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Cyber Future?

From the Humanism of Romanticism and Enlightenment to the Bioparadigm

I. The Two Forms of Humanism: the Enlightenment/Modern and Romanticism/Postmodern

The recent media discussion has been dominated by the never-ending debate about the modern and postmodern culture. It is usual to consider modernism as a continuation of the Enlightenment and postmodernism as a new Romanticism. What connects modernism to the Enlightenment is first and foremost universalism; what connects postmodernism to Romanticism is cultural pluralism. Generally speaking, the Enlightenment and modernism believe in one reason; whereas Romanticism and postmodernism believe that there is no universally applicable reason, but different belief systems that cannot be compared with uniform criteria. In the Enlightenment the emphasis is on changing the world; whereas in Romanticism it is on a genuine and original return to nature.

Essentially, however, both the Enlightenment and Romanticism are humanistic ideologies. According to the Enlightenment, human nature is the same everywhere and every time. It is through rational discussion that people and societies can find the right goals for them as well as the effective ways to reach them. This discussion is made possible by the human ability to use language and think rationally. Reason is an ability on which human relationships are based. It is reason that makes emancipation and progress possible (see, e.g., Berlin 1979). The central achievement of the Enlightenment is the idea of a modern democracy that penetrates all levels of society; it applies to universal human rights, community rights as well as individual rights (Malmberg 1999: 81).

Romanticism, on the other hand, is interested in what is special in individuals, groups, peoples, and nations. One cornerstone of Romanticism is nationalism; another one is expressionism. According to expressionism, genuine expressions of human emotion must take precedence over clinical and one-dimensional scientific rationality. What Romanticism emphasizes is genuineness and human nature instead of artificiality. From the Romantic viewpoint science shuts out the issues that are essential to man. Thus, Romanticism emphasizes nature, but not in the biological sense – because biology is a science of the Enlightenment. It is the experience of nature, for example an experience of color, that Romanticism – much like Goethe – emphasizes. The experience is qualitative and cannot be reached with Newtonian methods (Ylä-Kotola 1988). Nature in the Romantic sense is a pastoral, a stage complete with thunderstorms and mythic animals. In the centre of the stage is undoubtedly man, preferably an artistic genius who makes his own rules in his life.

The previous characterizations of the Enlightenment and Romanticism can be reasonably well applied to modernism and postmodernism as well. At its purest, modern art was Bauhausian: scientific, ahistorical, and universal. The right combinations of colors and shapes could be determined by the structure of the human sense organ; understanding the principles of human sensomotoric functions made functionalism possible. Using information aesthetics, beauty could be found somewhere between chaos and repetition.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, emphasizes distinction, differences, new tribalism that is created when people join various subcultures and leave them. The truths of different groups are equally valuable and cannot be evaluated with a uniform criteria.

In this article I discuss the issue of what comes after postmodernism. My hypothetical claim is that the postmodern stage is a short transitional stage. Based on my previous definitions, many “modern” movements could be seen as part of postmodernism: for example, surrealism as represented by Salvador Dalí or, to a certain extent, the cinematic art of Jean-Luc Godard already in the 1960’s (cf. Ylä-Kotola 1998). However, it is not in the scope of this article to take this argument further. Instead, I will take as my starting point the previous arguments that the Enlightenment/modernism as well as Romanticism/postmodernism are essentially humanistic movements that organize the world from within man; the central trend in 21st century thinking is to break free from this point of origin.

II. *The Polemic of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as a Philosophical Problem: Is There a Universal Reason or Several Fields of Reason?*

A central question in philosophy is how reality can be received. There are three main types of answers:

- (A) Reality can be received/represented as it is in itself and independently.
- (B) Receiving/representing reality depends on the mind.
- (C) Receiving/representing reality depends on language.

(Kirjavainen 1996: 123)

Often the Enlightenment has been characterized by a strong faith in science. Empirical science has been regarded as being based rather on observational knowledge of reality than rational reasoning. If rational reasoning has been emphasized at all, it has usually been human reason that is essentially considered a universal phenomenon – possibly obscured by dogmas and superstitions.

It is the uncritical realists who have most naively believed in empirism. According to them, mind can receive reality as it is (A); an idea that was relatively common in classical philosophy. The idea of presenting reality as it is, is related to the idea that logic as a form of thinking or language also brings form and structure to reality.

In the early 20th century philosophy there was an attempt to purify science of metaphysics. Logical empirists wanted to simplify scientific language by going back to elementary sentences that describe perceptions and logical combinations of these sentences. This thinking was based on the myth of given reality: according

to this idea, there are certain given sense data that form the basis of knowledge. Later, with the help of progress in, e.g., psychology, it was realized that perception is always theoretical. It is through certain conceptual systems that we organize reality. This was understood by Immanuel Kant already in the 1700s; however, his idea might have been ignored on the grounds that if theory is constantly intertwined with perception, it is a precondition that needs no special attention. Let's take a closer look at this form of universalism.

The central idea of Kant's 18th century Copernican revolution in philosophy is that we never reach reality as it is but always interpreted by our mind. We merely know that a world of things exists, but we can only reach the world of phenomena that is constructed by the restrictions of our minds. In other words, Kant's idea was that we reach the world as mental representations, but we cannot reach the object of these representations. Furthermore, Kant saw the human mind forever bound to the same conceptual or linguistic system of categories characteristic of the species. This can be called the universal reason of the Enlightenment or, historically more correctly, "transcendental subject." According to Kant, time and space are permanent categories of the human mind. We cannot perceive things without associating them with time and space, neither can we think of things without associating them with such concepts as causality.

In our time, theories of the relationships of mind/language and reality have become, on the one hand, presumptions of language as a universal medium, and, on the other hand, language as a calculus that is interpreted over and over again, as discussed by Jaakko Hintikka and Martin Kusch (Hintikka & Kusch 1998). The former idea, represented by Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Gadamer, seems to me essentially Romantic; the latter, represented by, e.g., Edmund Husserl, Enlightened in an unnaively critical way.

According to Kant, there are conceptual means to explicate the relationship between mind and reality; but how is this possible if the concepts of the mind are meant to signify the way the relationship between self and reality is structured? In the terms of contemporary philosophy: How can we study the representational relationships of language independently of those representational relationships already set by language itself (Kirjavainen 1996: 123–124)?

In the classical period the issue was how we could study – from outside of mind and reality – whether our perception matches reality. Now the issue is how we could study, from outside of language, whether our language matches reality. According to the Romantic standpoint of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, speaking of reality is irrevocably imprisoned by language's own conditions. This standpoint is called the theory of language as a universal medium (ibid.: 124).

The starting point of my doctoral thesis on the cinematic philosophy of Jean-Luc Godard (1998) was to study thesis (C): Receiving/representing reality depends on language. According to my hypothesis, thesis (C) has two preconditions: (1) We receive the world only in interpretation; (2) This interpretation is linguistic. My question was: what if precondition (2) is incorrect? What if interpretation and thinking operate on the level of sensual constructions, such as mental images? For Jean-Luc Godard thinking and perception are not separate, but "sensation is evaluation" and "evaluation means sensation" as in the Latin word 'video.' In the classroom of Godard's *Le gai Savoir* (1968), we learn that reality can be understood only by



interpreting it through the language of sights and sounds. In my thesis I summed up Godard's philosophical standpoint on reaching reality as follows:

(D) Receiving/representing reality is dependent on the principles of audiovisual sense perception and presentation.

From this perspective logic is indeed a form of language, but it does not describe those conditions our mind uses to work through and analyze sensual constructions: logic is not a form of thinking. As pointed out earlier, Kant saw the human mind forever bound to the same species-specific system of categories. According to Kant, our human world of experience has an a priori part that is common to all people at basically all times: this a priori part of experience is constructed by forms of sense perception and categories of understanding. These are the constructive principles. However, individual experiences of reality differ, because we experience the world also through our personal world view and values. These are what Kant calls regulatory principles.

The main thesis of my doctoral dissertation is that for Godard the forms of sense perception themselves are "regulatory principles": constructed through our world view, fundamentally private. Why is it then that based on everyday experience different people have a relatively similar view of reality; that, in the end, forms of sense perception are shared? The answer is that we grow up in a common media culture that ever since our childhood teaches us to see a certain way. It is media culture that provides us with those hidden principles that we use to analyze our everyday sense perceptions. Godard sees the mind's audiovisual intellect as multi-layered and changing at varying rapidity, partly regular and partly normative. We analyze the empirical reality through several metaempiric preconceptions; as well as through the relatively stable standards and rapidly changing principles of our understanding. An example of the latter is fashion that sets a rule into our minds according to which a certain visual figure seems stylish one moment and tasteless the other.

If we see reality as being fundamentally the same for all people with healthy senses, and interpreted only afterwards either through linguistic or audiovisual categories of understanding, it is possible to clear the manifested reality of a variety of interpretations that see reality through the glasses of different interpretive systems. This standpoint sees language as a supply of name tags for naming things. However, the immediate perception does not exist, since reality is already interpreted as it is perceived. To make a distinction from the theory of "a variety of interpretations of the immediate sense data," I name the latter standpoint as the theory of "a single interpretation." The linguistic counterpart of the theory of "single interpretation" is the well-known but controversial theory of linguistic relativity by Sapir and Whorf.

A central insight of media studies is the idea that the world of cinema, television, video, and computer is not just the world outside us, but equally shapes our perception and intellect. According to the famous idea by McLuhan, media are extensions of senses. In this sense their nearness prevents their immediate understanding and comprehension. Thus, we have reached the transcendental philosophical question of the day: what kind of effect do media have on our intellect?

According to Marshall McLuhan, electronic communication has radically transformed our culture. However, he was not an ahistorical thinker in the sense that he

would have seen no precursors to the situation. On the contrary, McLuhan saw that the human conception of the world and perception of reality had always been shaped by contemporary media technologies. In the prehistoric times it was through taste, smell, sound, touch, and sight that people perceived the world. With the invention of the phonetic alphabet sight started gaining in importance, which was further promoted by the invention of the printing press in Europe. McLuhan believed that an electronic revolution could bring the senses back to balance.

Kant saw the intelligent subject first and foremost as pure consciousness; therefore, he described the structures of the subject as the only conditions for an experience and a world. In this case transcendental philosophy meant that objects were formed from within the reflecting cognition. The thinking self constitutes the world as an object of his or her perceptions. Thus, the subject carries in itself the model for perceiving and analyzing the world, the essential structural characteristics of a world taking shape. Kant's philosophy is therefore stuck with the preconceptions of a Cartesian rationalism that differs from empiricism. The reversed version of this is Baudrillard's cultural philosophy. Culture defines the structures of the subject's (man as object!) experience from outside, thus creating a fragmented self.

In his enlightened transcendentalism, Kant made a problematic presumption that reason as an eternal standard that is a precondition for all experience by all rational beings. However, reason does not precede perception, but changes and develops along with it. By combining thinking and perception, we get an interesting insight into the importance of media in the 20th century. By changing our everyday world of perception, media has changed and is changing the forms of our audiovisual thinking. The relationship between the subject and the world is reciprocally interactive. This idea corresponds with the thinking of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception does mean observing a rule and following a norm, but this does not mean that a subject would reflect its inner, eternal structures into the external reality. It is also through perception that norms are created (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 73–78). Thus, man assimilates the metaempirical interpretation systems when living in an empirical (media) culture. The transcendental level genuinely exists, but it develops together with the intersubjective audiovisual semantics of culture.

III. *Excursion: Is Beauty Universal?*

The universalism of the Enlightenment has given rise to varieties that see, for example, beauty as having a certain universal basis. According to Romanticism, Russian beauty is different from German; according to postmodernism, beauty in the world of Miami Vice is determined by different rules than in the world of French art film.

Let's look at one enlightened attempt to find the universal basis of beauty. Professor of philosophy and mathematician at the University of Helsinki Ilkka Niiniluoto has applied the statistical concept of information to art: this is based on the fact that the elements of the language of art and their combinations appear in certain fields of culture and artistic styles relatively frequently. Thus, their 'surprise value' in relation to the frequency of appearance can be calculated (Niiniluoto 1980:



49). According to Niiniluoto, a similar idea is the basis of a construct presented by G. Elfving in 1965. This construct shows how certain stochastic processes can be used to make 'synthetic art.'

The starting point is the beauty of sentences. A sentence has aesthetic value if the work of art is not too chaotic – as is the sentence “jkzao awqia rcexr lumsz” which is informatively effective and has high entropy; nor too standard – as the sentence “kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk” which is an example of high redundance; but there is the right amount of redundance, as in the Finnish sentence “käki kukkuu kaunihisti” (literally, “A cuckoo cuckoos beautifully”). This method can be generalized for two-dimensional images that are constituted of white and black squares. If the squares are colored according to a probable mechanism in a way that the correlation between adjoining squares is strong, but not too strong, we can achieve aesthetically interesting entities (Niiniluoto 1980: 50). It has been claimed that this theory can be used to describe visual beauty in more general terms as well.

As such, Niiniluoto's theory cannot be accepted as the theory of beauty. Since perception is always directed and targeted, there are no absolute line formations that we see; rather, we see a structural entity that our perception constructs. For example, whether we perceive the dimension of depth has a radical influence on the phenomenon – I am referring to the well-known fact that in certain African cultures perception is two-dimensional. In fact, the physical image of the world is a construction created by our brains. This has been studied by Göte Nyman, professor of psychology at the University of Helsinki. This is how he describes his scientific progress: “One could almost say that I've proceeded as if along the optic nerve. It started with the problematics associated with the optic image. However, gradually I started to realize that it is not only an image that is transmitted in the process, since the neural web totally transforms the image already on the retina. One has had to think that this physical depiction of the world is, in fact, our personal picture created by ourselves” (Ollikainen 1999: 23).

IV. From the Humanism of the Enlightenment and Romanticism to the Bioparadigm

It would thus seem that Romanticism and postmodernism are, in a sense, right. But, the Enlightenment is also right. The fact that different perspectives and frameworks of perception exist does not mean that the images of reality created by them could not be compared from a certain starting point. On the contrary, they can be compared from many different points, although no point can a priori be foregrounded as a universal reason. Moreover, one's personal interpretive framework can be reflected and, if necessary, changed.

What have been our most popular and important interpretive frameworks in the 20th century? As, for example, Daniel Bell has noted, the western modern culture of the 1900s has been, in a sense, Janus-faced. On the one hand, effectiveness, productivity, and profit have been emphasized in the name of goal-oriented rationality and Lutheran work ethics. On the other hand, the Romantic ideal has given us the will to break free from mental restrictions, fulfil ourselves, and defy the logic of obedience, discipline, and hard labor.

The Romantic rebellion is characterized by a will to see through the eyes of the strange and unfamiliar Other, to be somebody else than the lame everyday self. An example of this is the popularity of rock music in the 20th century, which exemplifies the western paradoxical will to be Black, to meet the stranger within oneself. The desired forms of otherness have included race, gender, and sexual preference. Therefore, the media culture of the 1980s and 1990s has been more or less permeated with ethnicism, feminism, androgynism, and homoism – isms that are based on human otherness. In a sense, this is a contemporary realization of the 1960s ideology turned into aesthetic forms that have lost their original emancipatory meaning (Or can Michael Jackson, the central figure in racial, gender, and sexual otherness, be considered emancipatory?).

As we enter the 21st century, the significance of the forms of human otherness as media cultural content seems to have changed. Now the desire is to see through the eyes of another species. The utopia of media culture is changing the human being into a cyborg, a new animal species. Biometaphors are also playing an important role in film, music videos, as well as the Internet. At the same time biotechnology is utilized to develop virtual reality systems; information technology industry is doing advanced research in hypodermic communications media. Moreover, new media interfaces are often modeled on nature.

What is the transcendentalist meaning of this 20th century avantgarde desire to see through the eyes of a black person, a woman, a homosexual? The starting point for this is the idea that there is a certain primary principle of goal-oriented rationality in analyzing reality in society. This principle of seeing could be called “the way the Enlightenment, science, and white heterosexual man perceive the world.” In many forms of so-called postmodern theory this “primary look” is considered as capable of dispersing into several contextual subcultural ways of perceiving the world that are like recollections of the Romantic nationalism. What the postmodernists like to forget is that different contexts are contextually linked and different subcultural “looks” are essentially rather similar. While it is true that men and women in certain aspects think very differently, in many aspects their thoughts are rather similar.

Above I claimed that the avantgarde desire to otherness is redirecting itself outside of human species. Thus, the utopia of media art seems to be “a desire to see through the eyes of an ant.” How can this be made possible? Let’s consider a closed virtual reality system where man actively receives sensual information through data glasses and suit. We can imagine the incredible visions available to us through this. But is it possible to see with an ant’s eyes? No. An ant’s senses and physiology are totally different from ours. In Helmholtzian terms, man’s perception and understanding are restricted by his sense physiology.

However, in McLuhan’s terms we can presume that using virtual reality affects the ways in which we perceive and analyze reality. In the recent discussion there has been concern for the possible damage of overusing virtual reality applications. In his book *Tiede ja ihmisjärki* (“Science and Reason”), the Finnish philosopher and humanist Georg Henrik von Wright quotes Einstein: “the tragedy of the modern man is generally in that he has created for himself living conditions that his phylogenetic development is not up to.” And continues: “must this be a permanent tragedy. Considering how slow evolution is, there is a risk that man cannot adjust

to the changing living conditions in time before he is doomed as a species.” From this perspective virtual reality is an example of a medium that overloads our senses and diminishes our ability to live.

However, there is another side to this cyber utopia. Traditionally, media technology has operated outside the human being. These have affected the way we see reality within our sense physiological limits. The idea of cybernetic organisms, however, means interfering with the body, the physiology of the senses and the brain. This brings us back to Helmholtzian transcendentalism. The Utopian object can be formulated as follows: “if virtual reality is not suitable for human physiology, let’s change the human physiology.” Indeed, the development of virtual reality systems is relatively close to genetic manipulation and biotechnic research. According to the well-known media artist Stelarc, manipulation of the human body can create radically new art and philosophy. Thus, the desire of “new” in modernism is changing into a cyber modern utopia of media art as a radical expander of sensual experience.

“It is true that for a long time I’ve had no problems in transforming myself into a dog or a horse, bird, snake, cat, fish, larva, butterfly, or even a worm. Not just with the help of some stupid facial expressions. I experience those creatures through their own organs. Through their vision. Through their senses of hearing and feeling. I can experience their sexuality, mating, fertilization, pregnancy, giving birth” (Kinski 1991: 455–456).

These are the words of Klaus Kinski, according to himself the most important movie actor of the 20th century, in his self-portrait *Ich brauche Liebe*. According to Kinski, already as a child he had the ability of animal metamorphosis, but did not know how to interpret it at the time. He became aware of his abilities when performing as a woman in Jean Cocteau’s play *The Human Voice*. In order to enter his role, Kinski walked the streets at night dressed in women’s clothes, underwear, bra, garter, and high heels. For Kinski it was natural and obvious to be dressed as a woman, since he had experienced a metamorphosis and had begun to feel like a woman. “I was completely aware that I was a woman and it is natural to dress as a woman if you know you’re a woman,” Kinski describes the logical reasoning behind his solution.

Kinski’s argument is interesting, because not only does it sum up the real content of the trendy debate on gender and style, but also gives a hint of the themes towards which the contemporary cultural debate is following the *Zeitgeist*.

The abundance of research on gender and style is partly due to the most significant new artform of the 1980s, the music video, which introduced androgyny and gender blending for a broader audience. However, both androgyny and gender blending have a long history in, e.g., rococo culture, in which the whole issue of gender and style is practically non-relevant. The Finnish general and war hero Adolf Ehrnrooth summed it up when asked for his opinion on men with long hair: “Well, my forefathers wore wigs.”

The fact that the music video shook our narrow, culturally bound idea of gender and style is due to one of its more general characteristics. What was the source of imagery for the 1980s music video is fantastic realism. This meant that in an attempt to replace our everyday world with varieties of otherness, the makers made mannered searches into all cultures and all historical periods. However, the variet-

ies were adjusted into a certain strict formula which fundamentally was the three-minute opera itself.

As we enter the 1990s, the music video is still important for the *Zeitgeist*, but no longer represents change. Where the focus of change is moving can be inferred from the statement by Kinski. The central idea of modernism is the desire of new, which in the 20th century has been realized in various forms. The 20th century new “new” is plunging outside the boundaries of sensual perception, into animality, much like Kinski. How this posthumanistic program is realized is by means of new media. The substantial focus of virtual reality, artificial life and biotechnics, genetic manipulation, prosthesis surgery, transplant and artificial organ techniques is to experience the unhuman; that what is out of reach for human sensual perception. What is to be changed is not the epistemic preconditions of our culture, but the superhistorical, biologically structured preconditions of man, the Kantian *a priori*. The current stage is an attempt to reinvent the human being, an idea introduced by Dr. Frankenstein. The multiplicity of this utopian attempt is described in science fiction literature and film.

V. *Are We Prisoners of the Glasses of Our Culture and of Our Species?*

In the beginning of this article I divided humanism into two rough forms: firstly, the Enlightenment/modernism, which sees reality through the human eyes and realizes it through the universal reason; secondly, Romanticism/postmodernism, in which an image of reality is formed already on the retina by the culture to which we commit ourselves. We contemplated whether a universal ideal of beauty exists. We were inclined towards conservative Romanticism. To sum up, everything we see is deeply defined by our culture. It is not a subsequent distortion of a pure image, but a mechanism which creates a pure image. This mechanism cannot be restored to our natural language, but it can be understood by analyzing our perceptual environment. In addition to this, the mechanism is influenced by the level of evolution of the species. For centuries our characteristic physiological mechanism has regulated our perceptions. Thus, transferring from humanism to the bioparadigm means speeding up the evolution. At the same time, it is a significant psychological step, since, for example, morality is traditionally seen as an essentially human characteristic. Do the new, cyber technic extensions of the body signify the genesis of a new species? Have we come to the end of the enlightened and romantic humanism which put emphasis on the human being?

We have come to Engels’s formulation of the problem in *The Dialectics of Nature*: “Cognition: Ants have eyes different from ours, they can see chemical (?) light-rays (*Nature*, June 8, 1882; Lubbock), but as regards knowledge of these rays that are invisible to us, we are considerably more advanced than the ants, and the very fact that we are able to demonstrate that ants see things invisible to us, and that this proof is based solely on perceptions made with our eyes, shows that the special construction of the human eye sets no absolute barrier to human cognition. In addition to the eye, we have not only the other senses but also our thought activity. With regard to the latter, matter stand exactly as with the eye. To know what can be discovered by our thinking, it is no use, a hundred years after Kant, to try

and find out the range of thought from the critique of reason of the investigation of the instrument of knowing. It is as little use as when Helmholtz uses the imperfection of our sight (indeed a necessary imperfection, for an eye that could see all rays would for that very reason see nothing at all), and the construction of our eye – which restricts sight to definite limits and even so does not give quite correct reproduction – as proof that the eye acquaints us incorrectly or unreliably with the nature of what is seen. What can be discovered by our thought is more evident from what it had already discovered and is every day still discovering. And that is already enough both as regards quantity and quality. On the other hand, the investigation of the forms of thought, the thought determinations, is very profitable and necessary, and since Aristotle this has been systematically undertaken only by Hegel. In any case we shall never find out how chemical rays appear to ants. Anyone who is distressed by this is simply beyond help” (Engels 1966: 239–240).

We are prisoners of both our culture and our species. However, we can learn to look through the glasses of another culture, often gradually and learning unconsciously as cultures interact and change. The glasses of our species have been changed as well by evolution. The cybercultural bioparadigm means wanting to see through an ant’s glasses, with new eyes and differently. Fantasy is no longer transsexual nor transracist, but transspecies.

VI. Literature

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