Nature is Perverse Sometimes
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Is our meme pool stagnant, expanding or collapsing?

If our contemporary cultures are conservative and intolerant of anomaly and change, the meme pool must be stagnant in many regions. If the natural world is being absorbed and completely interwoven with the artificial [or symbolic], then meme mutation is rampant and the meme pool is expanding. If in fact there are literally thousands of languages and cultures being destroyed by a handful of imperialistic techno-cultures, then it is clear that the meme pool is collapsing.

With the advance of electronic and now digital technologies, clearly the balance of culture has been altered and there is change everywhere. Non-electronic cultures, traditional cultures based in unplugged biological and sociological experience are endangered and threatened with extinction. As communications and information technologies are introduced to all cultures globally, cultural diversity is reduced. At first traditional cultures are merely infected with artificial cultures. The initial infection is not fatal. The arrival of artificial cultures is initially greeted as a gift from far away. Artificial, electronic cultures are designed to travel far and wide. They have global mobility and once a technological infrastructure is established, destruction of traditional, non-electronic cultures is imminent and swift.

An argument can be made that artificial, even seemingly alien cultures are no less natural than traditional cultures. Man is natural and everything that man does is natural. If one is in the director's chair of a techno-culture, or if one is represented or served by an artificial culture, then it's hard to argue against success. Those not represented or served are quick to be threatened and perhaps smart to resist. There are many who stay away from computers and computer networks simply because they feel awkward and frustrated when in relationships mediated by digital machines.

One strategy to reverse the dominance of artificial, alien, digital cultures is to fill the machines with natural biological and social phenomena, at least symbolically. Whether this is pictures of animals and plants or vaginas or penises or the mega-polyphony of chat lines, the content of any new medium is its users [unless you are excluded — then your exclusion is the content]. To illustrate my point, let me introduce some images of nature to this digital text. Viruses and bugs tunnel effectively through elaborate switching systems, waiting patiently for open gates. Weeds and vines twist around and force their way into network backbones. Cockroaches, mice and rats scurry from Chicago to Melbourne to Lima to Kigali in milliseconds. The little creatures blaze the trails, while people sit transfixed by screenlight.

We bathe in the screenlight of our computers, sitting as still as plants, facing an artificial light source, its surface articulated with symbolic nature. Artificial life [A-life] and natural life [N-life] are reduced to a barrage of symbols, language itself as the primary experience. When we leave our workstations and go outdoors even nature itself appears symbolic. The black birds, the crows and ravens, talk to us as they eat our garbage. The squirrels perform high wire acrobatics as they chase each other from telephone pole to pole across sagging lengths of fiber optic cable. Which species are information rich or information poor? Will A-life and N-life eventually trade places? Will virtual representations of extinct N-species take over cyberspace? Will A-life spill out of our machines and escape into the sunset?

God, I don't know. I do know that we don't appear to give one sweet fuck about the natural environment. We love to model cyber-ecologies and talk about how representation is a dead issue. It's construction time! A-life is under construction, N-life is under destruction [not deconstruction]. The argument is that A-life will help us understand N-life, what's left of it. Thinking about complex, parallel, interdependent systems [A-life and N-life] is good. Artificial systems can provide insights into natural systems. I can accept all this post-biological, pan-ecological posturing, if it is leading us towards a greater awareness of our global environmental crisis. When I remove my VR headset, I find I'm living in a burned-out, totally out-of-date industrial city in the rust-belt of the American northeast. Syracuse, New York, sits on the south end of a large "freshwater" lake, Onondaga Lake, which is so polluted it can barely support bacteria, let alone fish.

Why are particular domains of the technological environment so hostile to certain memes?

The seas are empty [once-abundant species such as Atlantic Cod are threatened with extinction], but the majority of highly educated, computer-networked artists, writers, theorists, critics, scientists worldwide are more interested in the emergence of A-life than they are concerned about the disappearance of N-life. The memes stating "nature's in trouble", the images of clear-cut forests, waterfowl covered in crude oil or dead dolphins being removed from commercial fishing nets — these memes have become common in the news media. You 'll find "nature's in trouble" memes on television news reports and in newspapers and magazines. But you will not find "nature's in trouble" memes on the Net in any great abundance.

This absence of "nature's in trouble" memes on the Net can be explained in a number of ways. People living in cyberspace are largely urban creatures, their natural environments have been covered by concrete and asphalt for so long, their air has always been blue-gray with exhaust fumes; they don't count the natural environment when they take stock of their quality of life. Nature, for the urbanite, is The Body and the body is thought of as a discrete biological universe for limited sensual awareness and reproduction. For most networked urban intellectuals, the body is the necessary site of the mind - nothing more, nothing less.

In the context of the "Memesis" project, none of the participants are professional conservation biologists. Thus, it is not our professional business to see extreme, tragic irony when fleshing out the cultural ecology [of memes] during an era of catastrophic biological collapse. There are lengthening lists of endangered, threatened and extinct species on the WWW, but "pictures" of declining air and water quality, of species of plants and animals that have disappeared or are rapidly disappearing, are not on the Net, not yet.

Partly it's a problem of bandwidth and fidelity. The Net for most is still an electronic multimedia "magazine" of text, stills, moving picture clips and fragments of voices and sounds. Real-time digital video of reasonable resolution would offer the potential of better pictures of nature. But then the advertisers would move in. Advertisers would pummel the Net with the "nature is fresh and clean and beautiful" meme attached to and contextualizing whatever they were trying to sell. Anyone with access to commercial television in North America [and unfortunately far beyond via satellite, microwave and cable …] is inundated with messages about beer that is made from cleaner and colder water in Canada, or land-roving four-wheel drive vehicles that can climb mountains, or sanitary napkins that smell like wildflowers in a meadow! The "nature is … beautiful" meme is being pumped out into

television land in massive doses. The "nature is … beautiful" meme also does very well in magazines, on billboards and backlit photomurals.

So, to recapitulate, we find the "nature is in trouble" meme doing pretty well on the television news. We find the "nature is … beautiful" meme flourishing in the advertising space of television, billboards, photomurals and magazines. [And the "nature is amazing" meme is abundant on the cable nature channels; and the "nature is unpredictable" meme is omnipresent on the cable weather channels.] None of these nature memes do particularly well on the Net, not yet.

Advertising designers are engaged in sophisticated cultural or memetic engineering. They propagate and introduce new strains of memes and they analyze the success or failure of memes or examine new relationships between memes and memes, and memes and audiences. They study and track how audiences adapt to memes and they quickly alter memes to more effectively influence people. Advertising designers are well versed in the site of memetic reception - human consciousness. They understand thoroughly the social psychology of the advertising audience. Advertising designers are just turning their attention to the Net. It remains to be seen how long it will take them to introduce "nature is…beautiful" memes to the Net.

If advertising designers practice memetic engineering on a massive scale, what possible impact do artists have on the memetic environment?

Artists, like advertising designers, have been practicing memetic engineering since the dawn of cultural evolution. Artists have been producing somewhat different results with their signals and have been focusing their energy into different pathways. But, strangely enough, memetic engineering procedures employed by artists have yielded a very similar "product" to advertising. Audiences have been able to differentiate between advertising and art memes largely because of previous memetic experience [advertising and art are usually received in clearly different contexts]. In other words, people's memories are organized by the kinds of memes they've experienced and stored. Advertisers use the "nature is … beautiful" meme to instruct people to buy certain products if they wish to connect with nature. For instance, the scenic natural environment is used to sell all-terrain, four-wheel drive vehicles. If a person has absorbed thousands of hours of "nature is … beautiful" memes in an advertising environment [such as commercial television], an experience in the natural environment itself may "instruct" this person to buy a four-wheel drive vehicle. Nature itself is transformed into a meme.

An artist may construct the "nature is … beautiful" meme in a very similar way to advertising, in an attempt to yield a very different result. A traditional approach would be to make a picture of the natural landscape, using oil paint on canvas or colour photography or video in an installation context. The meme in this case is a stereotype; the beautiful, unspoiled natural landscape should still be a worthy subject for art. It is after all the birthplace of the human species and therefore should illicit warm feelings. If through individual style the artist can send a clear signal to the audience that this landscape picture is his or her personal vision of the landscape, while proving that the landscape represented is essential and still significant to the viewer as well, then an actual experience in nature may "instruct" a person to buy a painting or photograph or video installation by such and such artist. Of course the key factor in this scenario is literacy — sufficient prior learning by the audience. If the audience exposed to landscape art is skilled only in absorbing television commercials, and not viewing art, then

viewing an art work that represents the natural landscape may simply prompt one to buy an all-terrain four-wheel drive vehicle.

The "nature is … beautiful" meme can be constructed in any number of ways, but if it is an image of a natural landscape unspoiled by man, it will be perceived according to the viewer's prior experience. His or her memory of the natural landscape and/or all memetic representations of the natural landscape will determine how any new landscape experience will be processed. For city dwellers the natural environment is quite an abstraction. Four-wheel drive vehicles are often called pathfinders. They can leave the beaten track and provide access to virgin territory. To find a natural landscape to match the beautiful nature memes we experience in advertising or art, we'll probably need an all-terrain vehicle. Nothing beats a meme for convenience and symbolic clarity.

Serious artists have pretty much abandoned the unspoiled landscape. Instead they've embraced a "nature is a tragic background for man's mess" meme, if they are intelligent, aware of their surroundings and inclined to be critical. Being critical is an important factor in making contemporary art distinguishable from advertising. The advertising designers stay away from the "nature is a tragic background …" meme, because it won't sell anything. It's too much like the tragic nature stories on the news, the oil spills or the Chernobyls. Even "green" products, themselves critical of environmentally-incorrect products, are still sold with sunshine, flowers and the glistening surfaces of clean water.

Artists generally insist on launching their own brand of memes into the world. They can create their own kinds of memes by choosing to twist and pervert stereotypes, reaching larger audiences preconditioned to receive stereotypical memetic products. If they choose to work with stereotypes and thus manipulate audiences predisposed to be responsive only to stereotypes, they pit themselves against advertising designers and the advertising industry's powerful commercial engines of replication and dissemination. In terms of nature memes, this can pose serious problems. It's hard to be effectively critical of those who destroy the natural environment if your "critical" action is to make pretty pictures of the natural environment.

Artists can of course play a different, more subversive role in today's memetic universe. They can choose to create and launch anomalous memes, atypical signals, practically unrecognizable messages too personal and obscure to be understood and passed on to many others. If advertising designers and commercially inclined artists push around stereotypes, then it is also apparent that other artists will describe the world with obscure and atypical memes [a-types]. Audiences, with the exception of other artists and/or others also conceiving of and promoting a-types, will generally overlook atypical memes [a-types].

Up to this time, survival for atypical memes [a-types] and for the artists who issue them has depended on whether or not these a-types would cluster and emerge as useful prototypes and then finally evolve into stereotypes. A stereotype is an exceedingly common and stable meme, a knowledge structure whose variation and further evolution is compromised because of its usefulness in its current, mature form. Many believe it is impossible to reach a broad audience unless one is dealing with stereotypes. If stereotypes are the raw material at the base of advertising, then artists have a responsibility to work with atypical memes — memes that no advertising designer would touch with a ten-foot pole. Art should exert a force in opposition to or in conflict with advertising.

With the Net and the horizontal communication and connectivity it engenders, artists and others inclined to create atypical memes must begin to define their own version of nature in

cyberspace. Pools of a-types are forming as virtual communities of artists and kindred, others meet and exchange atypical images and ideas of nature at various Web-sites. Unfortunately the advertising people will arrive with their "nature is … beautiful" memes sooner than we would like. The pollution of advertising will obscure all other forms of memes. The threat of the advertising industry's imminent arrival should not dissuade us from our own instinctive efforts to bridge the increasing gap between culture and nature. The territory we once knew as the natural environment, no matter how problematic the use of the nature meme has become, cannot be abandoned. Nature cannot be left behind.