Media ecology, neuro-image and Hito Steyerl – a schematic essay on contemporary image circulation and effects

Introduction

Throughout his extensive analysis of the relationship between humans and media, Friedrich Kittler asserts that our reality and history are created by the media that surrounds us and that there is nothing outside of this media constituted world (1999). More precisely, media are so embedded in our lives that they shape our identity, our conscious and unconscious, and nonetheless our behaviour and the circumstances in which it manifests. As each era is profoundly marked by its ecosystem of tools, machines and technologies, which according to Marshall McLuhan is "as imperceptible to us as water is to fish" (1969), it is this precisely the media ecology[1] that formulates the history of those times. In this sense, media have a significant impact on our brain and cognition of the world as well. In this paper I will focus on the influence screes and cameras in their current multitude of forms have on our brain and behaviour, by referring to a moving-image piece by the contemporary artist Hito Steyerl.

[1] Media ecology is a term introduced my Marshall McLuhan in 1962, through which he explains that media surround and shape us just like an environment. In a media ecology the media are not just tools, but they are the ones that constitute our world.

Theoretical framework

Taking into account the McLuhanesque idea that it is the media itself and not the content that shapes our society, I will outline the theoretical aspects that shape the understanding of today's media ecology and that bridge the relationship between different cinematic forms and the brain. In the current climate of cognitive and late capitalism, the wealth values have shifted from a focus on materialism and production towards a rather intellectual, authentic experience-based wealth accumulation.

This shift was enabled by the rapid technological development and the widespread of devices that can provide easy, instant access to information and data.

The flow of the data is provided by networks, which currently stand at the structure of our internet-based, high-tech, online society. The way information reaches us and the manner in which we interact with it is in an intense visual format enables by devices with screens.

The more networks, the more devices, the more devices, the more networks.
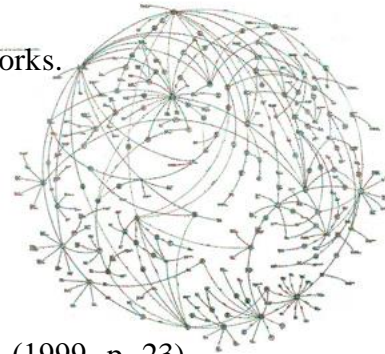
In a data driven society one can "move in, around and through information" (1999, p. 23). Bolter and Gruisin's definition of the fluid media ecosystem encompasses both the visual and the embodied relationship we have with data today. Such movements are possible both physically and virtually. For example, fibreoptic cables are a visible, yet invisible element of the daily, urban landscape, as their presence is infiltrated in the underground, on top of the concrete layer and even up in the air. Hence, the texture of the 21st city is of a knitted fabric made out of entanglements of networks. Furthermore, Bolter and Gruisin argue that immediacy enables users to have a corporal, haptic experience of their devices by transcending the user interface from 2D to 3D and nonetheless by integrating the senses of touch in the interaction with computers (1999, p. 23). While the mouse and the digital pen were the first enablers of the tactile digital experience, the touch screens have now brought the materialisation of the virtual interface to a new level, where finger gestures control the interplay between the body and information. Nonetheless, our experience with the virtual and the digital is dominated by the realm of the visual.

At the core of "the digital turn in culture at large, and in media culture specifically" (2012, p. 8), according to Patricia Pisters, stands development the neuro-image. In the networked data culture, the neuro-image is like a moss in a forest, spreading through any surface and being that could sustain its life and more importantly, whose life it can symbiotically contribute to.
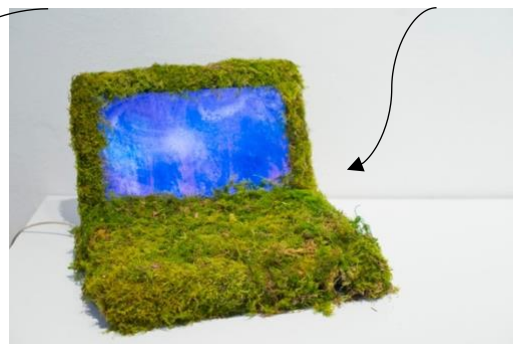
Different instances of moss spreading

Pisters identifies the key characteristics of the neuro-image as:

belonging to a "vortex of the contemporary urban cityscape full of networked electronic and digital screens—screens that are themselves always already connected to assemblages of power, capital, and transnational movements of peoples, goods, and information" (2012, p. 2)

fostering the "insistence on brain processes" (2012, p. 3)

Travelling through "navigation displays, computer screens, cell phones, television sets, urban screens, and surveillance technology; which are the markers of both a typical twenty-first-century media city and the practices of everyday media use." (2012, p. 2)

In her discussion of the neuro-image environment, Pisters introduces the Deleuzian term of the "brain screen", derived from Deleuze's acclaimed affirmation that "The brain is unity. The brain is the screen." (1986) Although this statement could be the subject of an entire paper itself, a simple definition from the perspective of cognitivism would imply that the cinema (or in general moving-image) spectators are not passive viewers, but that in the act of watching one makes (conscious and unconscious) connections and reacts in relation to the image. Pisters goes further to affirm that the brain records and plays images, "while many things may change, nothing completely disappears in the "flickering" and "relinking" loops of our brain screens that are caught in an eternal return of difference and repetition". (2013, p. 161)
Furthermore, the brain and the screen are not two separate entities, but they shape each other and the world in a continuous interrelation.

The neuro-image and the brain screen are formative elements of the cognitive capitalist system in which the eye is the main instrument for navigating the world. As "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964), the two elements highlight the presence and influence of the image, the visual and the cinematic in our contemporary lives, dominated by devices that facilitate the instantaneous presence of such images.
To further elaborate on the impact the aforementioned media ecology has on society and on individuals, I will refer to Hito Steyerl's short film *How to Not Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013).

<u>Analysis</u>

The short video *How to Not Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* acts as a guide to becoming invisible, where the artists illustrates different ways in which one could disappear. Using an instruction manual-like discourse, the film includes five lessons/chapters: 1. Make something invisible for a camera, 2. Be invisible in plain sight, 3. Become invisible by becoming a picture, 4. Be invisible by disappearing, 5. Become invisible by merging into a world made of pictures. Through each chapter, Steyerl depicts images accompanied by a narrator's voice where she, along with costumed actors (who are wearing specific suits used in green screen film production to hide a person or an object) are attempting to merge into the images depicted in the film.

Still image from Steyerl's *How to Not Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). Here the artist is covering her face in green paint used in chroma keying (a technique that layers two images on top of each other, where usually the green is removed and replaced with the other image).

How to Not Be Seen is a humoristic perspective on the Pister's idea of neuro-image, more precisely on the super saturation of images, video camera, screen, surveillance and so on. Even if the film was made in 2013, when Web 2.0 was still not at its climatic point as it is now, I believe that the film is even more relevant today, as we are experiencing a social media networked society. The voiceover in the film is asking questions regarding the circulation and distribution of images such as: "How do people disappear in an age of total over-visibility? Are people hidden by too many images? Do they become images?"

Here I would go further and state that today it is impossible for someone to escape being captured into an image, from the moment one is born and being given an identity, to even when one walks on the street their life is being recorded by a camera. The main operating systems of society are today also dependent on images, such as travelling on an airplane which now is regulated by screen and camera-based identification. Even if one manages to escape these systems there are other uncontrollable factors where one could be recorded or taken a picture of, such as unknowingly appearing on someone else's picture or being seen in a picture taken from a satellite.

In this perspective, there are indeed many questions concerning privacy and identity, but in her film Steyerl suggests that being in many pictures might be a way of hiding from being seen, meaning that over-exposure might render someone invisible. On social media, especially on platforms like Instagram it seems that the more a face appears on the screen, the more one seems to want to scroll over and ignore it. Once familiar with an image, the viewer becomes less interested in seeing similar figures. That is why social media celebrities can represent, in a Deleuzian sense, the ultimate contemporary schizophrenic, as they have to re-interpret their personalities, attitudes and appearances all the time so that their figures do not become invisible and the viewers. Therefore, if an abundance of images creates the desire to not participate in the act of looking, what are images today and what is their purpose?

If the images we see are being projected – in Pisters terms, in a loop on our brain screens, it could be argued that one starts seeing life through the lenses of filmic and photographic images. Just like in *How to Not Be Seen* the world is seen through the lenses of an U.S. Air Force surveillance camera that is calibrated using a gridded patch of land made out of concrete in the middle of the desert. In Steyerl's film the footage is never realistic, like in Bazin's cinema, but it is always mediated by user interfaces, green screens or animations. As a result, *How to Not Be Seen* illustrates the impact the conglomeration of images has on the "prosumers (active content-producing consumers)" (Pisters, 2012, p. 10) to the point that even images are seen through and framed through other images.
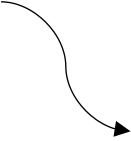
Hence, aren't we as prosumers filtering and framing the aesthetically pleasing, nicely lit moments and objects in our life, instinctually thinking that such a sight could make a good Instagram post?

Throughout the short film there are cuts to bird's eye view shots of the concrete patch in the desert, showing the artificial construction as a flat grid used for calibrating. Besides the illustrative function through which the alien formation is showed in the deserts, such aerial, zooming in shots point to the fact that the cinematic image has allowed the brain to see things that were impossible to the human eye previously. Technological development paved the way to a new way of seeing in close-up, from very high or tilted angles and to a way of time and space travelling through the use of montage and editing. In this sense, Hito Steyerl writes that:
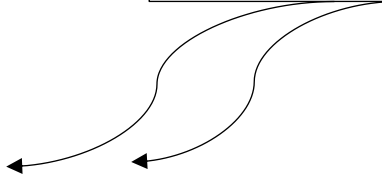
> Our sense of spatial and temporal orientation has changed dramatically in recent years, prompted by new technologies of surveillance, tracking, and targeting. One of the symptoms of this transformation is the growing importance of aerial views: overviews, Google Map views, satellite views. We are growing increasingly accustomed to what used to be called a God's-eye view. On the other hand, we also notice the decreasing importance of a paradigm of visuality that long dominated our vision: linear perspective. Its stable and single point of view is being supplemented (and often replaced) by multiple perspectives, overlapping windows, distorted flight lines, and divergent vanishing points." (2012)

Therefore, today the screen of our brains has now the possibility to perceive our surroundings from multiple perspectives, to penetrate and scrutinise with our gaze every corner of the world and distribute, manipulate and re-contextualise these images infinitely, or until exhaustion.

But why would one want to disappear in the first place? Through humour and satire Steyerl also insinuates that we should find means of educating ourselves in terms of how we could cure ourselves from the symptoms of living in an image dominated society. The constant interaction with moving images can also have stronger effects on our minds, which are analysed from neuroscientific points of view by Geert Lovink in his essay about Zoom and internet fatigue. He describes that being in the constant presence of video calls, interfaces and internet pages can create exhaustion and anxiety, as the brain is working harder to read visual ques from the images depicting people from the shoulders above (Lovink, 2020). In the interaction with the digital image the physical realm is lost, encouraging our attention to shift and start multitasking. Nonetheless, being in the presence of a camera and seeing yourself on the screen can trigger a performative state, where one constantly feels self-aware or like acting. Hence, being invaded by images can lead to exhaustion as our brains are still not adapted to a fully digital world, which might make people like Hito Steyerl want to disappear.

To discuss the concepts of the neuro-image and the brain screen beyond the realm of classical cinema, I chose Hito Steyerl's film as I believe that it illustrates and discusses the history of our time as seen through the media that surround us. Before delving into the details of the film, I analysed the main traits of cognitive capitalism as a society dominated by information, software, networks and virtuality. By understanding our media ecology and its development we can further understand the effects it can have on us as individuals as well as society.

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