, as a world of applications available and data do. In order to understand this applied space, one has to recall that cyberspace in the last century visionaries' jargon meant "control". Remote control. The power of the world in the palm of our hands. Working on different programs at the same time. Standing or walking on different worlds at the same time (GPS, videogames, Second Life, real world) is also a multitasking phenomenon. All this multiplicity and overlaid grid of available things to do by the new urban global IT citizen is about cyberspace.

At first, the applied space of today's iPad and smartphones is cyberspace. That is correct. Though we have to accept either that cyberspace is "whatever you view on your computer screen, the electronic geography you traverse when you are on the Web." [5] So ultimately, this is all about geography. What technology allowed us to do since 1994, on a mainstream level, is to traverse, avoid, overtake, transnational borders. Fences are rendered meaningless ever since the Web came up. Which type of space is this? Gibson himself in the text *Chaos & Cyberculture* (1994), in the interview conducted by Timothy Leary, tells us it [cyberspace] is "notional space." [6] So here we have the ground set up for the advent of the "network-screen." If there was a time in which each geography had its own screen codes, that time is long gone. "Notional space" has provided us with the tools to use the applied space of the digital age: "geographics". From Google Earth, GPS, Geocache communities, the applied space of control became "the grid", the ground upon which everything has been established upon. A major contribution about this issue is provided by Higgins, as she says that "the persistence of grids demonstrates that once a grid is invented, it never disappears." [7] Cyberspace is that grid, the Web is that grid. Something we can never uninvent. It's not technology we are discussing here. It is culture, a mankind landmark, an American product to civilization. Though one thing is still working on one hundred percent, the fact of each new media image being something where the user actively goes into. Why it happens is answered by Svetlana Boym, who believes that "the computer medium is largely tactile", not merely visual." [8] The computer tablet revolution, with their promising applications, proves to be a good applied space, and it shows how Boym is quite right about it.

3. NETWORK-SCREEN

All we know is that in 1994 the cyberpunk visions of the “datascape” became true by the hands of Timothy John Berners Lee and Robert Caillau whom have tested the HTTP communication design between servers online since 1989. Yet cyberpunk authors did amazing discoveries, they imagined how audiovisually and interactively things would be like. William Gibson admits such logic by assuming that “Well, if there’s space behind the screen, and everybody’s got these things at some level, maybe only metaphorically, those spaces are all the same 'space'.” [9] Despite the “newness” of his words, the point is that what today we take for certain this post-Web world and how we interact with the network-screen, yet it began in the 80s.

Media-environment users actually belong to this new sphere, the realm of control, they have grown or matured within a "post-Web," "post-cyberspace" world. Beyond this a new characteristic is implied in space-consumption, since space became translated to images (First Person Shooter videogames, Google Maps, Terragen software for virtual landscapes), or at least computer-generated, and that is how we became “user-players”. At the same time we play and use, we travel, work and entertain ourselves.

By staying connected to this universe all interaction depends on the user's position and his tactile skills, like typing, rotating, pinching, pressing and moving icons around. So, if it’s a question of space, digital one, and if people must be users, the network-screen is the hardware-software combination which establishes best the new interaction mode with the digital world, the media-environment.

For the very first time a culture appears, being produced by “everybody”, rather than by an intellectual and social elite, regardless of national borders or social class. Now, the network-screen provides worldwide access to a screen across networks, and that is the screen of new Web 2.0 and upcoming 3.0 brands.

People feel driven to the Web world. All there is one finds it on the Web. If one does not find it that is because it is likely inexistent. More and more students upload their CVs and portfolios online. Pictures are being uploaded to Flickr, videos to YouTube, short global messages composed on Twitter accounts. For professional reasons they are connected to LinkedIn and whenever they can they chat in Facebook, Orkut, Baboo, Bebo, Digg or Hulu social networks. All the people online together outperform small cities in terms of communication flows. Some countries are smaller than the amount of online users in some social networks. The advent of the network-screen is marked by another event, the fact of circa eighty percent of users being mobile nowadays, updating anywhere, anytime.

Cory Doctorow says that "the networks that emerge are owned by everyone and no one." [10] Digital world democratizes and then is turned into a corporate cluster. This too happens. It is a second nature what we’re discussing here, and right now it is huge. Today we need a “postmedia literacy.” Media started in the mud brick of Mesopotamia all the way to modern wax disc or contemporary PlayStation and iPads. And it does not end here. As the media-environment keeps growing, a “contiguous record”, a "continuous-memory" of the digital realm, improves our information and access to it. Network-screens are so global and relatively cheap these days that sometime we forgot a major part of Earth’s population has no access to cyberspace. Regarding the true substance of cyberspace, Boym highlights it is basically “datacentric.” [11] Judging by the amount of search engines and new Web sites, ebooks now available and so on, one may think a new type of person is needed in this data world. New media has new performances. Therefore, it changes the user and the player into a sort of “data-pilot”. The wider "networking" and "data collecting" event turns people into data-pilots. Due to this, one could invoke as well the concept of transmedia event. Is it possible to describe what exactly is going on? Yes, it’s a phenomenon of “global palimpsest”. It works as an ever-increasing space of posts, blogs and news from everybody to

everybody. Like a self-growing empire of records, in the Wiki age, and some narratives move from one medium to another. Consumers keep following them.

Today 36% of Amazon books sold are digital releases for the Kindle system. We no longer search for the news, the news finds us... Networks of news are established, people gather around contents. Communities grow upon content interest, depending on which records are published, available on the network-screens.

Our media-environment keeps increasing and turns other relatively new things into obsolete items. Online is no longer a state of digital citizens, it's a law. Nobody separates computers from networks. The digital is obviously the network. It hardly seems unlikely how for some time both things, computer and the Web, were separated. "Cloud computing" establishes this at its best.

People are looking for collective waypoints. GPS and GeoCache community and the social networks are symptomatic of this substantial problem. People gather, link, unite and move towards common waypoints. Cyberspace still is the perfect spot for sharing those waypoints. It can work out fine for sharing GPS coordinates as well as ideas, texts, pictures, designs or mathematical concepts.

Our network-screen world, our attachment to the mobile media-screens is a new thing. But what leads us into it is quite old. We need the past memories and the tribes. A man without culture is an empty vessel. Yes, we live in a screen culture, and now all screens are linked together, they are so flat that images seem to acquire more depth than their media.

It is a question of performative subjectivity too. People, subjects, perform, they share, work and function based on their convictions. It is not an objective data-based world, it's a subjective-relying network. This is our time's identity card. No one can predict anything anymore, if all that happens is recorded on the Web. As soon as the network-screen has it all, everybody around the world knowing something could trigger unforeseen consequences. The more people know something the likely change is taking place. Things become impossible to anticipate. Soon there will be not much differences except those of performativity. Performance will determine how things unfold. Based on performance one will be capable of predicting the future. This transition is better explained by Gibson, who says "We're all doing VR, everytime we look at a screen. We have been for decades now. We just do it. We didn't need the goggles, the gloves. It just happened. VR was an even more specific way we had of telling us where we were going." [12] In the aftermath of this thinking, the point is that now each network-screen is a portal, a door to the media-environment, we are before the NEXTension.

References and Notes:

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