

The Fugue of the Five Senses and the Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

Selected Proceedings

from the 11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society



editors:

Evangelos Kourdis
Maria Papadopoulou
Loukia Kostopoulou

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EDUCATION & SEMIOTICS



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Against proliferation and complexity: the role of history teaching in current and future multi-sensory obsession

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the contemporary obsession of continually enhancing the human sensory systems and its prospects, and it will try to provide a kind of possible remedy through history teaching. This obsession is generally embedded into the frame of transhumanism, a theurgist desire for transforming and augmenting the very human nature, and our current sensorium as well, so that we could see and feel better through the glass darkly of the present reality. In history teaching multisensory digital technologies are also used as educational tools so that students supposedly acquire a deeper as well as joyful awareness of the past. However, such ludic awareness has acquired a deep consumerist character, which lastly entails only «the Great Thrill of Lived Reality» (Baudrillard). The adoption of a transhumanist investigating spirit towards nature, humans, forms, and events deceives its very agents by searching for an authentic experience, when what it remains is only the proliferation of consumerist signs. History, and especially history teaching, are called therefore to underscore the wisdom of limits, the restricted character of every human enterprise, which the past abundantly offers.

Keywords

sensory systems, proliferation, transhumanism, history teaching

The investigating mentality: Transhumanism in sensorium

"The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible", notes Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the end of the 19th century (Wilde, 2007). Stressing on the mysterious nature of the visible, contemporary scientists, artists, psychologists, pedagogues, and managers, try hard to exercise their creativity and imagination on a really advantageous field. By excavating, analyzing, synthesizing and, at last, transforming human vision, they attempt to go beyond the limits of any conventionality.

It is well known that since the ancient times and, moreover, since modernity western thought has privileged sight above all other senses, establishing the hegemony of vision on a hierarchy of the senses. However, in postmodernity such ocularcentric "bias" are increasingly conceived as outmoded and even useless. The enigmatic nature of the visible, blended, however, inextricably with the invisible, has triggered an orchestrated investigation to extend, to escalate, to intensify, to heighten, to deepen, to multiply, and to accelerate not only the five traditional senses but even ourselves, our own body, soul and brain. The five senses should not only be multiplied, but also be understated: they have already accomplished their mission in the world and should be left behind. The world has now another mission, the duty of artificial ultra-intelligence and technological singularity, submitted to the imperatives of a futurist ideology in the extraordinary formula of dystopia and extropy. Normality, being supposedly synonymous to boredom, has now become a wretched banality.

All senses seem, therefore, to be as greedy mouths, which are lustful for a terrifying, insatiable appetite. Thus, they should be overthrown by the challenging, innovative and shifting sensorium of the new sensory modalities and the digitally based multi-sensorial semiosis, which are included into the new synesthetic regimes. This investigating mentality tries not only to destroy the hierarchy of the senses, but also to dismantle the ordinary state of things in favor of a futurist, chimerical multi-field of incessant transformation of everything. Every aspect of the world should be subjected to the law of a never-ending bloating of things, desires, passions and possessions. It seems that we are really condemned to breathe in the air of multi-, and furthermore, a multi- saturated by an extreme rapidity in that technological realm of speed, which Paul Virilio baptized as "*dromosphere*" (Virilio, 2007).

Not surprisingly, this precisely describes the very arena of transhumanism, an international, intellectual and interdisciplinary movement that aims to transform the ordinary human capacities and achieve mastery not only over nature and common human beings but over the future itself (Bostrom, 2005). In any way, there is not a fixed nature anymore, but only a transitional being which continuously attempts to overcome its limited existence. By insisting that human species is transitional, transhumanist theorists and practitioners lead the narcissist obsession of continually converting them into something

different than the already existing one, to a realm of hyperreality, which is conceived as more real than the old one.

Indeed, this climate of ever-complicated futurology is the condition in which we live since even the rise of modernity. Yet, in the twentieth and twentieth-first century, mesmerized mainly by the Theory of Probabilities and Chaos Theory, transhumanist endeavors eventually impose their fascinating power on current societies as the new normalization, the new destiny. The reason for such an extreme evolution is the overpowering and really panic impulse for theurgy, which overwhelmed scientists following the real or alleged dethronement of God and traditional, monotheistic religions in general. Now, we have the new “prosthetic god” who coordinates this impulse to continuously remake ourselves.

However, this dystopia is not based on choice. The ostensible ideology of multisensory coercion for expansionism is imposed as inescapable on every human creature and ought to be internalized and put in practice by everyone, especially by the aforementioned instructors in transhumanist augmentation, in order to be productive and effective. This internalization makes expansionism almost unchallenged and protected by criticism. The existing consumerist and continuously accelerating system is supposedly the best that could be hoped for and we are indebted to make it work better by subjecting ourselves to its legitimated trajectory. It has become the new orthodoxy, the new belief system. Nowadays, the ramifications of that standpoint are, certainly, all too obvious, yet not logically connected to the roots of such attitude: nuclear bombs and smart weapons, and, certainly, the unsurmountable ecological crisis, are the most obvious among them.

Notwithstanding, these phantasmagoric transformations of the field of the sensory systems seem not to change, decisively and deeply, the old oculacentrism. The foundation is the same visual determinism through the medium of the new and extremely complicated technologies of panopticon, the Bentham's prison. Therefore, vision can be accomplished better and fuller by a new ultra-visual culture, which, while secretly dominates people, perverts them by asking their own conscious participation in the “new brave world” of technological, compulsory enthusiasm. It is about a new “*visual imagery*”, through the contemporary “*industrialization of vision*”, which entails an extra-human vision, “*giving sight to a machine without a gaze, sight without seeing, and giving speech to an image without humans*” (Virilio, 199; Virilio & Lotringer, 2005).

What is undoubtable in this process is the extreme risk on freedom. Thus, the alleged innocent positioning on transhumanism is the new postmodern myth, and seems to pass over the fact that by transforming human capacities, and sensory spheres as well, the existing power relations are not deleted but are also transformed. Some decades ago Hans Blumenberg (1993) had already suggested that “*the connection between vision and freedom is being dissociated. Due to the dominance of the prefabricated and of techno-*

logically pre-cast situations and aspects, the modern extension of sensory spheres has not become a source of freedom". It is now well-known that new control mechanisms are more direct, concealed, disguised, invisible, and certainly tremendously powerful in contrast to the old ones. Therefore, the creation of a panoptic society, where the boundaries between the permissible and the prohibited, and between the public and the private too, are intentionally confused, seems to be our present and future destiny. Using surveillance technologies and constructing a massive data storage, government and advertising agencies, at least, make virtually transparent our digital self: "[T]oday every single digital trace can be identified, stored, and aggregated to constitute a composite sketch of what we like, whom we love, what we read, how we vote, and where we protest". We are "exposed", we live in "an expository society", as Bernard Harcourt calls it (2015). We are completely under "a new virtual transparency that is dramatically reconfiguring relations of power throughout society..., producing a dramatically new circulation of power in society" (Harcourt, 2015).

The innovative and almost surprising feature of this panoptic control is, however, that we crave such exposure and yearn for the demolition of our privacy. The natural, human need of communication has been extremely augmented and transformed by these global webs, based on an exclusively hedonistic imperative of "likes", "follow" and "share" in the new realm of publicity and avowing, which is deeply saturated by jouissance and desire.

The conformism of proliferation in history and history teaching

As indeed any other human science, history simply follows and conforms to the universal impulse to accelerate and enlarge everything, being merely an instrument of assuring the global rally to a curious kind of technological "eternity". It seems to be predestined to justify and rationalize the irrational instinct of an always technological proliferation. It is bound to support all the scientific endeavors to enhance life, body and mind, society, and the world itself, offering in fact a constantly wiggish interpretation of historical process from simplicity, alleged ignorance and naiveness of history's agents as well as historians of the past to the multi-intelligence, sophistication, and multi-experience of the present and future, which is easily coined as "progress". The underestimation of the past attempts and the aggrandizement of the present ones seems to be the underlining trend of our historical thought, either confessedly or not.

It was at the dawn of the twentieth century, when historiography begun to continually experiment with new forms, concepts, challenges and ventures, extending its regime with the aim to be attached to the furious march of technological sciences and be legitimated by them. Certainly, this aim is expertly concealed behind an uninterrupted demand for understanding, a real fetishism of understanding, as I have called it, which is also supposed to validate history mainly in the eyes of the prevailing natural, formal and

applied sciences. Jacques Le Goff (1988) mirrors this process by insisting that “*through the continual enlargement of its territory, history is still becoming coextensive with man*”. Consequently, a man, who is incessantly coerced to proliferate himself and his world, has the urgent need of a historiography which plainly supports his enterprise, recording by all the more sophisticated tools his victorious course.

Furthermore, it is history teaching itself which also bows to the aforementioned “co-extension”. It makes excessive use of multisensory digital technologies and multi-medial educational tools by which students will be supposedly led to a deeper and wider awareness of the past acquiring a better pleasure of it as well. For, according to currently undisputable pedagogical dogmas, knowledge and comprehension is nothing if it is not connected with instant and continuing pleasure and enthusiasm. Only a student who seeks stimulation and excitement through knowledge fits well to contemporary society. However, it is precisely in this point that knowledge and comprehension meets to the contemporary consumerist spirit. For such burgeoning and ludic historical awareness has a deep consumerist character, that is, a self-referential enjoyment of presentism. History does not teach anything anymore, but simply enjoys its students with consumerist experiences, e.g., in thematic historical parks, and prepares human beings for a boundless, absolutely technological, transhumanist future. The obsession with the more and more historical understanding has something Rankean in its attitude. “*The all the more voracious demand for reality, for ‘truth’, for ‘objectivity’*”, which is characteristic of the consumer society, in historiographical fields lastly entails to the multisensory delight of the very moment, “*the Great Thrill of Lived Reality*”, which Baudrillard (1998) had penetratingly attributed to “*the dizzy sense of a total presence at the event*”. This points to the fact that the irrational motive of adopting the unlimited investigating mentality towards nature, humans, forms, and events is subjected to a theurgist as well as a consumerist impulse, which really affects even historiography and history teaching. For technological theurgy and consumerism seem to be the two sides of the same coin.

The undermining of transhumanist determinism through history teaching

Admittedly, one can persuasively teach the history of human societies as a long chain of successful events and achievements. Thus, historiography seems not to validate the weakness of man, but instead his ever-growing endeavor to conquer the highest peaks of human possibilities in almost all areas of his impact. That endeavor man almost always attributes to civilization and its improvement.

Yet, it was Walter Benjamin (Zohn, 1969) who noted that “*there is no document of civilization, which is at the same time a document of barbarism*”. Hannah Arendt (1962) also suggested that “*Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; [...] both are articles of superstition, not of faith*”. The history of fruitful and progressive attainments is always followed by a curious demon of catastrophes, which paves the same way of that

triumphant process. On the eve of the most destructive in the global history World War II, the British philosopher and historian R.C. Collingwood (1939) wrote in his autobiography: *“Not only would any failure to control human affairs result in more and more widespread destruction as natural science added triumph to triumph, but the consequences would tend more and more to the destruction of whatever was good and reasonable in the civilized world; for the evil would always begin using the engines of destruction before the good, the fool always before the wise man”*.

Following the radical thought of the above scholars, among many others, this great connection between the scientific/technological proliferation and its extremely damaging force in all human affairs is something that students could be taught, particularly through history. It is well known that almost nobody informs his teaching by this connection in our schools, and even ecology usually stands only for a moral equivalent to an always legitimized technological proliferation. Thus, the study of history, saturated by the views of those philosophers who attempt to go against the grain, should uncover this fountain of alleged technological innocence by illuminating the wisdom of human limits, which are really threatened by contemporary absolute technization of the world. Despite the contemporary loss of human-scale actions and aspirations, the past itself abundantly offers not only the reassuring of human capacities, possibilities and attainments, but also the long experience of the restricted character of every human enterprise.

Admittedly, such a currently unconventional goal is rather difficult to be achieved in societies that exclusively favor the inspiring stories of success. Yet, we might change this direction by, for instance, exemplifying historical events and personalities, which not only conquered but failed to accomplish their specified mission in the past or present coincidences. A long, global history of human failures in parallel with, and in contrast to, victorious achievements, would teach children of the intrinsic value of modesty and humbleness in humanity itself. These stories of vulnerability and defenselessness would prepare them for their own, and very possible, failures in life, and be well-disposed for assessing the failures of others as well. Studying at first mythological cases as the Hercules' poisoned shirt, Achilles' heel and Samson's hair, students would be familiarized with the intrinsic susceptibility of human beings, even if they were heroes or semi-gods, aiming eventually to search for equivalent characters in subsequent historical periods who were dealing with anxieties and uncertainties brought about by their opponents or historical circumstances in general. Moreover, in the ancient Greek world of Sophocles it was Nemesis who punished the hubris of arrogant and frivolous humans. Such a retribution could wisely be taught to students, who especially belong to the upper classes, in order to restrict their usually oceanic appetites for conquering the world through their voracious dreams.

Notwithstanding, it is decisively important to highlight that children should also be accustomed to assign a plausible, credible and familiar meaning to these temporal disap-

pointments, a meaning that will distance themselves from mindless optimism and destructive despair alike, creating instead a sensitive and viable equilibrium between them. A focus on personal or collective disasters of past and present, if it is scheduled and managed with pedagogical sensitiveness and historical profoundness, far away from sentimentality as well, would entail to a deep investigation of the exclusively human tragedy in the world. These failed or cataclysmic cases, however, should not be conceived as paces towards the recapture of success in an always positively progressive, entrepreneurial thinking, but as a means of reconsidering the limits of nature and human beings.

Thus, considering the realities of negative consequences of a historical process full of potential pitfalls, students are particularly introduced into the realm of fear, not as the strategically composed nowadays domain of phobia, but as a conscious respect and sensible responsibility for life, nature and humanity. For one distinguishing feature of our postmodern society is the overwhelming *fear-phobia*, as I could name it. Although fear is “*a fundamental and universal emotion that has been adaptive in ensuring our survival as a species*” (Milosevic & McCabe, 2015), now seems to prevail an orchestrated propaganda which is exclusively oriented to the rejection and repression of fear, and automatically identifies fear only with passivity, defensiveness, inadequacy, shame, depression, cowardice, and, at last, with psychological phobia. Therefore, this propaganda involves the pathologicalization of fear, particularly in an era and in a society of dopamine, which brainwashes its members by always making risk based decisions, or undertaking extreme sport activities.

Besides, fear, the consciousness of moderation and precautions, and the awareness of the deep human tragedy of living in the world, might be considered, and also taught, as “senses”, which are located beyond the old five ones. Such humanist, and not transhumanist, proliferation of senses may be considered as a great achievement pacing as well the footprints of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. Therefore, instead of a multi-sensory, ludic teaching of successful outcomes of an always triumphed human agency, teachers and students, undertaking a study of human arrogance, could in contrast experiment with unsuccessful schedules which entailed to severe human or natural costs.

Conclusion

World is indisputably complex, but capitalizing complexity in order to seize upon humanity is the modern/postmodern neurotic response and device of a man who has lost his integrity during the excessive scattering of his powers and possibilities. History and history teaching could thus put a halt, at least, to the extreme linearity of expansionism, the still wiggish perceptions of historical process and goals, trying to circumvent sequential innovativeness. These human sciences could, at last, teach sobriety, humility and simplicity, values actually and symbolically ignored to the extreme at our own extreme risk societies.

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