FORMATS 2
formats

An evocation of post-books

Antoni Mercader

The Basilica of Saint-Denis (close to Paris, where many of the Kings of France are buried); "Artifices" (a biannual event devoted to art and advanced communication organized by the *Ville de Saint-Denis* and the *Université Paris 8*), two places in a rainy November of 1994 that will evoke the future of books.

The protagonism lies in the confrontation brought on by the polysemy of the Basilica's gothic stained glass windows and the hypermedia proposals of the event's third edition, specifically the interactive installations: "An anecdotal file of the Cold War" by Georges Legrady (1) and "Portrait no. 1" by Luc Courchesne (2). Two views of communication that are physically very close to each other, one just in front of the other, both in Légion d'Honneur Square, that visitors could fully appreciate when mass was held, or in the early evening when the exhibit was full of university students. These two views, both technologically complex yet quite different from one another, given the period in which they were conceived and actually produced, are the ideal pretext for the following reflections:

When artists' CD-ROM are within our reach, a proposal for interactive compact discs, like videoart CD-ROMs for videographs, we often do not perceive some of the cultural dimensions behind their production. We are now facing the ideal moment to look between the lines and identify the route implied by the arrival of electronic books, or hypermedia (3). We must skip over time to realize what has happened in going from the Pre-Gutenburg galaxy to Multimedia. Countless authors, works, and events have all contributed to make the current situation possible.

We might consider that everything began when written scrolls became codices, at the same time when bell towers chimed, energy came from windmills, when iron production and agriculture reigned, the time when art was imaginative and pedagogic (i. e. old). It continued on until the key moment when the material could be folded, and the era of the book began, when factory whistles sounded and steel production marked the baby boom, the organization of labor, the steam engine and when art was boldly spiritual or personal (in other words, modern). And it will continue up to the point when computers can divvy up time into infinitely tiny spans, when the dominance of fossil fuels, new materials, renovation and the technological boom challenge the ecological ideas of sustenance, when what folds up is the text itself (hypertext), when art is eclectic and heterogenous (what we call post-modern).

Is this the point in time, then, that we can talk about nonlinear books, electronic books, "artist post-books"?

The simultaneous occurrence last year of several exhibits of contemporary in which the format in some cases, or the means in others, was directly related to hypermedia technologies emphasizes the fact that art has always been close to cultural and technological progress that has broadened its ability to communicate.

Books, over the centuries, have brought together the entire essence of each period, from miniatures to painters' ID cards, from the illustrated book to the book which is a work of art in itself, we can envison them all in the Museum of History, the Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Now, artist's electronic books, CD-ROMs designed by one person, are evidence of the expressive and creative experimentation in a nonlinear format; in other words, they are cultural exponents of today's society. And they are not limited to visual artists, but are also made by movie-makers like Chris Marker (4) or designers like José Manuel Palmeiro (5).

As we approach one of the exhibits on "electronic arts" we can see that next to electronic books, hypertexts and hyperimages that can be brought up on the screen, there are other options that are attempting to go beyond the writing stage (bulletin board, screen, keyboard) that was begun by Vannevar Bush in 1945 when he explored the instrumental extension of memory and started a line of inertia tied to tradition that is still evident today. There is also interest in looking for alternative examples to the main direction, so that we can further appreciate the contributions of more radical experimentalists.

The creativity of artists is wide open, and follows the lines of each expressive context. Just as Hans Holbein the Younger in 1533 asked us to view his "Ambassadors" (6) from an unexpected perspective, a daring view in a work of art, to see the skull he had painted at the foot of the people, thus violating, as many others had, the traditional perspective in painting, CD-ROM artists are offering us paths and ways to do similar things with books at a point of post-industrial development that we might call post-books.

The broadening of the horizon is clear and means we must reconsider definitions. Is this the same thing as what happened with images and post-images?

The development of images, like that of text, has not been without conflict, and has resulted in their attaining the rank of writing. Many years later, from the time that images move (motion pictures) to when we can move around and sell (video and computer images), we can now talk about audiovisual and multimedia language and as a result, of hyperimages in the same way as we refer to text and hypertext. The computer screen, and a short time from now television, are the temporary home of hyperimages and electronic books. As we wait for the result of research by artists and

scientists, the future of hyperbooks is wide open.

The field of experimentation with books has been, and is, as broad as those of stained glass windows or video installations. Placing a religious program in the multicolored stained glass windows of the Basilica of St. Denis is a part of the constant influx of contributions that art has made to communication from the time of drawings of animals being hunted were done on cave walls to that of "Tron" or electronic operas.

It is very clear that devotees of religious ceremonies do not have to push buttons and that the content of the interplay among the stained glass windows is captured differently from that of the interactive installations subject to programming and structural factors such as the use of a mouse. That is why the interface or the set of elements enabling humans to relate to the communicative system is so important, so vital. And from that stems our interest in evaluating the architecture supporting the windows and the computer system supporting the texts, sounds, images, graphics, and data.

Intertextuality and interimages (weaving, relating ... indexing) is also a decisive issue, the lead hairs that hold and relate the transparent images used the imagination of the moment as elements from television and the movies that use Marker do today, or images of private lives or the public life of Hungary of the 1960s in the case of Legrady or in being able to literally "grasp" the images of Perry Hoberman's hypermedia (7).

The contribution to the kinestheses of images (and text), to the perception and sensation of images and texts, whether in the overwhelming verticality of the stained glass or in the gently illuminated room with the interactive displays, has made, or rather makes, our internal system perceive time and space differently in the two cases.

The interrelationship in time of the Basilica's stained glass and the temporary exhibit of a contemporary manifestation and the fact that the scene is St. Denis has led us to this reflection, from the standpoint that something in the world of books is changing.

Text from the author's contribution to the lecture series and workshop entitled "Miratges, de la postfotografia al ciberespai" 'Scenes from postphotography to cyberspace', held at the Centre Cultural of the Fundació La Caixa located on Passeig St. Joan, Barcelona (8).

Notes:

(1) "An Anecdoted Archive of the Cold War" (1993) by Georges Legrady is an electronic book in the form of an autobiographical archives that relates personal materials to official materials from East European Communism from the early 1960s. It interactively crosses the Hungarian author's own background with that of the Cold War. Each user evaluates with a slightly different perspective the sequence of events,

ideological positions, personal interests, which have been chosen at random. The CD-ROM of the same title was issued by HyperReal of San Francisco.

(2) "Portrait No. 1" (1990) by Luc Courchesne is an interactive installation that allows the viewer to converse with the virtual image of a young woman (in a video sequence that constitutes an animated portrait of Mary). To talk to her (Mary is seen as a reflection on a glass pane) you only have to choose the sentences and questions that are written on transparencies over a computer screen. See the CD-ROM entitled "Artintact 2", Karlsruhe: ZKM, 1995.

(3) Hypermedia integrates hypertext and hypermedia together in a single articulated system, in a nonsequential network of connections and associations, thus providing the reader with a wide range of possible consultations and the opportunity to easily move from one item to another.

(4) Chris Marker is a movie-maker known for his interest in research. In 1996 he created "Immemory", a hypermedia made up of photographs of his travels, family album pictures, and scenes from his favorite films, in the hopes that "readers-visitors unconsciously replaces my images with their own."

(5) See the CD-ROM entitled "GPS (Oigo Rom Sector)". Barcelona: Institute Universitari de l'Audiovisual, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 1998.

(6) In the collection at the National Gallery in London, or in any other large museum, we can see how the view of artists has almost always corresponded to what we are saying. We can also see how artists have always had an attitude that is similar to that of the authors of the CDs we can now view.

The polyptych by Niccolo di Liberatore "Christ on the Cross and other scenes", which dates from 1487, and the painting by Holbein "The Ambassadors" (1533), are two clear examples of this, the former because of the perfect fit of pedagogy and old art, and the latter precisely because of its violating thereof, just fifty years later. See the CD-ROM "Art Gallery". London: Microsoft, 1994.

(7) "The Sub-Division of the Electric Light" (1996) by Perry Hoberman is a hypermedia in which the screen is considered a source that cannot be differentiated from light. It can divide the screen into individual images and at the same time the reader can change their position and move them around as they occur on the screen. See the CD-ROM "Artintact 3". Karlsruhe: ZKM, 1996.

(8) See the diskette "Miratges, de la postfotografia al ciberespai". Barcelona: Fundació la Caixa, 1998.