

CYBERMEDIA AND THE FATAL ATTRACTION OF REALITIES

Bilwet / Adilkno / Filwis

"Don't want, don't want, don't want to be part of your world."

David Byrne



"Away with the cameras! Away with the cameras! Sit! Down!" A lively band from Surinam danced on the balcony of the city theatre awaiting the arrival of Nelson Mandela. He was to address the 15,000 residents of Amsterdam who had flocked by. However, the musicians remained invisible as a battery (of white) press cameras was standing directly in front of them, killing time. This accordingly gave rise to irritation. As the news came that the "King of Africa" had entered the building, "the media" gathered round the microphone in the centre of the balcony. It became clear to the crowd that they wouldn't see this either and they began to scan. Spontaneously the cries of "cameras beat it" changed into angry chants of "Down with TV". This was a variant of "Down with ME!" (ME = mobiele Eenheid, the Dutch Flying Squad which is generally sent into action during riots); the picture hunters being compared to the police task force. The diffuse antimedia unease that had already been prevalent for some years with a public that had been throttled for a decade to become insignificant decor or just as insignificant consumers, changed to regard the cynical media agents as having taken over the role of the task force, depriving the masses of their happening. "The Media" have declared themselves increasingly for the happening and gradually took over the field with all their technical prosthesis. The real masses in the square in front of the city theatre had become just as imaginary to the pressmen as the viewers at home, who were just as indifferent to them.

"The masses of the people" feared they would only see the backs of some media men although they knew that Mandela had come for them, and the happening had not been intended to be an open-air press conference. The journalists sensed that it would only be a matter of time before the first stones hit their high-tech and withdrew from a meter-and-a-half wide media-free zone. Then the "Royalty in Exile" appeared in the press-free zone and had a good look around to see who all had come to him. He noticed that there were still thousands of people at the side of the balcony, standing there applauding and he forced his way through the cameras to welcome them, too.

Unlike all the popstars, football teams, queens and politicians who use the crowds for their PR, Mandela did not make a dash straight for the microphone, but took time to meet the masses. He, too, cast "the media" aside for the happening. All at once it became ven% still, and contrary to expectation, Mandela did not just reel off a number but dared in the simplicity of it all to embark on a dialogue with those present to make the purpose of ANC clear. After about half-an-hour he finished talking with the words "We respect You, we thank you and above all, we love you". We had never heard that from "the media" before.

The media anticipate being faced with a battle of life and death in the coming age of digital interfaces. The 0/1 bit principle could even have a yes/no analogy. Two staggering scenarios manifest themselves: If we say "yes" to the media then we emigrate to Cyberspace, we leave the hardware of our bodies and consciousness is entered in software. If we say "no" then we select the "exit to reality" and the media will end up as a household article or as a museum art like a vacuum cleaner and wickerwork peasant's basket.

The scale and the frequency of antimedia incidents are increasing daily but they are carefully set aside in the press or are not termed as such. Not one newspaper mentioned the above-mentioned attack on the unfriendly conduct of the media towards the public. Nevertheless, the contours of an international-scale "anti-media" movement are being outlined. The motto is that in order to meet someone at all, several connections have to be interrupted first of all. The habit of ripping a telephone box apart before going to bed, or short-circuiting a switch cabinet or pouring concrete into a meter, taking video cameras from crossroads or cutting through street cables is no longer sensational. This jointly divided art of living, which originates from do-it-yourself aid and which is set on simple pleasure is not yet beyond the stage of local disturbance. However, when the "uplinks" to the "global village" are capped en masse it is evident that many more earthly beings will use their media-free time for other things.

Viewers have enjoyed years of being thoroughly blunted by television, but that, too, becomes boring.

The plea for educational TV with justifiable broadcasts really does discourage them. Research has shown that the television viewing rate has "decreased alarmingly" of late. Even those remaining groups who still have a TV at home deny making use of it. The aversion of admitting to being a consumer leads to the reply we hear from alcoholics: "Me, and drinking?" "The few shows can not be termed watching television".

The "media caste" moves exclusively within permanent actuality, as it considers it to be their social task to avert the danger of a sudden comeback of history. For this purpose it rids all happenings of their origin and consequence by producing items with no connection and consequence. It is also aware that once the masses regain their ability to act, "the media" itself will be their first victim. "The media" was formerly an exception. The impressiveness of live moon landing pictures was due to the fact that the likes of this had never been seen before: the whole world was switched on to the fascination of sitting at home and being able to leave earth. The promise of being able to leave the unbearable inertia of life, of being able to

definitely penetrate the technological universe by speeding weightlessly from one place to the other seemed to have materialized.

Two decades later viewers became aware of what this actually meant. By turning everything into information, "the media" is capable of levelling every happening to the same pictures (all the Dutch media compared the Mandela speech to cheering the national football team). As "the media" is omnipresent, space has lost its content and can be filled with pictures from somewhere else without being something else. The only context of the place that can be seen, is the following item. The media goggles have become identical with the touristic experience of "here today, gone tomorrow". It is not necessary to confront oneself with something else, there are infos about it. "Why should we converse with one another when we can communicate so well?". The others have become obstacles or objects about which you can discover interesting characteristics. And when they become boring, you just go on.

Now reality is the exception. The media men are vaguely aware that it represents a risky temptation. Psychically they can interpret this as a romantic feeling they once had every now and again during their certain "moments". Or they can dismiss the cry for reality as nostalgia or the fear of technology. The attack on the media will, without doubt, be denounced as being the undemocratic behaviour of vandals and the disinterest as being an alarming development which can be countered with information. But the aversion to the "goggle box" is nothing more than the expression of the general human need for "outside" where one can make "experiences of one's own". Reality is regarded as being the domain of the unforeseeable and that no longer corresponds to the wonders of technology. The moral values of the anti-media movement (respect, gratitude, love?) can prevent their aversion from going so far as to definitely destroy the media. The media just have to confine themselves a little. The anti-media movement could allocate the channels of information a place in the machinery of daily life and not bother about it any more.

Now, that "the media" know they have been cornered, their response is such as to suck their consumers into the screen once and for all: cyberspace "the medium to end all media". The rumour about the "new space" which is circulating the real existing global village charges current research with enormous expectations of unbounded possibilities. The cyberspace epic has already been written by a certain Willam Gibson. The video kids nervously keep watch at the door of their arcades and the military eagerly experiment with the total interface between body and machine. Old hippies don data jackets and gloves to personally make their eastern dream of uninhibited trips into universal consciousness come true without the former withdrawal symptoms, And finally there are the video artists with their aesthetic morals, who want to keep the new cyber experience vacant to prevent it from being filled with banality. It cannot be gathered from the early works of these pioneers, to what extent cyberspace will remain a private experience in the near future, or will be the virtual vehicle of hypercommunication between cosmopolites. "Cybermedia" is the synonym for this public space which is under construction.

In the Cybermedia the distance between subject and object which presented so many difficulties for the old media, has been eliminated. All the reflecting about this and criticising on the place of self in the world and the singsong about an imaginary reality which cannot be found again in pictures, must finally come to an end. The purist narrowmindedness which endeavours to strictly separate human and virtual reality is banished by the explorers of cyberspace to the prehistory of political metaphysics. This old-fashioned need to draw lines is replaced by a democratic view of reality: if it doesn't appeal to someone, look at them through cybergoggles and it looks entirely different.

The twentieth century media have not been able to meet their promise of the "global village" as being a place of maximum mobility. The anticipated uprooting of all earthly beings by

progressive mediatization was regarded as being a part of the inescapable process of human progress. By creating a global infrastructure in which everyone can involve himself, every region should ultimately reach the escalator of history moving in the direction of prosperity and convenient life by themselves. Even now, technical progress consists of the construction of a set of ideologically neutral networks and measures:

from cable networks, motorways and (air) ports to processing waste, the mobility of workforces, raw materials, goods and information. These transregional structures could hang over traditions and nationalities like a cloud. The media idea was that by transcending local identities these would disappear by themselves, or, should this not be the case, would become uninteresting from a global perspective within infrastructural developments. The function of the regions in this planning setup is as suppliers of cultural raw materials for a varied program. If regions do not (cannot) participate, they are entered on the list of written off areas, and will remain futile voices in the wilderness of information.

Yet, the media have never produced an internationalizing effect, on the contrary they have proven themselves to be a means of consolidating local conditions. With universal communications, everyone can remain in his own place. Not everyone has succeeded in getting to know his own environment and habits as a tourist. More and more regions (Middle East, Soviet Regions, China) are beginning to interfere as jamming stations in the project of transnationalization. Old media such as religions stubbornly retain their own absolute values and cause a rumpus in the Family of Men. They simply do not want to comprehend that we are all living in one world (did they miss the broadcast of the moon landing?) They will learn this lesson yet, when it becomes apparent that their local atomic war leaves the rest of the world quite cold. Their catastrophes are not ours.

Cybermedia represents the end station in the concept of global network. It sets course for perfecting the infrastructure with the compelling motto: "A system or no system". It is their dream to accommodate all media spaces in the cyberspace house. Until now mankind has pottered about in small rooms but now there is the possibility of surveying it all and establishing contacts. In future we will be able to easily change over from all radio programs, films, archives, and libraries to all kinds of private conversations, teleconferences and teleshops, the world over.

The perpetual singsong of former realities which have served to frustrate the project of modernization for a century, is capped by being replaced once and for all by a new principle of reality. In cybermedia all "formats" of language, time, territory, identities such as sex, race, or life style, environment, health, and age are converted into the universal 0/1 code. Switch on means being everything, everywhere. The desire, originating from former grey times, to leave the mortal body is combined with just as old a desire to have a communicative community of pure people, free from domination. World peace is effected on an abstract level where playing a little game of war can only mean falling behind. In a historical sense, cyberspace is probably still traceable from war as the father of all things, but in practice, in the genealogy of technology, the fateful transfer of genetic material has also become fatal for this father. Similarly, SDI had been planned as being the climax of the cold war, however to the dismay of the military-industrial complex it brought about its abrupt end.

The threats surrounding the realm of cybermedia freedom are legion. On the one hand there are the unconvincible dissidents who — in groups — want to impose their "format" on all the data flows within the world empire of infrastructure. They regard the disappearance of time/space differences as a possibility to impose their will directly on consumers.

On the other hand, ominous subjects appear which penetrate their own loneliness and the joint consensus by running amok in cyberspace. They stab blindly with their electronic daggers at

chance passers-by. But dangers are also lurking from within. Corporations, which Gibson has already pointed out, create new bounds for their data buildings and apparently may even be able to place the entire cyberspace under their control. An exclusivity, which undermines the democratic intention and which provokes acts of opposition which have written the total accessibility on their flag. Furthermore, the electro-atmosphere can choke up in no time with the increasing volume of data waste, dilapidated environments, noises whirring around, virtual billboards which are set up along the data flow, spontaneous crashes by overload, or lack of computing capacity. Cyberspace also permits repressive and therapeutic applications which probe the belief in value-free communication.

People ask us: "Does this cybermedia have a perspective"? Artistic and popular/scientific journals create smoke signals to make the introduction of cyberware as attractive as possible. Laymen who do not previously check out, won't get any further than the question of technology. The more advanced get tied up in the question of ethics. They hope for a widespread social discussion about the safety of the new media and the disposal of the old media. Consciousness should not suffer any permanent damage from the latest psychedelica. And N.G.O.s like "save the TV" demand guarantees that the media keeping their distance must remain. The doubters are of the opinion that cyberspace — just like Starwars — is technically possible but practically, it will remain in the simulation phase. To be able to introduce it on a global scale like the telephone or the TV, would call for such an investment in hardware and software that all the entire production capacity would have to be withdrawn from civil consumption.

They expect cyberspace never to get past the level of private consciousness and that it will end as a hyperindividual kermis attraction comparable to the "Orgonkasten", dreammachine and megabrain. The neomaterialists draw attention to the limits of communication. They claim that we have had nothing to say to each other for so long and that we do not want to meet anyone, not even in cyberspace. The other can be consumed easily without involving any contact. Media convey something but fail to emit anything. One has contact with a real piece of steel or concrete without the obligation of input or exchange which is inherent in cybermedia. The visionists only give orders prophesying that the cyber project will become one of the ruins of the post-industrial overestimation of its own capacities. They do not mean this in a negative sense. They regard the failure of the megachip as a challenge for the artist to actualize the ruin-aesthetics with the written-off electronics.

To pacify this interpretation rage, the cyber philosophers refer back to an intellectual concept which has been valued highly for centuries: the Hegel structure of "Aufhebung". The difference between the virtual, formerly known as the "spirit" or the "imaginary" and reality presented as the absolute principle is reconciled in the simple advertising slogan "virtual reality". The magnetism of this logogram could turn out to be a bitter disappointment. Particularly among the antimaterialists there is a significant rejection of the entire marketing idea. They consider cyberspace only to be a real increase in the number of media and reject the critics as being nothing more than a secondary murmur which merely belongs to the introductory phase of a new product. The assurance that the contents of cyberspace simply consists of all the previous media makes them indifferent to the promise of a "new mythical space". They could accept a completely animated arsenal of pictures, as cameras could then disappear from the public eye. But cybermedia should become much more than a 3D video game and their craving for pictures will continue to force them to leave the studios and to nourish themselves on extramural street picture material.

The cybermedia charm is the naivity with which it approaches the world. It feels that artistic fascination is sufficient to obliterate reality. The world continues to withdraw from its own terminal. This does not disturb reality in the slightest. It is aware of the very human need for

the illusionary and waits until this has passed again. However, the question is — can the antimedia movement also be as patient.

Foundation for the advancement of illegal knowledge (ADILKNO)