Hybridentities

syncretic cultures—diasporic subjectivities—hybrid identities

From an ethnographic point of view, I would like to focus on this year's "Ars Electronica", crossing digital communication, cultural mutations, techno-syncretism, mimetic prosthesis and hybrid identities. **Hybridentities.**

Hybrid ◄ ◄

In Western tradition, the concept of hybrid has two historical and cultural matrices, one *genetic* and the other *mythological*. In the first case, a hybrid being is sterile, because a product of the union of animals of different species cannot itself reproduce. This means that hybrid is an anti-value, especially for pro-creationist cultures. In the second case, hybrid figures represent the risk of a regression towards some animal and human mixture (sphinx, harpy, or chimeras as mythical cut-ups): here the coexistence of unsettling traits underlines an atavistic fear of falling prey to an irrational power, in which the myth destroys a purely reason-based identity.

Assembling these two different matrices, the concept of hybrid manifests sterile and regressive reactions, it produces irrationality and fear, still used as a stigma: "You are a hybrid" as a moral obsession *against* impure identity and *for* a pro-creationist imperative.

Such a *bio-mythical* imperative confirmed the choice of instrumental reason, pure identity, dualistic logic, anti-relativistic universalism. Outside these four theoretical frames, there is the risk of falling into a mortal aporia for a kind of logos that must restore its logical order against any aporetical discourse, fluid identity, diasporic subject, cultural syncretism, pluri-logical perspectives.

Syncretism is a similar concept to hybrid, usually connected by "great" philosophy to a superficial mixture of different system of thoughts or behaviors, a blend of incompatible fragments. Consequently, both concepts-hybrid and syncretic-represent the risk of a sterile superficiality from the point of view of a pure and universalistic system of logic.

Beyond such a traditional (and still dominant) iron cage, a different meaning of hybrid (and also of syncretism) has been appearing in recent years as a consequence of several processes:

- info-biological research
- flows of post-colonial subjects
- the emergence of digital mediascapes and e-spaces
- an erotic attitude *(erotitude)* toward post-human body and non-procreationist behavior

Info-biology, post-colonialism, technoscape, e-spaces, erotitude are converging toward a visionary, contructivist, de-centered meaning of hybrid, no more condemned to regressive imaginations. Hybrid cultures favor liberational bodyscape, spreading **syncretic cultures, diasporic subjectivities, hybrid identities.**

Beyond (not against) the tradition of a pure rationality, *hybrid, syncretic, diasporic* underline the possible coexistence between different and incompatible processual codes, and the liberation of floating meanings long imprisoned inside the clarity of mono-logical thought. Here I should like to propound the aporetical depth of impure superficiality.

I would like to stress that—through incompatible behavior and displaced erotitude—hybrid is going to spread a multi-prospective, multi-narrative, multi-sequential communicational

process; a fluid criss-crossing among ethno-digital cultures. Syncretic, diasporic and hybrid cultures are affirming the desire for extreme differences as the base of a new egalitarianism.

▼ ▼ *Every universal is partial—every singular is plural—every purity is hybrid—every history is polyphonic—every taxonomy is anomic* ▲ ▲

Prosthesis ■■

The research on web-communication, electronic art, hybrid identity may develop a new *ethnography inside the web and through the web*. It favours a pluri-codes co-extensive representation. If I select two different codes—an alphabetical and iconic one—and then I morph them, the result is an in-between alpha-iconic junction, a sort of language through physiognomic codes. Such physiognomic communication does not lend itself to any form of linear reading or understanding through the traditional interpretative approach. They are syncretic codes—and not synthetic. *Body-signs;* I look at sounds; I feel codes and touch icons. I add sensorialities in my simultaneous decoding music, writing or visual art: an extension of my traditional sensorial perceptions. Structuralistic rules, semiotic squares, binary oppositions no longer work.

▦ *Five angel-bodies come out from the screen-water spreading drops of electronic soundscape. In a reloaded dead factory, Bill Viola's Water Notes* ▦

Following a philosophical approach to anthropology, based on fundamentalist, vitalistic, objectivistic criteria, it was affirmed that any Western technological discoveries were a prosthesis added to human organs in order to carry out activities that "naturally" our body was not able to perform (Gehlen). From such a methodology, the telephone became a prosthesis of the human ear, movies of the eye, the car of our legs, and so on to the contemporary discussion about the PC as a brain prosthesis. In this relationship between technology and isolated parts of the human body there persists one of the worst philosophical traditions (that I imprecisely define as "illuministic"): on the one hand there is the evolutionistic "nature" of *homo sapiens* philogenetically constituted since the famous "critical point"; on the other, techno-culture is added to "nature", leaving every single sense unchanged in its ontological *naturalia*.

It should be clear that such a paradigm does not work. No technology is added to an organ, leaving it ontologically intact and separated from all the "rest". A technological prosthesis (post-human body) is not related only to "its" own sense, but—in different and changing ways—to all the others. Every sense is interlaced in a fluid connecting to all the other senses. According to Scheper-Hugues (2000), my anthropology focuses a **mindfull-body** perspective: it means a *body full of minds,* different minds disseminated along the whole body in a cognitive sensoriality. Here we have a pragmatic post-Cartesian methodology, beyond any dualistic opposition.

In such a perspective, the fluid bio-cultural traits include and do not exclude technology. There is nothing *natural* about the eye. The eye exercises a growing function incomparable to that of the past; the eye co-participates in the innovation processes spread by techno-communication, and its ability to look at things is continuously challenged and modified. The traditional dichotomy—here the cultural prosthesis (PC-screen) and there the natural eye—is overcome and constantly remixed. My perception systems, my sight sensitivity, my art of looking at things, my velocity in decoding are all improved, modified, pluralized, and accelerated in relationship to new forms experienced through the web toward unexplored interconnections.

Between bio-cultural eye and prosthesis a mimetic process of hybridization is taking place. And such a "local" hybrid process is diffused along the mindfull-body.

The biology-technology link *(info-biology)* becomes deeper and more complex, so the act of "seeing" becomes a sort of continuous training that problematizes (alters) traditional boundaries, which clearly separated the nature/culture levels. The new anthropological frontiers of seeing are porous, they favor bi-directional—bio-cultural and techno-natural— flows that are producing models no longer distinguishable from a prosthesis added to an organ, leaving the latter unchanged. For such new visions of looking inside the digital communication perspective, the prosthesis-model become completely obsolete and something much more interconnected appears.

There is a growing hybridization between body (mindfull-body) and digital technologies. The question of identity connected to Ars Electronica (and not only to this) presents such decentered and fluid scenery: *our body is hybridized through an interfaced and interbodied* mimetic process.

Gehlen's prosthesis is related to the illuministic body as the mindfull-body is connected to digital web-communication, from ontological objectivism to mutoid multi-viduality. Cronenberg's *Videodrome* is the philosophical manifesto for visual-body, screen-face, TV-eye announcing the 80s, the new era, just at the same time as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Cronenberg and Gibson are visual anthropologists and cultural philosophers more complex and deeper than Gehlen (cf. Canevacci, 2003; Marchesini, 2002).

Multi-vidual ◄◄

Hypertexts produced so far are disappointing because they are based on the mere juxtaposition of different narrative patterns (essays, images, sounds, tales etc.), connected by *keywords* oriented to the production of new meanings. This montage of traditional languages certainly needed some changing, but the hypertext does lie beneath its potential.

The perspectives opened by digital communication, visual art and web-ethnography could be different. Any single narrative plot should elaborate an intimate non-linear representation: any frame may communicate writing, sonic, iconic, graphic narrations; its *semiotic immanence* constructed through altering logics for altered identities, crossing from this multi-linguistic immanence to dislocated, accelerated and random plurilogic.

This hypertext—alliterated in its hybrid immanence—has no end and no beginning, maybe not even a final meaning; it plays with a constant and irresolvable mixing with figural logics, sonic writings, tactile screen, ophthalmic codes; the work of interpretation for any possible meaning is not only linguistically but even logically and figuratively different within the same subject. This is the experience of a *passage* from an *in*-dividual to a *multi*-vidual who crosses a random mix of pluri-textualities.

This is a challenge for the traditional *in*-dividual (the Latin translation of Greek a-tomon), spreading **multi-vidual** with polyphonic and diasporic identities. A new subjectivity is emerging that *travels* beyond the cyborg. In Haraway, the cyborg still communicates ambivalent oscillations between hope and menace against dualisms. The actual problem is to move *beyond—not against—any dualism and universalism.*

Avatar is beyond cyborg.

In the web communication, the aesthetic, cognitive, visual, perceptive, mental flows are multi-linear, multi-sequential, and multi-perspective, inside any single expressive segment of meaning. Aporetic figures, sensorial logics, post-dualistic representations, altered identities, tactile and retractile bodies. Diasporic logics. A diasporic attitude penetrates inside logic transforming it into intellective sensoralia.

Orlan produces herself as *Self-hybrid/action* and Meredith Monk sings *Scare Song.*

My-selves قـأ

Bodyscape connected to e-space performs a mobile my-selves. The relationship between bodyscape, digital culture, web-communication, and performing identity can liberate polyphonic selves *and* simultaneous languages. Beyond the traditional language, I stress *my-selves* in order to spread a pluralization of selves inside any subject: a mindfull-body full of selves. *Body-selves* (Canevacci, 2003a).

Every self is a plural cluster of selves. Through digital morphing, it is possible to spread out a *digital collage,* beyond the collage in the surrealistic sense as a juxtaposition between two (or more) incongruous codes. Morph inserts figural transformations into a pixellated visualscape, overcoming the traditional distinctions between animated and still life, human and animal, technologies and body, even gender and ethnicity, resulting in the dissolution of any static identities.

If pixels are part of my skin, it is not possible to define where the psycho-materiality of my mindfull-body starts or finishes. This new level of subjectivity interlaces itself with morphing.

To quote Sobchack, "the morph interrogates the dominant philosophies and fantasies that fix our embodied human being and constitute our identities as discrete and this reminds us of our true instability: our own physical flux, our lack of self-coincidence, our subatomic as well as subcutaneous existence that is always in motion" (2000, xii).

Such a non-coincidence between the self and the underskin existence is not a loss, but a potential multiplication of minds disseminated along a bodyscape. This new imaginative-productive level of morphing destabilizes old western metaphysics, de-centers any debate about values and authority.

The plural of "I/me" is not "we/us" but "egos". A polytheism of *selves, eus, ii, yos* is avatar. From community to connectivity.

As M. Novack visualizes: "the cybernetic revolution brings us the cyborg as the second phase of self formation through technological increasing. The third phase has just appeared in cyberspace : the virtual complete embodiment, the avatar".

▼

Inside a Novack's liquid space, *Pan Sonic* are playing the physicity of electronic noise, a panic industrial sound: a sonic physicity is a *soundscape* and an *e-space*. An extra-systole of the egos.

▲

Heteronomies צֹאֵצָאֵי

The new figural and narrative modes amplify every linguistic cross between selves and others. Morphing embodies and disembodies any possible others. Morphing is the inquietude *(desassossego)* of a subject transforming his/her face into another visus. *Face-off :: Faces-in*.

Identity is challenged in its translucent skin which mutates in restless physiognomics. The transit from collage to cut-up and then to morphing expresses the maximum of inquietude through a subject who experiments the extravagant plurality of egos-visus.

The morphed identity expresses the cipher and the *glipho* of Fernando Pessoa's heteronomies walking *nas ruas de Lisboa*. A poet is a multitude, a multitude of heteronomies. *Desassossego ...*

Through digital communication, *heshethey* wish the diffusion of liquid significant, beyond any petrified meaning; favor floating and corrosive codes against any universalistic power of symbols; a restless performance of **memory** and **amnesia.**

I-skin : Avatar

In the French-glocal website www.I-skin.com a body-skin—an interconnected pixel-body—is designing architectural-body features, and *I-skin* appears with all *its* perceptive, perverted, figural modifications.

I-skin is a collaborative effort of artists from different disciplinary fields. The web installation assembled visual interfaces allowing users-visitors to interact with graphical three-dimensional avatars; their formal aspects are decided directly by themselves through the action of different *I-skins* which can modify any parameters on an architectural body.

"The avatar is the interface that will in the future enable people to experiment with virtual environments through new senses and by extending the communication modes. The process of creating an avatar illustrates the link between information and appearance: I-skin, an information skin".

I-skin can be interpreted as the *skin-of-ego,* an *ego-skin:* a generative identity related to physical dimensions, cultural gender, deep desires, pixel aspirations and pixel suspiria … It focuses on another cybernetic revolution: after its first invention (Wiener) and cyborg (Gibson-Haraway), the third is the avatar, the embodiment of the virtual—its *somatiaction*.

The avatar wants to affirm the multiplicative performance of a body extended through its communicational hybrid-prosthesis. The avatar bodyscape routing on the web is *a somatized info-bio body.*

Hybrid-scape : hybrid-body : hybridentity …

Somatization emerges between translucent pixels and skins. The term "somatization" is used to focus on a pathology penetrating into a body; and somatization as a symptom that transforms a disturbing discomfort into "soma". In an avatar perspective, somatization may express a *skinny metamorphosis.*

Somatization is hybrid skin: hybrid informational skin: perceptive and cognitive skin.

Mike Heim:

"Architecture is becoming *avatecture:* physical buildings morph into virtual structures that generate online avatar communities. The avatars discuss prototype structures in virtual reality, and the physical structures become multimedia visualizations. Avatecture injects transformation into physical structures, merging clicks with bricks. The avatect is a shaman who creates interactive visions".

The avatar is emerging in my researches on techno-communication and on identity mutation. Avatar means—in a metaphorical sense from the original Hindu philosophy—the experience of a multi-vidual subjectivity and *at the same time* the production of multiple languages. These liquid concepts favor a *syncretic cross* between anthropology, technologies, arts, and communication toward the plurality of the egos *(= ii, eus, my-selves).*

- Avatar is a challenge to every monological discourse and fixed identity.
- Avatar as *multi-vidual* and *multi-visual* subject.
- Avatar as multi-sequential hybridization between *my-selves, web-ethnography, e-ars*
- Avatar as beyond any dualism, any unified synthesis, any universal culture or history
- Avatar as a diasporical *mindfull-body,* a fluid body disseminated of minds.
- Avatar is beyond roots and *rhizomes.*
- Avatar is a practice of incorporating *otherness* and *beyondness.*
- Avatar is hybrid identity: *hybridentities.*
- Avatar as from stereotypes to *heteronomies*

Avatar perspectives of technology, ars, and anthropology try to corrode stereotypes prolif-erating inside mediascape and focusing on heteronomies. *Multiple-selves* and *multi-codes* crossing polyphonic narratives, fragmented cultures, hybrid identities.

Self-representation is hetero-representation: it is a production of a visionary hetero-logic, an altered logic, a strange dislocating cluster of logics. I would like to stress the shift from autonomy to *heteronomy:* it makes explicit the idea that *nomos* (law) has an authority based on the static logic of mono-identity. That's why nomos should be moving toward the fluid brightness of the anomic "otherness": heteronomy *a desiring crossing toward the otherness.*

The random links crossing visual artists, transversal musicians, burning architects, syncretic avatar, diasporic multi-viduals, are looking at-through their hybrid-prosthesis-heteronomies, physiognomics, somatizations. **Hybridentities.**

H¥ßRÏÐÆNŦÎŦÏẼS

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