On the Information Myth
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Cyberspace! Virtual Reality! Internet! Multimedia! Where all your dreams will come true; where there is something for everyone; where finally the cure for all boredom resides. The gushings of cyberhype spew forth from corporate press releases, syndicated news services, erudite theory journals. We want so much to believe. For a while there we almost believed in the end of all grand stories of belief. But there is no need for that, now that cyberhype, the retooled, rebadged, shrink wrapped version of the information myth, has come amongst us. Let us all praise William Gibson! Let us all praise Bill Gates! Let us all praise — who was that virtual reality guy who was in all the magazines? No matter, praise the spirit of them all.

Information is a curious thing, with many of what Marx might have called 'theological subtleties'. I've never been convinced that there could be any such thing as a science of information, any more than there could be a science of magic spells. The only definition of information that ever appealed to me is Gregory Bateson's: "information is the difference that makes a difference."

There is, however, an art of information. It consists not only in styling something such that, despite the serendipity of interpretation, it will make a difference for someone, somewhere. It consists also in the restyling of such somethings in the process of interpreting them, on the receiving end.

That the audience is an equal collaborator in the art of meaning has never been a fashionable idea in art theory. This is perhaps why art theory has so little to say about those new means of purveying information that are now upon us, where the codes of reception are as yet unknown and have to be invented, willy-nilly, by those who are about to receive. In any case, perhaps the beginning and end points in the process, the creation and reception, are no longer quite so distinguishable. Perhaps it is the vectoral quality of information that matters now. The author is, as the phrase has it, dead. The audience is dissolving into the fuzzy logic of polysemy, and as for the text, the text is no longer a thing, but a vector. Its main property is increasingly the velocity and direction in which it moves. It appears less and less a thing and more and more a relation.

… I'm watching the 1995 Academy Awards on TV while I write this. They just gave Quincy Jones an award for something. I was really moved by his acceptance speech. The man knows how to turn on a humble magnificence on stage. Cut to a lipstick ad with Cindy Crawford, then an ad for spa baths. I turn the sound down with the remote …

If there is an art of information, might it not also be the case that information is the matter of art? This I think may be the way art appears increasingly in these times. It is not the sensuous

physical properties that we take to be the matter of art. It is not even the qualities of image. It is the qualities of *relation* those properties and images support.

For some time now the relations art becomes have appeared to gain increasing independence from the singularity of the form in which they were first prepared. For some time now the practice of art has tended towards the most tedious specialisation, formalisation, jargonisation, and also to its opposite, to a svelte and nimble play with the leading edge of abstraction — the point where art objects disappear into art vectors. 'New Media Art', 'Electronic Art', 'Multimedia Art' partake of the best and worst of these developments.

But why is it that in art, in commerce and in everyday life, information has become a mythic, fetish notion? Why this myth *now*? This seems to me the only way I can approach this problem the good folks at *Ars Electronica* have set for me, this question of the 'myth of information'. The modern critical spirit exposed 'myth' for what it was — belief without foundation in a rational accounting for experience. The modern critical spirit went on to find myth still clinging even to its own revealings of myth. Now many of us suspect that if you keep peeling away the layers of onion skin that is myth, all you find is more myth.

… Michelangelo Antonioni just got an award for his cinema of ellipses, of silence. They play a clip from the end of *Zabriskie Point* where everything blows up in slo-mo to Pink Floyd. I'll never forget seeing that when I was a teenager …

The problem compounds when what one has to peel is information, in search of the myth of information. You peel it away from itself until you are left with — nothing. So perhaps we might go the other way around — let's make a myth about the myth of information, in the hope that a little reason might be hiding somewhere in its skins.

Once upon a time people were thrown onto the earth. It was a hard place. They didn't like it much. They were afraid. So they got together and set about making it better for themselves. They got pretty good at this. They prospered and propagated. They came to see the earth as 'nature', as something from which they drew life, but as something separate from themselves. This made them unhappy. They felt like they were thrown onto the earth. And so they dreamed of remaking the earth in their image. They imagined a new geography. They developed words, tools and relations amongst themselves that allowed them to make of this nature something else. A new home more to their liking, more fitted to the way they found themselves. They made for themselves a second nature.

Eventually, second nature had door knobs that turned and cigarette lighters that lit and pop up toasters that popped up. Folks used words, tools and relations amongst themselves to make it so. They were at home in the world. Well, some of them were. Most people felt as if thrown onto the hard concrete of second nature as their ancestors might have felt thrown upon the earth. They were afraid of this hard, dark second nature. And so they dreamed of remaking second nature in their image. They imagined a new geography. Sometimes they seized the controls and set about building it.

They failed. Their efforts were heroic, but they were not the heroes of this myth. So people struggled on. They developed words, tools and relations amongst themselves that allowed them to muddle through, building second nature higher, wider, faster, until it covered almost all of the earth. But the people were not happy. The no longer told the stories about how fair the new geography would be once they finished building it. They no longer told stories about

how when they overthrew the people who controlled its building and built it for themselves it would be fairer still.

… My television sings to me. Elton John appears on the screen. He writes songs for the movies now. The first record — remember records? — the first record I ever bought was one of his. I don't have it any more. Now there is an ad for hair stuff …

So anyway, second nature got bigger and faster and less and less under any real control. Some people managed to make bits of it suit their needs and keep them conformable for all their days, but they did it at the expense of other people. All this while something else was going on. People were building a new geography, but didn't quite know it. They thought they were creating ways of making second nature work better.

It started with the telegraph. Then came the telephone. Then a wonderful thing I am watching now called the television. Then they extended this whole new thing around the curve of the earth and called it telecommunications.

… they just gave another special award — to Clint Eastwood. I remember my sister and her boyfriend took me to the drive-in to see one of his spaghetti westerns. I don't think they really wanted to take me, but my sister had to mind me, so there you go. Her boyfriend was what we used to call a lair, a larrikin. He was a bit flash. He drove us into the drive-in through the exit gates just after the film started, with his headlights off, in his silver Alfa Romeo, so we didn't have to pay …

What was so strange about all these tel-things is that they all enabled the people to send information about the place faster than they could get about the place themselves. Faster than they could ship goods around. Faster than they could go and beat up on each other. They made a name for the strange new perceptions caused by this criss-crossing of the geography of second nature: telesthesia, or perception at a distance. A word they made for it and promptly forgot.

The people were so busy using these new tools of telesthesia to rejig second nature, to make it work harder and faster and further, that they did not notice that it was creating a whole new geography. Slowly, line by line, they made for themselves a third nature.

And bit by bit, little by little, all their old dreams of a new geography, all their talk about all their tools, wound up passing along the vectors of this strange new skin of the world. But still they were not happy. They still felt thrown into this world. Not onto the earth, for the concrete skin covered the earth. Not onto the concrete, for the skin of telesthesia covered the concrete. They felt thrown into the web of the media vector. Sometimes they were afraid that it was stealing their souls. But mostly they were just bored.

And there was nowhere left to go. They no longer believed they could imagine a new geography and build it. What if it turned out as hard to land on as the old ones? So they believed in nothing, and forgot all about believing for a while.

Some people called this postmodernism.

… one of the producers of the movie Forrest Gump comes onto my TV and says, as he takes his award that "we should be proud to work in an industry that can entertain, educate and empower." …

But every now and then, when they were not bored or frightened by telesthesia, playing its firelights into their eyes, its rhythmic chanting into their ears, they would be seized by the promise of a new geography. Only now the earth they would write for themselves is a virtual geography. One made out of pure vectors of information, where every point on the earth can reach every other point on the earth, instantly and effortlessly and cheaply. Only they won't be points any more because you can move about on second nature and be in touch with things in third nature all at the same time! So the earth will be a teaming net of vectors, gossamer lines like fairy lights in the night.

And it will save us from boredom! It will save us from fear! It will save us from tyranny! It will save us from the hard bump against the ground, against each other, against our selves! We no longer have texts we have vectors. We no longer have roots, we have aerials. We no longer have origins we have terminals.

Or so some say. Mostly the people who get to build it, or rent it out, or play on it. Third nature grows outwards, extending itself ever more thoroughly around the earth. Third nature grows inwards, intensifying its dense weave of vectors wherever they form into dense clumps of heat, light and power. Third nature reaches out to the stars and in to the unconscious. And they became what they beheld.

… I watch TV here in Australia, and I see pictures of what is happening there in Hollywood, on the other side of the earth. I write them down with my laptop, and then I send these words via modem to people there in Austria, who put them in this catalogue that is here with you now. This is telesthesia, perception at a distance. What there is to perceive is the trace left by all these vectors. The sense of 'here' that they make is the here of third nature, which finds its way into the pores of the 'there' that is Hollywood USA, Sydney Australia, Linz Austria …

Third nature will save us from second nature and from the terrible damage that second nature has done to the thing we grasped in our hand as nature, and which ceased to be natural as soon as we so grasped. This is a myth about the information myth and where it came from. A myth only stays a myth if a lot of people for a lot of different reasons find that it gives them hope, allays their fear, relieves their boredom. Perhaps, even if it isn't true, it has uses. It is a way of understanding the relentless, endless, pointless, becoming-abstract of the world.

Perhaps it is better to believe in the impossible so that one can make it possible, rather than to put up with the possible only to see it become impossible.

… and I would like to thank my producers, my directors, my editors, my teachers, especially Karl Marx, Rosa Luxembourg, Georg Lukacs, Henri Lefebvre, Joan Robinson, Gregory Bateson, Harold Innis, Raymond Williams, Bernard Smith, Meaghan Morris, Paul Virilio, Fred Jameson, and the late, great movie legend, Guy Debord …

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