VIDEOTEX AND THE FUTURE OF RHETORIC

VIDEOTEX ET L'AVENIR DE LA RHETORIQUE

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ABSTRACT

By decade end a TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER will have occurred between on
one hand, the office, the industrial, the military, and on the
other, the home, the consumer, the citizen. These categorize
into three: microprocessors, high-density data storage media,
broadband switched telecommunications. At decade end society
will have been transformed beyond the obvious: information
retrieval, entertainment, shopping & banking, into the newspeak &
newsee of shifted literacy & rhetoric "Can Johnny program; not
can Johnny read?"

RESUME

D'ici la fin de la présente décennie, un TRANSFERT TECHNOLOGIQUE
aura été opéré entre, d'une part, le bureau, l'industrie, l'armée
et, d'autre part, la maison, le consommateur, le citoyen. Cette
technologie se divise en trois catégories: les microprocesseurs,
les média de stockage de données à haute-densité et les
télécommunications à bandes larges. D'ici la fin des années
quatre-vingts, la société aura été radicalement transformée:
depuis le repérage de l'information, les jeux et loisirs le
magasinage et les opérations bancaires à domicile, jusqu'à une
nouvelle littérature et une nouvelle rhétorique qui remplacerait
"Jean sait-il lire?" par "Jean sait-il programmer?".

First I'd like to thank Jim Feeley for covering the ground, so as to speak. We really are at the beginning of something, and he said that.

In twenty minutes, or whatever, I couldn't possibly tell you what it is all about. After all, I've just come from telling Mr. Carlisle and some members of Infomart what it is all about, and that took me eighteen months, and some of them are saying I didn't explain it completely enough and that they are still figuring it out. The best I can do is invite you into myself, my chaos, but using the new terms of Telidon, an effort will be made to paginate, which gives the impression of system, each page or aphorism, in itself quite often clever, all together as chaos describing chaos, as mercy to the logical not for long, only twenty minutes or so, there is more, infinity mapping to infinity, all in finite time.

Members of the audience should be put at ill-ease, separated from the anonymity of the herd, the safety of numbers, the reminder of contest. I'll single out especially those who threaten the many, with questions. That said I'll open by drawing some good words from a book, by one of you, to be published:

> "Perhaps the most eloquent scholar to first characterize Hellenic culture as a struggle between two modes of thought, that is, the logical versus the intuitive, was Nietzsche, who himself battled for the restoration of heroic values in a linear, logical and Victorian culture. In spite of the fact that this philosopher-poet conversed with Socrates, as if fact-to-face, the tragedy of which Nietzsche speaks is not an ethical one, nor a matter of birthright, nor a matter of heroic egotism. It might be said, that Hellenic culture, derived its vitality from the fact that the entrenched and dynamic oral heritage (the author refers to the sung tradition ... carried forward to us as those great epic poems ... The Illiad, The Odyssey ... just echo of Homer's Greece ... no, of the Greece re-told by Homer). That recall giving battle against the encroaching written word and logical grammar, for the natural property rights to the human mind."

Truth is I'm not going to reveal the author, that would be impolite, it is a book to-be-published and it is going to be a good one. Good because the author has taken the care, to go back, to the pre-Socratic Greece, as did Nietzsche, and think, as did Plato, as did Socrates, about the old Greece. The old oral Greece, as opposed to the new Greece they were creating, by their phonetic alphabet, by their grammar, by their logic, their objectivity.

Videotex and The Future of Rhetoric

We moderns are the recipients, perhaps the victims, if you are of that older point of view, of what they began, and what was accomplished, by phonetic literacy, evolving through ... Luther's Bible ... the Scientific Method ... Cause and Effect. And this pause, the end of a page, "five" if you are counting, but that's not mimesis.

The Abstract. By decade end a TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER will have occurred between, on one hand, the office, the industrial, the military and on the other, the home, the consumer, the citizen. These categorize into three:
1. MICROPROCESSORS
2. HIGH-DENSITY DATA STORAGE MEDIA
3. BROADBAND SWITCHED TELECOMMUNICATIONS

At decade end, society, transformed beyond the obvious ... the labour-theory of value inversion ... information retrieval, entertainment, shopping and banking ... a newspeak and newsee of shifted-out literacy and rhetoric. The question no longer "Can Johnny read?" but rather "Can he program?" or is he to be one of the many "Confined to interaction."

You know there is a difference. Just as you know there's a difference between on-line Boolean searching and intervideotexing ... with one of those new wooly oh so friendly things you're going to have to come home to ... that we're going to give you ... and don't worry about the cost ... that's a different movie.

Some librarians saw it coming. Look at last year's Proceedings, I've got them right here, I yellowed over some key speeches:

* Information Sharing in the 80's
* Fibre Optics in the Communication Network - Why?
* Information Transfer Made Easy

that last one is about packet-switching ... you know what that is, I mean, the idea of tying down a line while you're connected, including the spaces between the words, I mean, there may be great emotive meaning in the pauses between words, the deep breathing, but we could connect four or five terminals, in the spaces, between the words. That's what packet-switching does. A message and an address and it's there, not by the shortest route, just by what's available. That's why the military were into it years ago ... it makes the phones more ... survivable.

One of the certain things about we technocrats ... those of us blinded by having seen too much of the future ... is that people say to us: "But how can society afford this new stuff?" and we can't see that viewpoint, because for us, the future has already arrived, albeit in our imaginations.

Anyway, we know the cost arguments are false. The reason society can't afford the new, is it lacks the will to stop affording the old.

The old ways, like having books on shelves, like talking on the phone without digital voice compression, like owning your own landscape, like clearing cheques as little pieces of paper, that shuffle around North America, the World, as do we, flying about to meetings and conferences, those are lovely ways, just like having a private tutor, private physician are all lovely nice things, that's probably why the aristocracy went to such effort to have those things, and why we've tried so hard to have and keep those things ... and in our kinder moments ... extend them to as many as possible. But when we try ... I've tried, I earlier amalagamated the Medicare System in British Columbia, reduced administration costs by several millions each year, but physician-care & fee-for-procedure, it's an inherently expensive way to maintain health ... we often discover that the old ways were built on older unegalitarian societies that never assumed "universality" ... and that the best "technological fix" can't overcome the impossibility of "everyman a king, no man a servant".

So when people say "how can we afford the future" we say "by not all of us trying to afford the past".

A Telidon Interconnection Network, doing just half the things the M.T.S, the Manitoba Telephone System, has in test would be a cheaper better way. No question. The problem is getting there.

An economist might put it this way, I'll make him an agricultural economist, like Galbraith:

"That's all well and good but consumer incomes are already assigned, the money's already spent ... maybe the tractor would be an improvement on the horse but I have the horse and I'd have to buy the tractor and what do I do with the horse?"

Okay, there's going to be a period of time, when you've got the horse, you've got to give him oats, that he'll be strong before the plow, but now you've got to sell those oats, to buy the tractor. That's the transitional problem we've always had between eras. We raise the new capital by wasting out the old. How do you think the Industrial Revolution was financed? How do you think we'll finance the Information Revolution?

Fibre Optics: the '80 paper asks "Why?". An engineer would simply say: "It is better.". Glass becomes cheaper than copper. Expect in a few years the mining of the phone company,

just like General Motors and some others, mined the Cities of America, for those big fat overhead high amperage low voltage copper cables. Maybe that was before your time, G.M. had a deal, with the City Councils, they got cheap buses and "Urban Renewal" on the side ... G.M. took down those ugly overhead lines and sometimes even the dangerous, to cyclists, steel rails. As to who will pay ... finance the Information Revolution ... I suppose at the time it will seem a bargain ... like the diesel buses.

Another paper from the 1980 CAIS conference Overview of Satellite Telecommunications for Information Transfer reminds me of almost twenty years ago and Arthur C. Clarke saying:

> "We could put a fixed-point satellite, (he meant geo-synchronous) over India, and we could bring 'educational support television' to the entire sub-continent, and we could take peace corps workers and missionaries, not trained teachers, but literates, and backed up by the direct satellite broadcast, they could teach."

I was in the Defense Research Board in those days. And Clark is right. We could have done it. And if you worked out the numbers it made sense. Just as it still does. It didn't. It hasn't. Wonder why? If you think it was because it could not be afforded ... well maybe think longer and deeper ... because technical analysis and mercantile measure does not give all the answers.

Librarians - Dinosaurs in an Electronic Age, the author says:

> "The day is fast approaching when a person will be able to - telephone (directly) the library computer, etc."

raising the inevitable question of "When the computers become things that just about everybody can converse with, where will we librarians be?" And who has not puzzled over that question, and I wonder if librarians, who of all people seem most to resist this popular computing, this videotex, have in fact puzzled through to the answer ... and fear the answer.

The last paper from '80 that I'll mention Telidon Calling: Planning the Content by Joy Wilson, who I hope is here to defend as I attack.

She says: "Telidon represents a break-through on the world tele-communications front.".

Well I'd say break out.

Then she says: "The need for a diversity of information on the Telidon system is critical to its success."

And that makes me mad. Because it's so appollinian, so cool, so rational. An aside on the introductory theme, that the appollinian is as is moonlight, a reflection of the stronger sun, a chaos, the moon's light lacks warmth, it's purity a function of its distance from what it reflects. She's wrong.

That's the error of Prestel. That was the error of the early Telidon trials. The little bit of everything database. We forgot that libraries, even in small towns, have thousands of books and when we went for diversity at the onset that meant we began writing thousands of books, a page at a time, and we opened our library with 10,000 pages, and what we were offering was a library of incompleted books ... a collection of incompletions.

I'm sorry if my earlier comments seem unkind ... it's just that that sort of so rational advise is simple invitation to the Martin Lane (now Infomart Editor, previously Fintel, England) "Prestel Mine-Shaft Problem.".

The Mine-Shaft problem, the cliche of tree-structure Videotex, you go down a shallow information mine, find little or nothing there and get billed for three page accesses.

Videotex. If it can't escape the trivial without becoming too difficult what is it good for? I gave Joe Halina an answer this May at Videotex '81.

There must have been 1,600 people, most of whom had spent $600 - 700 to register, plus air-fare, plus hotel, etc..

Joe asked me: "What is going on here? Is this the Information Revolution D.O.C. has been promising us since 1971?"

And I said: "No it isn't. But Infomart has figured out how to make money out of this thing. They're telling. And people who want to listen and understand ... can make money too."

I think I discovered the solution. But I sold it to Infomart and a number of them say they thought of it first ... who cares ... here's what I said, I said that the way you build a library is a book at a time. They'd forgotten that. Maybe they hadn't known. Because computer scientists and computer utility people don't read books, they are usually much too busy programming and computing to do that.

Truth is what computer utilities do is applications. So I said: "Videotex is an application. Do an application at a time." And just to be sure, I gave them ten applications. In pure theory, they haven't done the best one yet. But they are doing one of the best three: GRASSROOTS.

Grassroots is a collection of information units exactly for agribusiness. It is based on (in part) research out of the Kentucky "Green Thumb" videotex project, also on media research done on Manitoba farmers by a firm with the suggestive name "Opinion Research".

It is also commonsense ... because what we found out in Green Thumb wasn't surprising, that farmers think a lot about prices and weather. Weather and commodities.

You see now the issue I hope. If you try to open a general library, even one restricted to "Truth & Beauty" you fall into the incomplete or the trivial. Let's face it, I mean "truth is" just takes a lot of pages, some would say even 170,000 pages "just quite don't do it". But 20,000 just on weather and commodities, and in the latter case mainly prices, well 20,000 pages on those two subjects is just about information closure.

World Weather Watch. The Telidon full-colour maps are drawn by computer. The numbers, longitudes & latitudes, rainfalls, temperatures and winds ... all go into the computer and come out on the map as graphic.

Untouched by human hands. Is the earlier reference to Marx's "Labour Theory of Value" getting clearer? Can you imagine people paying money for a job? What will be the "added value by labour-input" when the factory is empty? Maybe not just the factory. How do you sort electronic mail manually?

Far out. Maybe. But at least it becomes clearer why futurists call it the "Information Revolution" and not the "Second Industrial Revolution."

All this talk of revolution. F. Nietzsche:

"The tyranny of the priest craft began as a tyranny of exclusive knowledge. From the very beginning, life depended, for regulation, on the observations arrived at by those who took the leisure to map out carefully the movements of the heavenly bodies." (More explicitly, if we know who the 'Son of Horace' was, who was Horace?)

Men too busy to look at the stars
Not knowing
Therefore dependent
On those that did

And kept it secret
And called it magic

So maybe that's what we've been talking about and maybe that's why this Telidon is feared by the librarians, the secular

information priests of today. Or maybe it's just the appollinian
response to a new instrumentality of a new literacy.

Telidon is the medium of the learned printed word.

Telidon is reading Television.

Therefore Telidon is an electronic bumper sticker.

Question: University of Victoria: I've had difficulty
finding things on Videotex. Don't we need a
system that says "the librarian is in, human
help is available"?

Larratt: Behaviorial Research from the Japanese tests
says "yes".

Telephone services are good business. Do
people react differently to voice than picture?

Librarians didn't disappear after mass
learned-literacy. Maybe not after the
new literacy and man/machine coupling.

Question: If Grassroots was one of the three best can
you tell us the other two or maybe one?

Larratt: Another of the three has been chosen. It
will be formally announced soon ... but
there have been so many "loose lips sinking
ships", it was the corridor news of Videotex
'81 ... that Bildschirmtext beware ... it's
"Visitor's Guide".

In essence it's a city guide and teleshopping
... I think it will work ... in terms of the
consumer budgets of TIME/ENERGY/MONEY it makes
sense ... I'd pay a bit extra for a hotel room
that could help me cut through the city indexes
and then do some fast up-scale shopping, things
I'd forgotten, things I'd meant to gift.

Question: Concerning "those blinded by the future" how is
sight restored?

Larratt: The future ... modernality ... blinds in many ways
... within the theme I introduced it is the
blinding by the cliche ... and these are not
necessarily words, they're often layouts, the
colours, the visuals, the tendency to a mimesis
with an unconsidered commonality of things
... what Freud called the Oceanic Feeling,

which he was very quick to advise, he had never had. But I suspect that's not satisfactory.

Socrates felt the greeks were blinded by the poet's recall. He felt that they were carried off a bit too far in their mimesis of dionysian identity, of poetic oral, one imagines a visual imaginative component, of the great heros, before the walls of Troy. He feared that in that mimesis too much rationality was cast aside.

Now had your question been "How do you give back the sight lost during dionysian pursuits?" I'd answer: "You don't. If one is lucky, sight and sense returns, of it's own time, and if you are lucky, you remember some of the truth learned in the chaos ... and you rationalize it ... to new wisdom."