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Lecture 4 – Immaterial Culture

The theme of this last, of four lectures, will be the brain, and I must therefore warn you that about neurophysiology, I understand almost next to nothing. This is my excuse: I will speak about the brain in the same way that mechanist philosophers spoke of the machine, and that Baroque thinkers spoke of clocks. And in these somewhat metaphorical uses, the ignorance of details helps: it allows thought to fly high. So please keep my ignorance in mind as you criticise me after the lecture.

I said that today's theme is the brain: I should have said that utopia will be the theme, because currently the two subjects are entwined. My argument, during the last lectures, was that a new layer of consciousness – with new codes, and therefore, with new categories of thought, evaluation and action – is emerging. I will argue today that this utopian vision of the imminent future is connected to a type of image of the brain, and of the nervous system, in several different ways. Some examples: the post-industrial revolution is characterised by the installation of apparatus that simulate cerebral functions and/or the functions of perceptive organs, that is, of cerebral organs. The digital code, which articulates the new imagination, simulates through its structure, the quantic leaps of particles in the between synapses. The brain, with its extremely complex structure and its intricately entwined functions, is the model *par excellence* of a black-box and serves as the starting point for the cybernetic analyses of complex systems. The slow, but inexorable, diversion of our interest – which progressively abandons problems of the modification of the objective world (of work), towards problems of information (of data processing) – is at bottom a diversion from the muscular and digestive systems towards the nervous system. And the concept of cerebral orgasm also diverts interest from the reproductive system. The social fabric, once viewed as a battlefield of interests, is progressively visualised as a neural net. And above all: concrete reality is no longer experienced as something solid that bars our path with its inert perfidy, but as an absurd vacuity, ruled by blind chance and comparable with the computational intervals between the cerebral nerves. These multipliable examples may be summarised *ad nauseam*: the utopian vision is connected to the view of the brain, because both are visions where the material and the mental are confused with each other. The next São Biennial has utopia as a central concept: I suggest that they should use a synthetic image of the brain as a logo.

I will start, these utopian reflections, from the socio-political field, because politics deals with power, that is: with decisions and freedom, and every utopia, including the negative ones, deal with freedom. Under a Darwinian focus (be it coloured by liberalism, the “right” or by socialism, the “left”), there is a struggle for power, and those who gain power decide for others. I argued during the last lectures

that such a linear, processual, discursive and historical focus is no longer sustainable. Currently, decisions can be decomposed into bits-of-decision and be re-computed as mosaic-decisions, a strategy through which artificial intelligences make decisions. There is no individual, group, class or grey-eminence that retains the power of decision, because such a power is not something that could be retained. Example: if the north American President and/or the General Secretary of the Communist Party were to decide to press the red button and reduce culture to radio-active ash, they would not be exercising their power of decision, but executing an individual act provoked by other individual acts, for example by a button being pressed on a TV screen that shows missiles flying towards the USA and/or the USSR. That is why the function of American President and/or General Secretary of the Communist Party may be perfectly robotised. The President and the Secretary are not powerful, but functionaries of an automatic apparatus that may be ever more automatized. Classic, linear and historical political thought must give way to cybernetic thought, a term in whose root the verb "*kybernein*" is found, from which the term "to govern" also derives. Political Darwinism must give way to a neuro-physiological view of society.

Within the brain there are no zones, no special functions, no central point that governs the rest and that makes definitive decisions. The decisions taken by the brain (that is: by us as individuals) are the result of the computation of decisive-bits that occur all over the brain. Decisions are taken by something that may be called "consensus". The same occurs in society, this super-brain composed of brains, with the only difference being that society is a very inefficient brain. Because of such inefficiency we nurture the illusion that there are those who make decisions and those who are manipulated. The utopian vision projects an image of society as a better structured super-brain. A society without government, with the power of decision being diluted throughout the social net, therefore a free society, however, with a new, inter-relational, ludic meaning of the term "freedom". This utopian, cerebralising vision of society is already technically viable (which does not imply that it is effectively viable). The technical knowledge that allows for the establishment of such a utopian society is called "telematics" and I shall divert the argument to this field.

I will not deal with the theoretical aspects of this field, such as decision theory or games theory. I will not do it simply for the lack of time. I shall only sketch out the results of applied telematics. It is a net of reversible cables, and at each crossing point, or knot, can be found artificial and human intelligences. The cables carry information that are processed and reprocessed at the crossings. The input of the net is data that comes from the external and the internal worlds (from "matter" and from the "mind"). The output of the net are decisions transmitted to machines, decisions whose purpose is to give meaning to the external and internal worlds, that is: to the lives of the participants of the telematised game. This was a-shall-we-say, "ontological" word [telematics], before we consider the social super-brain a little closer. The classic question: "is society a system at the service of the individual, or is the individual a particle of society, that functions socially?" is overcome. Neither society, nor the individual are concretely given. The concrete is the intersubjective relation (the "cable"), of which society and the individual are nothing but horizons.

It no longer makes sense to try to distinguish between artificial and human intelligence, and it will continuously make less sense, because concrete reality is not in them, but in the informational relations that link them. This “ontological” statement is easier to say than to experience. That is because we still do not live in such a utopia.

Note that the telematics net not only put an end to the notions of individual and society: it also ends with the notions of public and private. It ends, therefore, with the notion of unhappy consciousness, that which hangs between the public in order to lose itself, and the private in order to lose the world. The information travels the intervals between individuals through the cables, and in doing so, they synchronise space and annihilate time: “utopia” means precisely lack of space, therefore time stood still. In such a situation there is neither public nor private space: all the participants of telematics are contemporaries and neighbours. Note even that the telematic net establishes a present that stands still, a kind of “*nunc stans*”. The information that travels the reversible cables go from memory to memory, and all of their variants are stored and retrievable. As a challenge to the second law of thermodynamics, no information is lost, unless it is deliberately deleted. This implies that the past is always present and that the future is the past re-presented. This is what post-history is. This challenge to the second law (which is the reason for every mental process), is not however, a miracle that ends with the tendency of things to progress towards entropy. This is possible because the telematics society is “immaterial” culture, that is, a culture that no longer stores elaborated information in objects. Perishable and forgettable works no longer exist in such a culture; there is only the flux of bits of information that are stored electromagnetically and audiovisually retrievable. Certainly: the cables that carry the information, which are currently made of inorganic material (but which eventually will be made of nerve-like material), are perishable. Therefore the knots of the net are also perishable, be they human brains or computers. We are not yet immortal in such utopia. But this is of little importance, since the information elaborated by the knots (by us or the artificial intelligences), are imperishable. Which, in the end, seems very close to the notion of immortality both of the Jews, *zecher*, and the Greeks, *mnemosine*. In sum: the key aspect of the telematics utopia is imperishable processing memories.

Now I shall pick-up the argument from the preceding lecture, in which I developed the concept of second-degree imagination. The telematic game that I have just sketched, whose aim would be to give meaning to the participants’ lives, and turn them immortal within imperishable memories, will result in images that are synthesised dialogically by those who participate in such society. These synthetic images, these computations of clear and distinct concepts in order to become models for the projection of meaning, will be the dominant cultural products of the future society. Second-degree imagination is no longer the faculty of an individual mind, as first-degree imagination is, however, it will be an intersubjective faculty: the new images will be the product of the dialogic collaboration between artificial and human intelligences. And the digital codes, through which such images will be articulated, these codes that operate with punctual elements, as does the brain, will be the dominant code of future culture, thus taking the place of the alphanumeric

code of the present Western culture. Second-degree imagination will therefore be a level of consciousness that breaks through the shell of individuality in order to penetrate the territory of intersubjectivity, just as the cerebral processes break through the cranial shell and are observable, as if inside out, in microchips. The once called “mental” processes, like imagination and discursive reason, will become immaterial processes within that grey zone between mind and matter that the new techniques turn accessible. And it is this grey zone, the destroyer of historical categories, which will be the territory of the new culture.

I have unveiled a utopian vision of telematic immaterial culture, in which *Homo ludens* will dedicate his lifetime to creativity born out of a second-degree imagination, rested upon clear and distinct reason, within a society driven cybernetically through intersubjective feedback, a society without governance or power, a society of freedom. All of the technical prerequisites for the establishment of such a culture are already here: nothing needs to be invented; it is only necessary to distribute the existing apparatus and to allow society to make use of them. However, I do not believe for even one instant that such a culture will be realised. The reason for my disbelief are not so much the probable catastrophes that will curtail the realisation of such an inebriating project: the thermo-nuclear threat, the pollution of the earth’s environment, or the, by the way, justified although irrational revolt of the Third World. My disbelief in the utopia is not even related to the reasons inherent in the project itself, for example everyone’s refusal to play in the creative game for the endowment of meaning to the absurdity of life. I do not believe in the realisation of the project because I am convinced that accidents always intervene in the realisation of no matter what project, and that such accidents are by definition unpredictable. By the way, the unpredictability of accidents is the very essence of freedom. Therefore the question emerges: with what aim did I present this utopian project and these four lectures, if not as an introduction to the project?

I do not know if the answer to this question, which I propose with the highest honesty that I am capable of, will be considered satisfactory by you, but here it is: I believe that to engage oneself in projects that are known to be unrealisable but desirable, and to seek to convince others to also engage in such projects, turns the projects a little less unrealisable, and I do not know of any other engagement worthy of this name. And I would like to close this course of lectures with the following consideration: I have spoken of intersubjectivity as a concrete reality, in which the interlinked subjects are nothing more than abstract horizons. Such intersubjective relation is respectively the only concrete reality to which we can hang on to within a situation where everything formerly held as real (the objective world and the world of the mind), dissipates into vacuity. Well, such intersubjective relation has an ancient name, although worn-out and turned kitsch: that name is *love*.