

The Pleasure of the Medium

Jouissance and the Excess of Writing

I am looking at a website - it bores me. I am delighted by my boredom.

Why should it not bore me?

Why should I be fascinated?

I am looking for an escape from spectacularity.

I don't want to be spectacularized.

I hear a discussion about 'quality'. I am bored by it.

I hate this boredom!

Why should I be interested in 'quality'?

What quality?

Whose quality?

'What is this shit?!??'

I hear desperation, unnerving irritation.

I am stimulated!

Who is saying this to me?

Who is writing?

Does it really matter?

The greatest fascination of a new medium always lies within the machine. It is not the old medium being the 'content' of the new medium – wrong formula. It is only when the old medium is discarded, even if this delightful moment is brought about by a mistake, that the magic of the new medium can disclose itself.

I had this experience when watching some of the magnificent websites created by jodi.org, specifically for the Netscape 2.0 browser on a mac system. The website would get stuck, seem to buffer indefinitely. Then suddenly, the page would start to load again, superimposed layers of graphics and ascii swirls crowding the screen. Blinking signs, links to more digital garbage, neatly organized in the defunct mosaic.

We were at the launch of the net.congestion archive and we experienced net congestion . . . Some people from Seattle who had visited our festival about half a year earlier had made a real local show. We had asked participants to this festival of streaming media to 'stream-in' for the occasion. We were watching from a comfortable space in the centre of Amsterdam. The Riga crew, as always, knew exactly what they were doing – a nice, low-bandwidth, grainy, but perfect web video mix and stunning electronic music from that magical city in the Baltics. The people in Banff had made a wonderful sound loop, perfect reception from Canada – we projected an image of 'Sleeping Buffalo' to it, a local mountain just outside the Banff campus.

But Seattle – they topped it off. They gathered a crowd (with some 9 hours time difference) and were staging a real-life serious debate on the politics of the networked media sphere. It sounded inspiring and insightful, from what we could get at our end, but every 10 to 15 seconds the stream would break up. The face of a speaker would

suddenly contort while the sound would squeak, turn into electrostatic noise (so it seemed) – on the projection screen we saw the most wondrous cubist images; constantly transforming over time, new contortions, blends of colours that were not there before, a grotesque, a caricature, emerging spontaneously. Adam, one of the organizers of the festival, was standing in awe watching this anti-spectacle – ‘*Wow, this is so beautiful! I could look at this for hours!*’

David Sifry, founder and CEO of Technorati, reports on 5 April 2007 that according to technorati.com’s then latest count, about 70,000,000 blogs are online, with a significant growth of fake and spam blogs (splogs), but still far outranked by genuine postings.

An excess of writing.

Minor mathematics – to get an average readership of about 100 readers over a certain average period in which these blogs are available online, before they disappear into oblivion, requires a population of 7 billion.

The conclusion would probably have to be that population growth needs to be sped up so as to match the growth of blog-production and provide them with a readership.

Roland Barthes identified two types of pleasures in text – the text of pleasure and the text of *jouissance*:¹

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.

Text of *jouissance*: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.²

The subject who holds these two texts in their field and in their hands, according to Barthes, is an anachronic subject. A contradictory subject who both ‘enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks his loss (that is his ecstasy). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.’

From Lacan we learned that the desire of the subject is oriented on an essential lack. This lack results from the illusory quest of the subject for its own consistency and unity that does not exist. This Lacanian subject is lost between the emanations of its own body, the imaginary images it projects on itself (the images the subject mirrors itself in without ever having laid direct eyes upon itself), and the symbolic order, that of language and text paradigmatically, in which it tries desperately to articulate itself, while this act of articulation by means of language only results in a further deferral of the subject from its (supposed) self.

The excess of writing is the futile quest of the subject to fulfil its own impossible desire by means of language.

The ecstasy of writing is the realization of the impossibility of this quest and the willing submission to it – the subject willingly losing itself, dissolving into text.

The ecstasy of writing/reading is a bodily experience. It adheres neither to bourgeois morality nor to Marxist/materialist doxology. Barthes explains:

On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object. The text supersedes grammatical attitudes: it is the undifferentiated eye, which an excessive author (Angelus Silesius) describes: 'The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which he sees me.'

Apparently Arab scholars, when speaking of the text, use this admirable expression: 'the certain body.' What body? We have several of them; the body of anatomists and physiologists, the one science sees or discusses: this is the text of grammarians, critics, commentators, philologists (the pheno-text). But we also have a body of bliss consisting solely of erotic relations, utterly distinct from the first body: it is another contour, another nomination;

. . . Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need.³

The erotic can only come into being beyond utility. This is what Bataille has taught us. Only when sexuality is freed from its productive (reproductive) functions can it be transformed into an erotic principle. The sovereign experience of eroticism cannot accept any reduction to a sanctified social code – it is instead heightened in the transgression of that very code, in the moment of *jouissance*, the coming, the climax of ecstasy, of entering the 'beyond'.

Eroticism, as opposed to sexuality is what defines our humanity. The dialectic of desire and prohibition simultaneously conceals and reveals that which is of supreme (*souverainement*) importance to us – the *sacred*. Its consumption is a moment of absolute delight, but it also opens up an experiential void where we stare in the face of death.

The erotic is never a principle of efficiency. It does not attempt to produce a maximum effect with a minimum expenditure of energy. Quite the reverse, it attempts to achieve a maximum expenditure of energy, a climax, in which life's energy is expended excessively.

Anguish, when desire opens onto a void – and, sometimes, onto death – is perhaps a reason for desiring more strongly and for finding the desired object more attractive, but in the last instance the object of desire always has the meaning of delight, and this object, whatever one might say of it, is not inaccessible. It would be inexcusable to speak of eroticism without saying essentially that it centers on joy. A joy, moreover, that is excessive. In speaking of their raptures, mystics wish to give the impression of a pleasure so great that the pleasure of human love does not compare. It is hard to assess the degree of intensity of states that may not be

incommunicable, perhaps, but that can never be compared with any exactness, for lack of familiarity with other states than those we personally experience.⁴

The ecstasy of the writing (blogging) subject is the embrace of its moment of its loss into text. This loss constitutes a negative pleasure far greater than the appreciation of beauty, or the positive pleasures of taste and sanctioned intimacy. The moment of loss opens up a void in experience because it signals to the subject the loss of its illusory consistency and unity of self (which never existed in the first place – but such a horror is simply too great to live with, and thus is always covered up by a phantasmatic support and imaginary self-images). In this sense, this moment of loss constitutes an absolute negativity – in that it signals the end of existence (of the unitary subject) – and confronts it with the face of death. But this text, written by the blogging subject seeking its own loss, comes back to that subject, and reconstitutes it, *in another place* according to Barthes. This moment of reconstitution of the subject produces a sensation of such absolute delight that it dwarfs any possible experience of positive pleasure – such is the nature of the existential sublime.⁵

A fundamental asymmetry between pleasure of writing and pleasure of reading remains, however:

Does writing in pleasure guarantee – guarantee me, the writer – my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an unpredictability of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game.⁶

In that sense the bliss of blogging does not end the objectives of literature.

To whom is this text addressed?

I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to 'prattle'. The prattle of the text is merely that foam of language which forms by the effect of a simple need of writing. Here we are not dealing with perversions but with demand. The writer of this text employs an unweaned language: imperative, automatic, unaffectionate, a minor disaster of static . . . : these are the motions of ungratified sucking, of an undifferentiated orality, intersecting the orality which produces the pleasures of gastronomy and of language.

You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure (hardly that of the mother); for you I am neither a body nor even an object . . . but merely a field, a vessel for expansion.⁷

This text for Barthes is quite apart from *jouissance* – it is a frigid text.

The text produced by the subject attempting to escape its own lack is the producer of this prattle, frigid text.

The text produced by the subject consciously embracing its own loss into text, yes desiring to dissolve itself in the text to escape the sheer weight of its own desires and

dabble in the delight of its reconstitution 'in another place', is the text of 'coming' of *jouissance*, of ecstasy - For, 'any demand is frigid until desire, until neurosis forms in it.'

Self-mediation is the act of constituting presence in a mediated environment. Formerly a marginal practice it has now moved to centre stage - *Broadcast Yourself!*

Presence in the mediated environment of digital electronic networks is constituted through the continuous circulation of images, sounds, streams in the network. Prosumed, picked up, remixed, laboured on affectionately, appropriated, commodified.

There is a subjectivity at work here, but a contradictory one. The images, the sounds, circulate, they are sampled more than created, mixed more than framed. The subject dissolves itself in the mediated streams of images and sounds – remix can dissolve the streams in turn to mere static.

Self-mediation does not aim at communicating information, at conveying a 'message' – instead it tries to establish affective relationships.

The networked subjectivity at work here is not an artistic subjectivity – the media space it creates is prattle. It does not push out the limits of what language and the machines are able to express (at all); to the point of crisis. Much rather, it embodies this crisis in constituting the outer limit in itself – beyond which only an absolute negativity, death itself, stares back at it.

The self conscious self-mediating subject adheres only to its ultimate maxim:

I transmit, therefore I am . . .

Source: Eric Kluitenberg, *Delusive Spaces - Essays on Culture, Media and Technology*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers / Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), pp. 277 - 284.

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¹ Barthes borrows the term *jouissance* from Lacan, which is most commonly translated as 'bliss', though some theorists consider 'ecstasy' a closer approximation of its intended meaning. I decided to use the original French word where its translation is ambiguous.

² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14 (French original 1973).

³ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share - Volume II: The History of Eroticism* (New York: Zone Books, 1993, orig. 1976), 103.

⁵ And this we knew already from Edmund Burke, see: Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, second edition 1759).

⁶ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, *op. cit.* (note 2), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4–5.