

Informatics, Freedom and Subculture¹

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ABSTRACT— *Certain contemporary considerations strengthen this as well, when we can read about among others the fact that we obtain modern identity through a kind of an inner made sacral central point placed in the subjective, that is to say the outer, mythical sacrality in modernity places itself in the particular subjective. Although the term critical has served to mark the boundaries of modern science, the scientific and technical successes of the decades which followed his work made a lot of people forget about the boundary and limit likeness of sciences and modern knowledge as Kant had shown it with the aim to mark out on what base modern science can be imagined.*

Keywords— informatics, space-time, subculture, motorcycle, free beauty

The cult of information and informatics is a phenomenon that goes back to decades as it was observed by many of its critics including Theodore Roszak. “Information has taken on the quality of that impalpable, invisible, but plauditing silk from which the emperor’s ethereal gown was supposedly spun. The word has re- [x] ceived ambitious, global definitions that make it all good things to all people. Words that come to mean everything may finally mean nothing; yet their very emptiness may allow them to be filled with a mesmerizing glamour. The loose but exuberant talk we hear on all sides these days about ‘the information economy,’ ‘the information society,’ is coming to have exactly that function. These often-repeated catchphrases and clichés are the mumbo jumbo of a widespread public cult. Like all cults, this one also has the intention of enlisting mindless allegiance and acquiescence. People who have no clear idea what they mean by information or why they should want so much of it are nonetheless prepared to believe that we live in an Information Age, which makes every computer around us what the relics of the True Cross were in the Age of Faith: emblems of salvation.”²

The paradox of the cult of informatics lies in the fact that it simultaneously emerges as a product of culture while at the same time it seeks to reshape the whole process of cultural acquisition. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the business-driven technical psychosis, which is generated with the sole purpose of increasing consumption and the various sub-cultures connected with technology. The latter offers a far more productive field for inquiry so I focus only on this topic. What renders this field particularly challenging is its extraordinary capacity of changing, renewing and expanding. This characteristic provides the daily users with a special experience and it forces the researchers to be self-reflective.

In order to simplify the discussion, I apply the term informatics for the world of the development and utilization of hardware and software. This is justified by the fact that up to the present there is a mutual dependency between the development of hardware and software, we speak of softwares, which require more sophisticated hardwares, and more complex hardwares, which enable softwares offering more services, more functions and an easier and smoother application. During its history of five decades, informatics gave rise to many utopian visions. The nature of this relationship is discussed widely in the literature; I would just like to single out two landmark events. The first was the spread of PCs from the end of the 1970s, which were easily manageable and suitable for personal use. The second was the spread of the more and more user-friendly computer programs at the same time, which did not require any special programming skills. Word processor played the same role in the case of the software as PC or MAC did in the case of the hardware. These developments gave a new meaning to informatics in the everyday life as well.

This chapter of the history of technology, which I outlined above, from the 1970s nourished people’s fantasy and created bolder and bolder utopias. The past decades enable us to examine these visions from a historical perspective and critically reflect on the impacts of this great technological development. From today’s perspective these visions can be seen as the belated products of the project of modernity since they propagated and glorified the increased power of man and the benign nature of this power. The negative utopias, which, on the contrary, envisaged the conquest of man by computers and robots, can be also placed under this label since they narrated stories of power struggles, only in this case the narration ended with the damnation and not the salvation of the man, who created the fateful machines. At the same

¹ This study was supported by the TAMOP-4.2.2.C-11/1/KONV-2012-0015 (Earth-system) project sponsored by the EU and European Social Foundation.

² Roszak Theodore: *The Cult of Information* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1986.) ix.

time we should not forget that technical inventions go back to the primordial times of humankind, and such inventions have always pointed beyond their naked technical nature. The wonder of the invention of the wheel or metal production was associated with the same visions of power, conquest and domination as the triumph of the machines in the modern age or the wonder of moving vehicles on the ground, in the water, and in the air, which enabled such freedom of movement that was unthinkable in the premodern age.

The second type of utopias encompasses visions, which connect technical development with the grand project of social development. These utopias are also rooted in the old times since all important technical inventions trigger grand visions of a bright future. It is, however, the specificity of the end of the 20th century that informatics intrudes into the everyday life at a formerly unprecedented scale. Many authors believe that informatics shapes life-styles, while others go as far as to argue that in effect new lifestyles are being created. Already from the 1970s many authors envisaged the creation of new communities based on the use of PCs and the networks that connect them. Interestingly, part of these prophesies were fulfilled even if neither exactly the same way nor in the same place and the same time as it was anticipated. In line with the concepts that had been formed some decades before, the devices of informatics became widespread globally and new and new networks are being created that connect the devices and the users. Following the spread of community sites, the number of uploads and the widespread practice of sharing it seems that new customs, communication forms and networks have been created, and the cycle continues.

The interpretation of the meaning of these transformations oscillates between an essentially optimistic (which is generally but not exclusively technocratic) and a pessimistic reading. Out of the extensive literature I single out Manuel Castells' book, *The Information Age*, which became a "bestseller" in English and all translations.³ Castells' work received a wide scholarly attention and it triggered several responses and critical readings because many authors disagreed with his statements. We have to note here that the digital gap between the different social strata and also between the countries poses a challenge, which is likely to stay with us also in the future. I expect the digital gap to be narrowing because access is getting easier but its elimination seems to be unrealistic. The *social* differences in the use of informatics will, however, persist because their basis, that is, social differentiation rests on the principle of *difference*, as it is generally accepted after the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Since this principle is not essentialist but functionalist in nature, its meaning remains valid also in the postmodern.

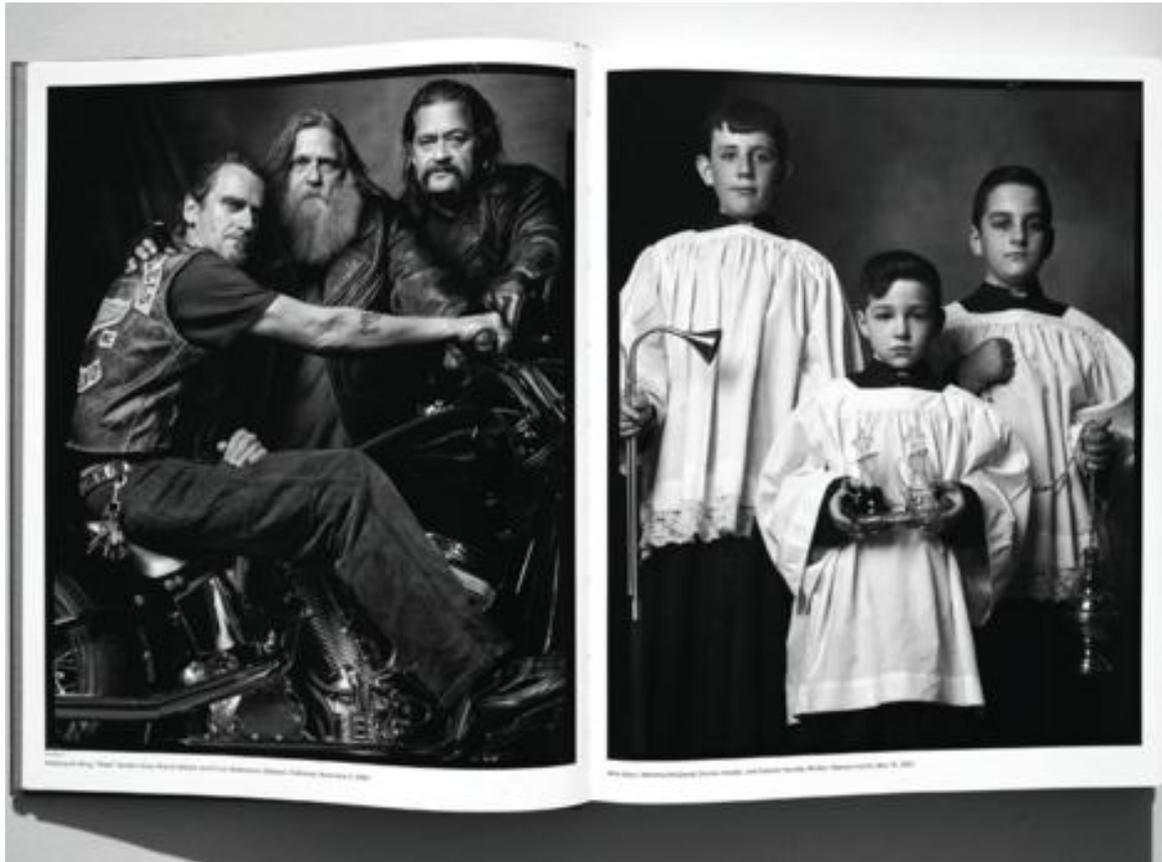
Today both the optimistic and the more critical, pessimistic "camps" are shifting their interests from the devices (hardware) and the programs (software) to the functioning and impacts of networks. "Commenting" offers a whole network of livelihood to many, starting from those, who devote lengthy articles to the question of how sitting in front of the monitor impacts on the spinal column, the eye or human relationships to those, who glorify these networks that they hold to be social networks or even go as far as to discover in them the new dimensions of human existence. Writing about "hot topics" such as the social network and other related phenomena carries the danger that many can't decide whether the above mentioned phenomena represent long-term trends or they are just ephemeral moments in human history - perhaps because we simply lack the necessary knowledge to make a meaningful decision. Therefore very often these texts should be dismissed as unproductive quibbling because they fall short to satisfy serious academic requirements, and the authors either indulge in speculation in order to secure their livelihood or they lack the necessary critical judgment and factual knowledge. But the above mentioned factors can also be present simultaneously. Undoubtedly, the desire to show a big face, to pour out uncontrolled emotions and to use an abusive vocabulary on the screen without punishment shows that we are dealing with previously well-known forms of human expression and interaction under new technical conditions.

It seems, then, that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of speech genres⁴ can be applied to the world of the digitally based communication. The everyday, often rough and coarse forms of speech are also forms, and even cursing has its own requirements and set of rules like any other genre. I would even assume that the use of new communication techniques is adapted to the already existing speech genres. If I want to be very optimistic, I would argue that it expands the set of speech genres that are already available to us. But informatics cannot create new forms of communication, let alone new forms of human existence; at most it can fulfill a gap, which was caused by the disappearance of traditional relations and the evaporation or elimination of former communication techniques.

It remains a question, whether informatics can offer anything valuable for culture and education? I argue that it does but this means the creation of new subcultures. We can call these subcultures communities but it would be difficult to decide how long these communities continue to exist. As the example of the society organized around the Harley-Davidson motorcycle shows, one subculture connected to a technical instrument can continue to exist for many decades. However, while the construction of this well-known, prestigious and highly appreciated motorcycle has not changed much over the years, informatics develops at an exponential rate. So presumably this development has a different impact on the building of communities from how the customs and rites of the Harley-Davidson fans change over the time.

³ Castells, Manuel: *The information Age. Economy, Society and Culture* (Blackwell Publishing, 2000.)

⁴ Bakhtin, Mihail: *Speech Genres and other late essays* (University of Texas Press, 2004.)



Mark Laita: Created Equal (2010)

Culture is a medium, which offers the aesthetical experience of the world from its earliest known forms to the present day. Therefore it can use any phenomenon for this purpose. If we stick to the example of the motorcycle, we can mention here Robert M. Pirsig's novel entitled *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*, which has many important cultural references including: the motorcycle as the manifestation of the human side of technical advancement and as a means of freedom; travelling as lifestyle and mode of existence; and philosophical reflections inspired by the wisdom of Zen throughout the novel. Pirsig's novel reflects an intimate, personalized subculture from the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Its direct antecedent is the *Easy Riders* movie, which is thematically closely linked with the novel. *Easy Riders* (1969) established a great cult and started an almost independent cultural movement, which created new lifestyles and inspired novel artistic products. I mention here Melissa Behr's film, *Me & Will* (1999) a continuation of the original story, which is narrated from the perspective of female characters and *Üvegtigris (Glass Tiger, 2001)* a Hungarian film directed by Péter Rudolf and Iván Kapitány, which offers a self-ironical interpretation of the *Easy Rider* theme. This Hungarian film created a self-sustained world of connotations and references, where even half sentences and phrases became significant and they could be employed anytime by the Glass Tiger fans to understand and entertain each other.

I wrote all the above because I sought to show that aesthetical, and in particular, artistic experience has a great freedom and whatever has real significance, is able to generate an impact, a reading, a re-reading or a re-writing. If I apply this to the topics that I have discussed so far, I can conclude that technology cannot be excluded from the world of aesthetical or artistic phenomena; on the contrary, there are times when it can be very important and it can gain a special cultural significance. I would, however, argue that too rapid changes in this sphere are disadvantageous because the phenomenon loses its distinct and concrete form, and it can be no longer adequately represented. This statement is valid for the past decades of informatics. The computer and its application can appear in the sphere of art as a theme or a motive but it has not gained such an important cultural significance as the aforementioned technical device, the motorcycle, and this is unlikely to change in the future. This vehicle is the durable symbol of freedom and free beauty, independently of its type starting from the scooter to the chopper. It can establish distinct subcultures, and within this genre, fun clubs and societies can be organized around singular types and brands of the motorcycle. It can be represented in literature, movie, painting or photography.



Ruth Orkin: An American Girl in Italy (Firenze, 1951)

The meaning of free beauty, *pulchritudo vaga* (a term used by Immanuel Kant) is the freedom of imagination while it is closely connected with creative reason: „That is to say, since the freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept, the judgement of taste must found upon a mere sensation of the mutually quickening activity of the imagination in its freedom, and of the understanding with its conformity to law. It must therefore rest upon a feeling that allows the object to be estimated by the finality of the representation (by which an object is given) for the furtherance of the cognitive faculties in their free play.”⁵

However, the world of informatics does not offer anything like that even if it is strongly present in our everyday life and even if it is associated with creativity. We can ask the appropriate question: what is the reason for this? One thing is sure. I am not hostile to the world of informatics because I am writing even this piece on my laptop, which meant a great assistance in my work in the past years. I also administer many of my affairs with the help of Internet, which renders management easier and faster. I therefore don't argue against this technology but I seek to show its limits as it cannot possess as much cultural significance as other devices. I think that the most important reason for this is the fact that besides the above mentioned excessive plasticity, informatics does not have a *spatial* dimension. It exists virtually, but it seems that man has a physical body and has a need for the experience of real space and the freedom of movement, which is made possible by the motorcycle that I used as a counter-example but not by the computer. The use of the motorbike, of course, carries certain risks but it seems that in real life we need some real risks. I will just make a passing reference to other forms of the aesthetical experience of risk including the siren world of gambling or in a more general way, the eternal lust for adventure but I refrain from discussing them at length here. I would be unjust to those, who see adventure not as part of life but they identify it with life regardless of whether adventure represents an artistic product or free movement in space. After all, I hope – and I am not alone in this hope – that the freedom of spirit and the freedom of body meets somewhere in this world. We can call this gratification or even happiness.

⁵ Immanuel Kant: The Critique of Judgement SS 35. The principle of taste is the subjective principle of the general power of judgement. (Translated by James Creed Meredith) <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>