

## Hybrid Reality

Today, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must face and respond to the great upheaval of the human condition. Nation-states, sexual identities, distinct forms of life, consciousness, intelligence, clear divisions between the microcosm and the macrocosm, geography, economic systems, understanding of space and time—no definition, no knowledge, no political, cultural or scientific structure can resist the onslaught of this revolution. We now live in a world made of entanglements and overlaps, a world of hybrid beings and hybrid shapes, of ceaselessness and instability, a world of frailness and universals, a world where neither matter nor reality can ever again be considered unwavering phenomena.

But what is the source of this revolution? What nourishes it? Fosters it? Why do we have so much trouble adapting to it?

To answer these questions, we must understand that the world in which we now live is based on a new ontology.

Until recently, the twice thinking sapiens that we are essentially lived in biological reality. What is biological reality? It is the perception and the understanding of the universe according to each species' specific biology (a fly perceives the world quite differently than we do. It sees, smells, lives and dies in its very own physiological way). Biological reality is not a single reality, but rather innumerable perceptions of reality, each dependent on one of the millions biological forms that populate this planet. Within biological reality, each species only distinguishes (and understands) a slight portion of the immense spectrum of reality. A human being, for example, barely sees part of the existing field of light. His hearing and sense of smell are limited. His eyes, located in front of the cranium (and not on either side), are ideal for detecting the slightest movements and thus for maximizing his ability to hunt. Each species, biological reality tells us, has a localized perception of reality, circumscribed by the information that it senses can register.

Biological reality has a profound influence on human being's perception of herself, so much so in fact that Metaphysics emerges out of it. We come to terms with birth, life, death and suffering through and because of biological reality (we instinctively recognize what lives, dies, what is dead, what is born, what suffers). Biological reality facilitates survival, reproduction, and thus evolution. It is the mechanism through which earthly life unfolds. But biological reality isn't an absolute; it does not seek to see or even to understand the workings of all things, the hidden structures of every phenomenon. Biological reality is nothing more than a strategy conducive to the evolution of species. Biological reality has no answer for why we die and are born, but it offers clear directions on how to identify the beginning of life, the grip of death, the limits of what can be considered conscious and intelligent. By acknowledging these limits, humans sketch the outlines of their condition.

But Homo sapiens sapiens is born with more than biological reality. Since tools were first created, human beings have found themselves immersed in technological reality. What is technological reality? It is the extension of biological reality, i.e. the perception of the world through both human *and* non-human senses (including machine and scientific "senses"). With technological reality, we now have access to numerous strata of reality that were formerly impenetrable: those of the microcosm and the macrocosm for example, or those of genetics and neurology, of protons and photons, those of relativity and quantum physics. If (prior to the last century) the impact of such an expansion of reality was as important as it is today (think of Newton, Pasteur, Galileo), it was no less rare: profound paradigmatic shifts remained extremely isolated cases.

But everything has changed in the last century or so. The paradigmatic shifts we face today

are significant and numerous. Further, the rate of their occurrence is increasing rapidly (since there are more and more machines, computer software programs, research centers, laboratories, instruments of measurement, etc., all sources of technological reality). From space exploration to nanotechnologies, we now live in a reality whose spectrum is constantly multiplied and re-assessed. The boundaries of life, death, and birth, the secrets of creation, the emergence of the conscious and the infinite, are being reworked and amplified. Man and his world are no longer stable and well-defined structures. Our universe is now a transparent realm, whose definitions are brittle and evanescent—a cosmos not of immovable facts but of constantly changing possibilities.

But in fact we no longer even inhabit technological reality since this would assume that we can still distinguish between humanity, animal species, dynamic systems, technologies and culture; since it would presume that matter, whether organic or metallic, whether analog or digital, chemical or binary, can be clearly subdivided. We now dwell beyond technological reality. As recent inquiries on the behavior of insects has demonstrated; as investigation on the ecology of bacteria (and their communication networks) have acknowledged; as studies on human behavior, often as predictable as computer programs, have plainly established; and as alarmingly real artificial life models have established, it is now *impossible* to separate the living from the inanimate, the organic from the non-organic, the collective (organic and inorganic) from the individual (and/or from the object). We constitute a whole, whether we like it or not. Humans, machines, biological or artificial networks are all intertwined into the planetary framework.

Pierre Lévy's collective intelligence, Derrick de Kerckhove's connective intelligence, Howard Bloom and Steven Johnson's *Global Mind*, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, and even the imaginary flights of contemporary science-fiction (the *The Matrix*, *Robocop*, *Terminator*, and others), all mirror, not only the entanglement of man and machine as is often suggested, but also this profound transformation of our understanding of reality.

Human beings have of course always perceived their world as an agglomerate of realities other than those readily accessible through the senses (e.g. the supernatural, the mythical and the religious). But two major differences separate these ancient "lateral" realities from technological reality: 1. While suggesting the existence of different dimensions, these realities always remained in contact with biological reality and essentially existed in order to act upon it (one calls the gods to help improve one's life). 2. These parallel realities, by-products of human imagination, had one specific objective: making the invisible visible and the incomprehensible coherent. In fact, these lateral realities were essentially the extension of biological reality within the realm of the perplexing. But today the trend is quite different. In fact, technological reality encompasses the world and its different levels of reality so thoroughly that it extends itself into biological reality, transforming the latter into mere illusions. We so readily believe in technological reality that we turn to it in order to explain not only the physical dimensions of existence (the organic, the body, diseases, etc.) but also metaphysical notions such as life, death, birth, and the infinite. Compared to technological reality, it's biological reality that now seems illusory, subjected to beliefs, illusions and blind faith. Even our own bodies now seem unreal, less a volume of flesh to be seen, touched, felt, and caressed, than a chemical, mechanical, immunological and electric equilibrium, to which technological reality has sole access. For us, today, the reality of the body (cells, genes, proteins, etc.) is one inaccessible to biological reality. Thus, a palpable gap between our body and ourselves emerges, one which allows for profound and often astounding manipulations. Indeed, because the biological dimension of our body seems so unreliable, so different from what technological reality tells us of its true state, we cheerfully transform it, sometimes even

going so far (with organ transplants, gene therapy or gene manipulation) as to deny its original, organic nature. We now consider what our senses assert as an illusion, and consider reality to be what we can neither see nor comprehend. Technological reality's omnipotence triggers the unhinging of our perception of reality. We have lived in a reality that we consider illusory for over a century now.

Should we be surprised, then, that movies, television, video games and other stimulations have been embraced so thoroughly? That parallel universes (extra-terrestrial, political, genetic) abound in popular culture? That plots of intrigues and conspiracies have gained such an audience? Not really if one considers that today's citizen has been forced to admit that what he sees, knows, understands, touches and hears are but a series of mirage. The real structure, the one that truly acts upon life, is developing beneath his awareness.

In effect, technological reality is now so foreign to us, so distanced from biological reality, that one can equate the role of the scientist to that of the shaman. Like the shaman, only the scientist knows the true structure of the world. Like the shaman, only the scientist has access to, and understands how to penetrate the true levels of reality. In fact, the scientist, akin to the shaman, suggests that biological reality is not only an infinitesimal dimension of the universe, but is not in fact, strictly speaking, even responsible for the genuine operations of reality. For the scientist, as is the case for the shaman, biological reality is essentially a consequence of the interaction of hidden realities with each other. Hence the large number of science-fiction films whose reality is in a state of constant transformations. For modern science-fiction, biological reality is a mask, a cover, whereas technological reality is the true essence. *The Matrix* is interesting in this respect. For its everyday reality is an artifice whose clearly articulated goal is to allow human beings to believe in the significance of their existence, without having to know or understand the dominant underlying structures that direct their lives, and whose only end is the survival of machines. In *The Matrix*, as in our contemporary world, the body is out of step with its existence, since its only reality is that of the simulacrum. Granted, the characters (and their bodies) act in a "real" world (that of the struggle against the machines), but only in the virtual world do they truly express themselves. As a mirror of our contemporary angst, the biological reality of *The Matrix* is a simulacrum, a device built for illusion.

In a word, as these examples make clear, we now live beyond technological reality, in what could be called *hybrid reality*.

What is hybrid reality? It's a reality that considers physical phenomena (bodies, organic matter, flesh, individuals) as visible expressions of something else. For hybrid reality, biology is like a wave on the ocean: a transparent and ephemeral shape, inseparable from its whole, and resulting from infinitely complex and hidden interactions. For hybrid reality, the structures of life, intelligence, consciousness and even, one might dare to say, of soul, are unintelligible without the help of extra "senses" (those of machines, science, mathematics, etc.). In hybrid reality, authenticity is inaccessible—since it only develops beyond or beneath the senses—and incomprehensible—since it relies on the laws of physics which often have no biological logic. Actually, the universe of hybrid reality is strangely similar to chaos theory's: both are infinite and immeasurable, since the more precise the measure the more transformations occur (if, as chaos theory tells us, I progress along a coastline inch by inch, I take into account a number of crevices otherwise ignored by a greater measurement. Thus, the smaller the measurement, the longer the coastline. The same type of phenomenon occurs with hybrid reality for the more we "measure" it, the more it changes form and eludes us). Hybrid reality is the impossibility of confining reality to its biological dimension. But above all, it is the impossibility of setting up boundaries, perimeters and limits; in hybrid reality everything

crossbreeds, entangles, everything merges and penetrates everything else; in hybrid reality everything is contaminated; nothing is ever clearly identifiable.

Furthermore, hybrid reality expresses the need to rethink and redefine the property of humanity. For in hybrid reality, we are nothing more than apparatus working under the guide of a dynamic process (known as evolution) that extends beyond us. In essence, hybrid reality suggests the profound displacement of human beings in the planetary hierarchy as well as in the very essence of meaning. The human being in hybrid reality, as in *The Matrix*, is a game piece, a mere peg; his role, his goal, the meaning of his existence is to serve a mechanism (the machines in *The Matrix*, evolution in our case). The rest is nothing but details. What then is the purpose of human beings, hybrid reality asks? What purpose is there for a human consciousness that watches the world, gives it meaning, and in turn defines itself? In hybrid reality, consciousness is nothing but an accident (an unfortunate one, since it allows anguish to emerge), which belongs not to the individual human, who is nothing more than the expression of the underlying dynamics of evolution (as the wave is nothing more than the expression of the ocean), but to the global existence made up of the multiple realities that entangle themselves within hybrid reality. In fact, to use the reading set forth by *The Matrix*, hybrid reality suggests that intelligence and consciousness do not serve man, but rather the mechanism known as evolution.

Thus, in order to understand, and more importantly, to decode hybrid reality, it is necessary to accept the above stated conditions. The innumerable uncertainties, violence, and confusions we face today (fundamentalism, fascism, sexism, etc.) are the expression of resistance to this new condition.

But this new condition also gives rise to both the digital culture and today's new forms of narratives.

For what is the digital if not a powerful tool of hybridization, contamination, and dissemination? One that erases any notions of Genesis, that develops in layers and strata, that eliminates all possibility of clear delineation, that proposes a nonsensical interpretation of the world which surrounds it? The digital simulates the world, imitates it, but is not linked to it, because whereas one can find traces of biological reality in an analog artwork (photographs, paintings, books, etc.), the origins of digital representation lie in the unreality of the binary language. Through it, the very framework of the world loses its biological dimensions and becomes mere information structures.

Digital art is representation without media or materiality (since it is only accessible through the thin layer of photons which makes up the screen), an evanescent and insubstantial art form that is not, in theory, susceptible to the decay of time, but is nonetheless as fragile as pollen in the wind. The digital is like hybrid reality: the shapes it produces and allows us to see are the result of invisible interactions and entanglements.

Digital art, like hybrid reality, is infinitely multipliable but free of all lineage (since no characteristics distinguish the original from its copies). Therefore, digital art cannot pretend to a classic narrative for it is neither centripetal nor causal, for it cannot be tied to a specific time and place, linked to particular geographies or cultures. Digital art, like hybrid reality, is the expression of de-territorialization. Neither can claim a territory, nor a delineation of territory; neither possesses a space, nor a geography; neither has a particular language. Both are ungraspable and unsettled, uncertain and brittle. Yes, in digital art as in all art, we hear, see and perceive the forces of melancholy and despair, sometimes pleasure and eroticism that permeate all human endeavours. But digital art offers these through the de-territorialization of its narration, through a discourse devoid of origin or causality, free of the linearity of time, space and story telling. The digital work of art does not tell a story, it whispers,

provides glimpses, sketches shadows; it does not narrate so much as waits for the world's distant rumors to catch up with it. Digital art is the art of estrangement, the art of exile, the nostalgia a world feels as it vanishes slowly. It offers us fleeting works, telling stories that can only make sense beyond the apex of perspective.

So, why work on digital art at all? A few years ago, Char Davies wrote the following:

Regardless of name, virtual reality, and all it infers, the inclusive three-dimensional environments of virtual reality are not a reality at all, but (only) a representation of human knowledge. If we create a model of a bird to fly around in virtual space, the most this bird can ever be, even with millions of polygons and ultra-sophisticated programming, is the sum of our (very limited) knowledge about birds—it has no otherness, no mysterious being, no autonomous life. What concerns me is that one day our culture may consider the simulated bird (that obeys our command) to be enough and perhaps even superior to the real entity. In doing so we will be impoverishing ourselves, trading mystery for certainty and living beings for symbols.<sup>1</sup>

I believe, unlike Davies, that we must understand the digital bird not only as an indication of today's profound transformations but mostly as a structure of transition. Davies' digital bird is still, and always will be, the representation of a bird; it stands for what we perceive as a bird. And yet, it is completely different, since it embodies all the characteristics of hybrid reality. But it still looks like a bird, still act the way a real bird would. Thanks to it, we can now question our newfound condition, the challenges and dangers of hybrid reality, the place both ourselves and our endeavours occupy and will occupy in this new planetary dynamic. We are on the shore of a fascinating world. How will we formulate our condition in the face of these new challenges and demands? How will we weave humanism with hybrid reality? Emotions with the digital and the binary? Meaning with evolution? Digital art offers us a road through which we can attempt to decode, understand, and grasp the paradigmatic revolution underway. It offers us different paths to explore as we confront metaphysical transformations, as we tackle the absence of biological meaning, as we deal with incessant shifts and entanglements. Digital art suggests that, even within the strangeness of hybrid reality, even within this reality in which the organic and the inorganic intermingle, which transforms the visible into a simulacrum and the human into a mechanism, there still exists the melancholy and joy, awe and despair so specific to living beings. In the face of these often violent and strange worlds imposed on us today by hybrid reality, there still remains a universal desire to share one's suffering, one's joys and solitudes. Since the dawn of time, Jesus has suffered on the cross and Ulysses has wandered in search of his homeland, says Michel Serres. That is why art exists. Faced with the prospect of the disappearance not only of our familiar ways, but also of our complete biological universe, art, even when devoid of a goal or an origin, even when centrifugal and a-linear, offers us rumors, whispers, and shades of the human condition and of its torment. Not even hybrid reality and the digital can escape it.

Translated from French by Isabelle Coitoux and Ollivier Dyens  
Thanks to Núria Enciso

<sup>1</sup> Davies, Char, "Natural Artifice", in: Richards, Catherine, Tenhaff, Nell: *Virtual Seminar on the Bioapparatus*, The Banff Centre for the Arts, 1991, p. 16