NOISE TO SIGNAL RATIO

CRITIQUE DE LA PRE-HISTOIRE CONTEMPORAINE

Delivered by Jean-Pierre Boyer

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" History? I don't have the faintest notion of it. "

<div align="right">Donald Duck (D. 455)</div>

Design/Electronic arts Conference... a spoon size paradigm.

New concepts of image/sound composition and processing ... the

mediatization of axiomatics.

Communication, information and data systems... the logistic ascent

to the "media atom".

Irony of the code: video/sound and the concrete phase ... enigma

of the "coit interuptus".

Media antiseptics... historical vacuum.

The matter of opinion

If the main purpose of the present conference is to clarify

several technical issues prevalent in the domain of experimental

video, our own contribution shall be one of peripheral concern to

most of the participants. Still, we see it as a critical attempt

to identify an unappointed and/or concealed state of confusion after

which the confinement, if not the ideological constraint of current

definitions should progressively appear.

Unlike Donald Duck, we are particularly sensitive to the

implicit part of the heroic dilemma, therefore our method and con-

clusions are most likely to depart from his.

Our first strategy shall consist in minimizing the magical

effects of a-priori thematic conditions by emphasizing on their

historical "inner-coherence", procedure which at last should inform us of both their moment of appearance and developmental conditions.

Consequently, we need not here to be blindly absorbed with apparently explicit technicalities but rather, make an inquisitive use of an expanded perspective on a socio-historic formation where the video "movement" suddenly appeared... and further developped.

If our task suddenly acquires considerable proportions, it is mainly because such realities objectively exist beyond the point where one still thinks that one can have ideas alone. In no way, we feel the necessity for canning the issue under strictly dogmatic conditions although we never really got used to the idea of walking on the head.

The whole question needs to remain an open-ended yet polemic one, as presumably none of us ever wished to become a living example of prematured senility. In other words, the contradictions are not to be evacuated but rather precisely developped.

Finally, we have to be mostly specific rather than evasive, for the unconditional use of generalized abstractions would simply reveal its inadequacy to a transformational comprehension of any real situation.
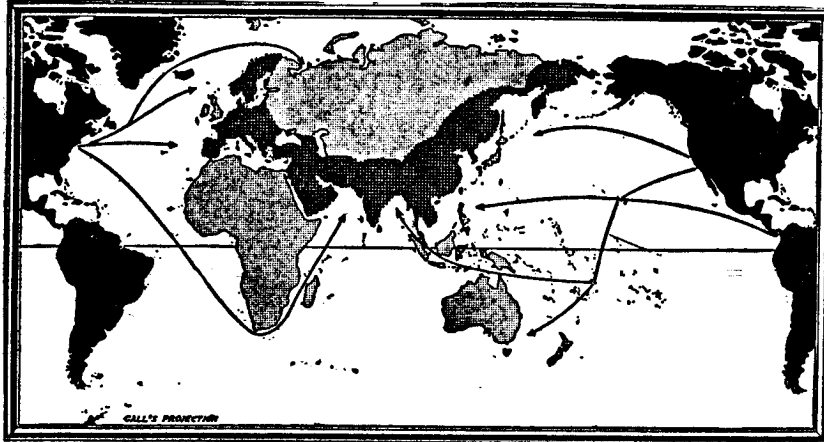
THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF THE OLD WORLD
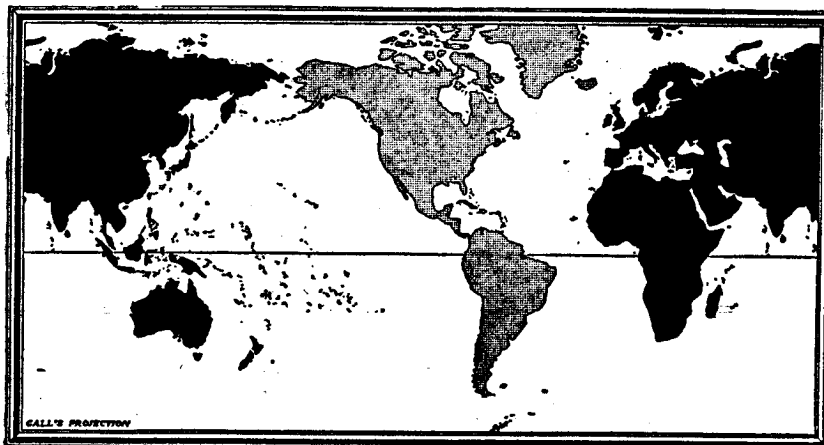
THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF THE NEW WORLD

After all...

The post-war "american way of life" is a cyclicly pregnant idiosyncrasy under which the reality is at best distorted, at worst inverted. Ironically, ideas do not grow as clouds do, nor do they get to us as the rain drops do.

Before it can ever become an idea, video is primarily a micro-phenomenon of the given society which produces it, therefore the intermittent unambiguity of its manifestations can hardly at long range substitute the hidden rationale of its origination.

In the troubled world of the spectacle(1), what is commonly available is also the limit of alienated observational conditions, so is the near-sighted complexion of our video apologists.

In the following, we shall investigate two states of the video "movement", which happen to be consistantly coincidental with the materialization of two dominant ideologies: ideology of communication and ideology of science.

In approaching the first one, it is worth noticing that from the beginning, the mostly shared video hermeneutics (obscurantism) consists in simply adequating the "movement" with the objective developmental state of post-war communication technology.

Aside from its momentarily pragmatic/factual incidence, it is clear that such a view offers very little of a real analytical value. However, if the interpretation is still to-day widely

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(1) Main apparitional mode of the inverted reality.

disseminated, it is ultimately for the same reasons that the first video protagonists didn't suspect the long term historical naivety of their own views.

To that extent, we shall suggest that te so-called "revolutionnary potential" of half-inch video technology was in the beginning already highly symtomatic of the symbolic production of system mythologies for which the ideology of communication was to later emulate on the form of well-known alternative strategies. Accordingly, the subsequent proliferation of mediated utopias is also here to be depicted as a structural effect of ignorance. Why? Capitalism had previously mutated: the cultural sphere had already become the market place of symbolic values (signs as commodities) and the industry of consciousness had proved to be the new homeostatic principle.

Given those primary considerations, one can already suspect that the mechanism of word-orders appropriation which is typical of what happened then, is always in a significant sense a double-edged sword.

More specifically, as our protagonist was to solely consider the structural qualities (accessibility, conditions of production and diffusion, etc)(2) as well as the technical qualities (immediacy, portability and specificity at large) of video as an alternative medium, then paradoxically the essence of the video "movement" was to be a-posteriori attributed first, to the manufacturers and their manual-listed technical/structural qualities

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(2) The other acceptation of the word "structural" will be discussed later.

and second, to the scientific, military, para-military complex
(research, education, surveillance, entertainment) and their nu-
merous experimental projects.

Revelantly enough, that new yet obscure state of affairs
was to introduce a severe contradiction, at which level one's
failure to really inform one's own praxis tended to become quite
problematical if not, simply characteristic of a mere subjugation.
As we now know that there are certainly many systemic ways to make
a failure officially consistant, our determination here to suspect
the unsuspectable is imminently reinforced.

Accordingly, our first conclusion is that the "revolution-
nary potential" per se and especially its new refined versions
which are highly residual of the thecnological myth itself, are
to be inevitably disabled just as any other ideologically biased
word-orders.

Because the issue is in many instances dialectical, our
criticism is also prospectively valid for as long as the media
world will still "survive" under the strict hegemony of macluanism
and other meta-physical gimmickeries, false consciousness is most
likely to dominate and phantomize its very matter.

At this point, one will contend that so far we have only
covered the most superficial aspect of the "movemen t" (its techno-
logical illusion) and that we haven't considered the real substan-
ce (generally called content) which has emerged from the same or
preferably a different faction of the "movement". This is half-true

because on the one end, we have learned from experience that such a dichotomy (form/content) is never or never to be in the reality so mechanistically resolved and on the other, we are fully aware that we still have to articulate the no less critical second aspect of the "movement" (its autonomization) before we can proceed to any further conclusions. Then only, we should be in a better position to unvail the enigmatic idea of communication.

Finally, it appears that interpretation is one thing, transformation is another. The "one thing" is as far as we are contending, a critical clue to media antiseptics and the "another" supposes that before we can set up a true alternative solution, we have to previously make sure that the question is truly delivered where it belongs.

... the "movement" wasn't so sudden.

Indeed, the so-suddenness of the "movement" has simply revealed to be an innocently spectacular contribution to a left wing/right wing common stock mythology. In other words, the ideology of communication was already shaping the autonomization of video even at a time when its institutionalization was still envisionned antagonistically.

In fact, it is true to say that the official communicators (mass-media) had long ago rejected even the possibility of communication and they were/still are quite cynical about it.

But at the same time, it is clear that beyond their structural disenchantment they had at least to entertain a certain "idea" of communication.

This whole process is called the birth of an ideology: what cannot be achieved in the reality mainly for reasons of structural incompatibility, is automatically sublimated as an incremental "au-dela" under which the real determinations are never to appear. Needless to say that the whole video "movement" is stigmatized by such a moment, especially as its autonomization is known to be coincidental whith the materialization of an imaginary communication increment.

In other words, video had been assigned from the part of institutions, the left-portion of an over-all non-communication, its destiny thereby resting upon ever ambiguous conditions of a non-conciliation with the ideology. It is important futhermore to notice that the very substance of the video stigmatization (causes and effects) was to remain occult until the moment of complete institutionalization, that is negatively when the phantasm of a responsability could almost organically transform itself into the responsability of a phantasm.

Although seemingly paradoxical, the transformation itself is at last acknoledgeable only diachronically or in historical terms, that is in terms symtomatically alien to a synchronic self-representation of one's own activity.

Restrospectively, it is obvious that a quantitatively important faction of the "movemen t" had signed the petition of reductionism, assuming that an alternative type of technology would inherently make possible the so far impossible and therefore concluding to a qualitatively different type of communication.

This was and still is variably the golden age of the ideology. Subjectively, the protagonists had spontaneously suscribed to a more than ambiguous anticipation and this, with even less than a suspicion that objectively it was later to become their own ideological constraint.

Now, if a decade later the contradiction seems to be a rather affordable one, it is for no other reason that the autonomization of video as a discipline (communicational, artistic, techno-scientific) has provided the protagonists with the adequate institutional paradigms which at last always convey the ultimate legetimation. Consequently, the role of institutions is here to be considered as a crucial one because if it is true that a large number of organisations (from media centers to congressional committees) were directly promoting the so-called idea of communication, it is no less true they were simultaneously accounting at the end of the line, the average benefit (effective capital and symbolic capital) of participation.

Therefore, it should now be made clear that institutions such as mass-media, art world and science/technology are the

major agents of social cohesion, especially as they prove to be
in all instances of a socio-historic formation, the first media-
tors of a social contract above all inherent to the power struc-
ture itself.

Finally, as we are to understand the true difference bet-
ween history an fairy tales, we also eventually understand that
the real issues are to found elsewhere, obviously beyond the ins-
titutional spectacle of the statu-quo.

At this point however, it is far from being clear that
from a mere defection we are ourself provided with a coherent
theory of communication, besides it would be just too naive to
assume so. But as we get the lesson from an ever recent past,
we can at least come to the following practical conclusions.

First, as the protagonist is to constrain himself with
both the material logic and the semantic era of the dominant
system power play, he is most likely to inherit from the latter
an essentially occult vision of history.

Second, it appears that any notion (present or future)
of the "movement", be it explicit or implicit, is most likely
just as any other commodities to be consumed through obsolescen-
ce unless video -- as a complex material/ideational reality among
others -- is ultimately reinvested with the _real movement of_
socio-historic struggles which again, prefigured its apparition
and determine any point of its development.

In the end, it is at least reasonnable in the perspective of a long term analysis, to expect from the current options a certain clarity over that particular matter, otherwise their silen- . ce alone conveys too much of what alibies are usually made of.

The ideology of science -- A genealogical essay.

Heuristics ?

In an effort to reappropriate, non-mechanistically, the problematic of video -- as a complex material/ideational reality among others -- we are immediately confronted with a number of severe limitations. Accordingly, one of our tasks consists in evaluating those which are realistically accessible to our investigation and also deciding upon to which proper extent, they are still to be considered as tactically relevant issues. (3)

Regarding some of those limitations, we have seen in the preceeding, that the reductionist view had somehow significantly failed to acknoledge the structural similarity of its own pragmatic guide-lines with some major constituents of the dominant perspective (mass-media).

More specifically, beyond the mere assumption that video as an alternative medium was in a rather absolute sense, the secret key to an un-biased communication, no particular emphasis had been stressed upon both the objective limit of a representational system (television: a window on the world) and correlatively, the problematic instability of an underlying process of semantic production.

Although at best, a certain antagonism with the mass-media had originally manifested itself under the form of alternative and

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(3) According to Von Clausewitz, a tactic is to a battle what a strategy is to a war.

controverting subject matters, it is only later and then somehow
remotely that the ambiguous status of the mediation itself was
to become an object of critical investigations.

Despite the obvious motivational differences regarding
the latter, it is interresting to notice that both what has now
regressively become "video art" (4) and a more directly (5) socio-
political video praxis, had at some point identified the necessity
of an anti-television orientation, that is, neutralizing the over-
all denotational/connotational effects of mass-media within their
own praxis.

To say the least, that particular type of "software" had
appeared as a necessary condition to a certain emancipation. But
in fact, while the former,"video art"(6), had almost organically
asserted the relevance of the issue -- concretely exploring the
illusionistic features of the medium if not, the modalities of
its exacerbation -- the latter, socio-political praxis, had on
the one end retain the equation -- reliability of the mediation :
mobilization impact -- while seizing on the other the critical
importance of a similar (illusionistic) or most probably a diffe-
rent type of formal procedures. Although it isn't possible here

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(4)   The secret/private luxury of mass-media and the good conscien-
       ce of the bourgeoisie.
(5)   Because we are less facist than we are at the lower limit of
       coolness, we make here a concession to "video artistic person-
       nal politics" as A.F.A puts it; the concession is only here
       conditional because the category itself is as elusive as the
       Pentagon's definition of "national security".
(6)   Minimalism, structuralism, formalism, mysticism and other yet
       uncompiled similarisms.

to establish an accurate partition of the various approaches and practical options, can we nevertheless suggest that this was and still is to a no less degree of ambiguity where the issue stands. Furthermore, can we assure that the latter (neutralisation) shows the real dimension of the present/future video dilemma, however naive it is to overestimate in the sole conjuncture of video, the unprecedent nature of this whole issue.

Accordingly, it should also be made clear that the heuristics of video as far as communication is concerned (7), is neither more modern nor different from the heuristics of writing or film-making, except implying that the video maker has to relate as problematically as one would normally be asked to do, to the specifics of his complex material/ideational reality among others.

Still, one further clarification here seems necessary. At this point, it is worth insisting on the fact that a certain notion of progress by the way not at all incompatible with the jargon of the power structure, imposes a relative determination over the made-particular heuristics of the so called"modern media". Whether such a determination happens to be or not in the present context, the main inferential basis for one's own activity, always depends as we have suggested earlier, on the degree of commitment to a-priori thematic conditions.

If it is so, then before we are to further elaborate on the question of heuristics, we shall stress the attention on the

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(7)   Presumably not its cynical phantom.

fact that the experimental phase characteristic of the electronic media, happens to be quite litterally subjected to a well-known atomistic scheme of communication/information/data and thereby singnificantly participates to the systematization of its inherent logic.

Consequently, it should not surprise anyone here, that the obvious fragmentation of the above issue tends to approach in the reality of its appearances, the upper limit of a pure calculus of intention.

Finally, we shall add for the benefit of the reader, that it is only once this state of affair is fully acknoledged as a severe ideological constraint that the "wonderful world of science" enters the momentum of a radical contradiction.

> "The more remote from awareness a myth,
> the more timeless it is; its ground is
> as blind as the back of a mirror."
>
> Gegler

The "whiz kid" and the cosmology.

A brief.

The mere belief that the electronic media are ultimately what they are, isn't convincing at all. Although we both recognize the importance and understand the logic of their material substrata, can we only but object to the instances under which Shannon's and Pierce's among others ideas almost acquire charismatic proportions.

If submitting the "wonderful world of science" to an elaborate analysis is beyond the scope of our immediate strategy, the subject matter seems relevant enough to somehow retain here our attention. Normally, we would demonstrate that both the machines and the techno-scientific knowledge do not transcend the reality and conditions of a social division of labor which at last, always assists their realization, but we shall rather adopt here a less "orthodox" yet more conjunctural approach.

In the present context, one must not forget that the claim for strictly technical interests doesn't necessarily mean the refutation of their philosophico-aesthetic emulations. Even the modern apologist ultimately reasserts that inferences such

as science - philosophy and technology - art, aren't "per se" new phenomena. But the point here, woldn't be so critical if precisely the foundation of a materialist epistemology (theory of knowledge) wasn't so much the secret dream of the present technocratic elite.

Such a phantasm however, is most likely to be decieved because paradoxically, intrinsicness and psychologism are too commonly the reflective mirror of bourgeois consciousness. In other words, here the technocrats are faced with a serious compromise : a doubtful combination of both their up-to-a-certain-point materialism and the idealism of the bourgeoisie itself. Nevertheless, it is not exactly here that our hierarchy's portrait reaches its completion.

For instance, if it is true that compare to technology, science is usually reserved a semi-pragmatic representational status, it is no less true that otherwise it represents to the present elite , a tremendous symbolic investment. After all, what we have called the "doubtful combination" might not appear, in the power perspective, to be totally inefficient.

Therefore, given the increasing role of scientific views in substituting the now obsolete religious values, one must eventually analyse the incidence not only in their ritualistic manifestations but also into the material spectrum of their specific rationality. In fact, the modern form of religion/ideology, neo-

positivism, doesn't pay its mythical tribute to ethereal super-strata (8), but is rather directly legitimized from the stand-point of an earth-based spectacular material production.

But here as we know, <u>technology is not neutral</u>, be it unpleasant to those who are just too busy mascarading its "nega-tive externalities". (9)

The myth of the 20th century "natural evolution" : the notion of progress itself, which is usually a "poudre aux yeux" to common sense, organically emerges (emanates) from the discour-se of those who are in a dominant position to decide upon the organization of the material/symbolic production, the regulation of the production process itself and finally, the social relations (socio-political software) which are most suitable to a logic of capital accumulation, territorial strategies... and a great num-ber of other much more subtle manifestations of the inverted reality.

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(8)   Only accessorily, at best as semi-pragmatic analytical con-cepts, at worst as items of a pure symbolic capital. One can find both of these in : "The reality of the non-material", an essay by Thomas Kunz published in Main Currents.

(9)   Refer to the apologetic essay of E. Mesthene : "Technology and social change".
      See the criticism of J.McDermott : "Technology : the opiate of Intellectuals" published in the New York Review of Books. Plus several bloody examples such as:

      Heuristic programming and the Viet*Nam war.
      System Analysis and the mit-aided military putch in Chili*
      Von Newman's Game Theory : psychologism and economic behavior.
   Taylor's Scientific Management and the automobile industry.

According to the bourgeoisie, history is a battle ground only when its technocracy wins ; the rest of the time, it is somewhat arrogantly said to be a "nature".

Here is a clue to the camouflage calculus and there goes the idealist bias of a so-called "materialist epistemology".

At least, ironically, Weiner knew that the concept of a cybernated/self-regulated society could have become effective only under the achieved conditions of an absolute consensus, in our words: a complete domination.

To that extent, can we suggest that the cosmological disenchantment is eventually total, given that a true materialist praxis, not merely an epistemology, eventually unvails the back of the mirror...

Ironically, while theoretical physicism ascends to "the reality of the non-material", the immediate producers descend to the "materiality of the non-real".
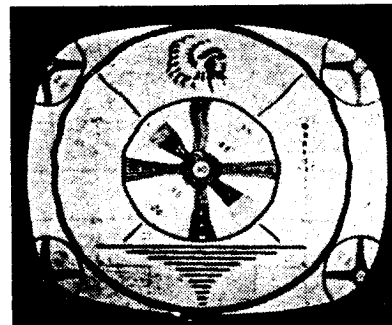
Note : Among other chapters that we haven't had the time to produce for this conference, is: "video, dataism and the phenomenologist syndrome."
Also we are now working on the second part of "Heuristics!"