

Radical medi@crity: Xs4all

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Gepubliceerd in: *Ba-bel*, photo Illustrierte, Berlijn 2005

Automobility: subject becoming traject

One late Friday afternoon in mid-December a traveller is returning to Amsterdam from a business meeting on Long Island, New York State. Trains coming into Penn Station are late because of a sudden flurry of snowstorms. Connections are missed. Even though the ethereal voices echoing around the rarefied transit space of Newark departure lounge attempt to put the passengers in hopeful mood, the gate numbers and departure times on the screens keep falling behind. Planes have to be de-iced. Arrangements threaten to fall through. The traveller's mobile phone has insufficient range, and he has no telephone card to hand. As finally the aeroplane glides into the night, the traveller is able to call from the satellite phone sunk into the armrest using his credit card. He sends a few e-mails from his pocket PC with its expandable keyboard and completes some notes. Meanwhile, the aircraft speeds onward – though seemingly suspended immobile – at more than 900 km/hour towards the other side of the ocean. The traveller follows the intercontinental route still to be covered, step-by-step, on a screen in front of him.

On arriving at Schiphol, the information screens for train arrivals and departures announce that frozen power lines are causing delays on the Amsterdam-Schiphol route. Jetlagged passengers grasp their mobile phones, holding dozy conversations. Most of them are gossiping about sweet nothing while staring blankly in front of them; others are already fully alert and busy relaying the latest state of affairs via their headphones.

At Rotterdam's Central Station the traveller withdraws some euros from the ATM and steps into a waiting taxi. The intercontinental and interlocal congestion acquires a *couleur locale*: they head out into the grips of urban gridlock. Three chock-a-block lanes of cars are being squeezed out of the centre past six sets of traffic lights. Despite the dangerous but well-intended manoeuvres by the Rotterdam chauffeur of Moroccan origin it takes more than a quarter of an hour to get past the main square only 500 metres further on.

Their conversation about the practical paradox of 'automobility' – namely the immobilization caused by the excesses of motorized road travel – is repeatedly interrupted by a voice from the taxi firm's dispatch office. But the chauffeur interweaves his hands-free responses with the conversation, and pointing to a little screen at the bottom of his windscreen he turns the banter to fast and distant journeys: with the Global Positioning System (GPS) it is possible to trace the route to any given street in Helsinki, Moscow or Casablanca. Not only is the car vectorally equipped for the entire globe, it is also a system that adapts to its driver like a made-to-measure suit: to the left under the dashboard there is a button with three encoded settings, one for each of the taxi's chauffeurs. When one of them keys in his own code the equipment downloads his personal data and the driver's seat adjusts automatically to the most comfortable position for him.

Once out of the centre the journey proceeds smoothly. At the front door, the traveller taps in his access code, walks down the hallway to the waiting lift and whizzes upward. In the bedroom he switches the TV on and zaps through the channels. The

adverts urge him to purchase a mobile phone with a built-in camera so he can use MMS, the 'multimedia messaging service'. At any given moment, the owner can telematically share his surroundings with his friends. Exhausted by high-speed stasis and hyperactive observation, the traveller finally falls into a profound slumber.

Dividual medi@crity

How mediocre has life of Western individuals become? Are there no more heroes anymore? Way back a working class hero was something to be, but nowadays this is an anachronism. And if we could be heroes than just for one day or even only for a Warholian fifteen televisional minutes. The predicate 'mediocre' does not exclude mediamatic heroism. Once we take the notion 'mediocre' as literal as possible, it is hard to ignore the fact that the thirdmillenium man has become radically mediocre. I realize that the suggestion that we live an average life full of boring routines is counterbalanced by the indisputable observation that in visual and global culture, where entertainment, infotainment and politainment are the key targets for maximizing ratings, the senses of the average TV viewer and festival onlooker are continuously triggered, stimulated and enhanced. Even when there is no time to enjoy it real time and live, one can participate interpassively, as Slavoj Zizek acknowledges: our recorder enjoys the late night TV movie. The only thing rthat is left, is storing the tape, never to be looked at again.

On the active side of this interpassive, spectacular gamma we are also far from being bored. We are hectically, even panicly busy: physically traveling around the globe as tourists, traders or terrorists, virtually locating ourselves via GPS or communicating our tele-presence to others via e-mail, SMS, MSN, MMS or whatever digital data device. Within this mode of being – actual *and* virtual at the same time - presence and absence are no longer oppositions: we are continuously anticipating our future presence. As Peter Sloterdijk rightly states, time is no longer an issue. The issue is dynamic space, i.e. our vectoral displacement within a spherical ambiance.

So the secretly implied suggestion that boredom immobilizes us like it did the Russian aristocrat Oblomov on his couch, is counterfactual too: over the last decades all life processes have been sped up. It accelerates exponentially. Life has become very excessive, even ecstatic. In spite of infrastructural immobilizations like traffic-jams, terrorist threats, tsunami's or physical and digital viruses, our mobility has become part of our selves (auto). The very essence of global consumers is becoming Aristotle's Demiurgos: the ultimate self (Greek: autos) mover (Latin: *mobilis*).

Notwithstanding apparent paradoxes and evident counterexamples I still cling to my thesis that global and local life, i.e. our glocal human condition has become radically mediocre, be it that we have to agree on applying the notion 'mediocrity' in a more psychotechnological than in a sociopsychological sense. I address the acknowledged fact that media in the broadest sense – from transportmedia like planes and cars to communication media as computers and cellphones - are ruling (Greek: *kratein*) our lives: mediocrity is first and for all medi@crity. Once connected to the world – and who isn't nowadays? – former *autonomous* individuals, have turned into, to update Friedrich Nietzsche, *dividuals* – split, cross-eyed persons (*di-videre*) whose lives are contractions of at least two perspectives: they are global *and* local, virtual *and* actual, and as a result: private *and* public. This counts for both transnational CEO's and dish antenna and mobile phone owning immigrants and their offspring. Living in the best of both worlds is being urban.

Capsular nodes: exstacy beyond oppositions

In everyday life both worlds are no longer experienced as opposite. These are necessary supplements, separated by blurred borders. How can this hybridization be adequately conceptualized? Neither by politically correct double identification nor by neoconservative, xenophobic crusader rhetorics that polarizes the tension into we against them. More philosophically tuned one can say that the oppositions by which modern subjects valued their own autonomy and the other's alienation – true versus false, good versus bad, beautiful versus ugly, democratic versus fascism – have become hybrid tensions. These have torn the autonomous subject apart. This became a *dividual*.

Dividuals should at least realize that they are nodes. They contract and connect all the vectoral mediatrajectories that connect them to other people and to the world. In being connected they are. Being is being in between. The *dividual* has become an assembly point – or as Gilles Deleuze would phrase it: an assemblage. Divided they stand. Linked to each other - both psychologically and technologically - *dividuals* are always right in the middle. Being 'right' in the middle – both spatially and ethically - means that from an inner perspective that everyone is centered. But from an outer perspective everyone is a target too. In Ulrich Beck's risk society a *dividual* is both spectator and actor, victim and killer. In risk society anticipation of one's actions implies at least two possibilities - or better: virtualities - controlling can become disastrous. The only option we really have is an adequate insurance. *Medi@cre* men live a self-insured life.

In order to protect himself from this double edged sword postmodern man has turned himself into a capsular being. In order to counterweight the centripetal forces of acceleration and hybridization he has encapsuled himself in cars, planes, and digital devices, hiding behind windowscreens, TV screens and interfaces. From a radical *medi@cre* point of view these interfaces do no longer mediate reality. They produce reality. Or hyperreality, as Jean Baudrillard prefers to call this excessive existence. In our thoroughly mediated society *ecstasy* manifest itself as a national broadcasted TV quiz on earlier TV programs.

From all this we may conclude that *medi@crity* does not exclude excess. On the contrary. Postmodern man has access to all available products and services at any time from whatever location in the world. In having access to everything available *dividuals* are highly excessive beings. They ecstatically reach out to their very being.

Xs4all instead of autonomy: paradoxical freedom

This radical *medi@crity* has serious consequences for our experience of liberty. Freedom is a modern desire. It has to do with knowing oneself. Socrates was revisited by Kant and adapted to modern subjectivity. In Manuel Castell's information society knowledge has been transformed into information. As such it triggers different desires. Knowledge empowers subjects. The will to know, as Michel Foucault extensively argued, produces an inside: modern man's selfconsciousness or subjectivity, with *Bildung* based emancipation as its goal. The desire to be informed, however, turns this modern interiority inside out. Spam creates choices. It makes us want what we could not even imagine. What we enjoy is access, not knowledge. Telling is selling. Information pays off, because it connects.

If access is the main topic in information society, as Jeremy Rifkin claims, autonomy becomes secondary. Enforcing your own (auto) rules (*nomos*) on yourself is overruled by the media that we have invented. Our freedom is in inventing these instruments for comfort, not in using them. Once the medium has become the message - i.e. once a car or a cellphone has become an integral part of my social life and as such an

inextricable quality of my being - disconnecting feels like cutting off a healthy leg and piercing an eye or ear. Refusing automobility feels like crippling, blinding or deafening oneself. The impossibility of stopping the ecologically catastrophic impact of massive car use through international cooperation is indicative of this paradoxical logic.

On the level of everyday experience we are confronted with other paradoxes, such as the paradox of freedom. Emancipation and autonomy are related to freedom. I have gained freedom when, as the most famous American song goes, I did it my way. Freedom of speech or whatever constitutional liberty cannot be restricted by religious or ideological dogma. Modern man should not be determined by heteronomous powers: church, monarch, capital or non-specifically identifiable, but unmistakably misleading ideas that obscure the individual's autonomy. For the modern subject, so ingeniously constructed by Immanuel Kant in his three critiques, behaviour and thought is checked by rational reflection. Kant's heir however underestimated the scope of this rational enlightenment. Next to its mental impact it had a double sensory impact: a physical enlightenment in the car and its visual component in electricity.

During the last five decades the enlightened experience of freedom has been qualitatively transformed due to the complexification and acceleration of human interactions, transactions and communications. Nowadays our main brainframe is no longer mental reflection, but automobile and interfacial reflexes. Physical enlightenment, i.e. comfort has outrun its mental component. As the above described homeward journey implicitly suggests we feel free as long as all media smoothly function. They are not experienced as heteronomous powers, because we invented them ourselves. They form an onto-technological dispositive that determines our consciousness. AS a condition of possibility they enable us to experience at all.

However, in order to feel free we have to believe in the media that 'cocoon' us. For this believe it suffices that they work. Efficiency and result oriented output is most important. Embedded within 'frictionless capitalism', as Bill Gates once coined his ideal, life becomes an ecstatic enlightened experience, beyond emancipation and Bildung. Perfect. This philosophical perspective is taken very literally by 'technostics' as Hans Moravec and Max More of the Extropy Institute: referring to A.I. research they understand the body to be a medium that can be casted away after consciousness has been downloaded and uploaded in another medium. No-body creates friction or resists.

But in daily life the very moment the body burn out, the server is down, the payphonecard or chipcard are emptied, the plane is iced or the car out of order, we feel ourselves as grounded as a prisoner of war. Strangely enough this sudden independence or autonomy feels like a lack of freedom. And after 911 it is conceived as unsafe and insecure. We would rather be spied upon than being left alone or neglected. The former opposition between private and public is no longer an issue. Post-911 men gladly exchange freedom for security. Interpreted from a modern perspective the protective 'cocooning' of the capsular individual is therefor an indication for a highly paradoxical freedom: we feel optimally free in being completely dependent upon 'our' media.

(Auto) Fundamentalism as free market ideology

In his book on modern mythologies Roland Barthes describes a jet-man. This pilot, Barthes states, voluntarily becomes one with 'his' machine and media: in his autonomous struggle for weightlessness the pilot, paradoxically enough, places his autonomy in the 'hands' of technology. He subjugates himself to the level of the

means. Faith in him equals an absolute trust in the technology surrounding him. He is no hero, but actually mediocre in his absolute faith in a total and machine-driven functionality within an all-encompassing technological system. I would like to qualify this faith in oneself via the media as 'autofundamentalism'. This is indicative of the crypto-religious character of an ecstatic automobility.

It seems that the idea of radical medi@crity 'contracts' in the figure of the Stealth-bomber pilot, who was interviewed after a mission during the First Gulf War in 1990. His freedom is no longer an inner experience. He survives thanks to an ecstatic awareness. Thinking has become a physical reflex. As this pilot the faster we move, the less vulnerable we are. Economically this boils down to the more we spend, the more we gain. Savings and property are old-fashioned assets; investment and speculation are highly rewarded. Ethically this means that in risk society responsibility is jurisprudentially recasted in terms of accountability and justifiability. In this world every contact is secured and insured by a contract. Micropolitical radical medi@crity – the total inbetweenness of selfconsciousness – is geopolitically mirrored in a free market ideology, because once individual freedom is secured by markets, freedom can only be gained in terms of contracts in the inbetween world of free enterprise. Neo- and ultraliberalism are the politico-economic legitimizations of this geopolitical medi@crity. And, to close the circle by referring to critical – or should we say: hypocritical? - voices like Georges Soros and Joseph Stiglitz, marketfundamentalism is the hidden 'religious' agenda of the free market ideology. Within this religious perspective freedom of speech is both a market value that is focust by the imperatives of a technocratic flexibility and a religious dogma that overrules any other consideration.

Being-in-between: hypocritical inter-esse

Is that all there is? Is a Peggy Lee syndrom the end of this story? No, there is still one promising aspect to radical medi@crity. We – but who is this 'we' - have indeed reach a turningpoint in thought that we'd better not neglect: consciousness can no longer 'progress' by opposing the mediocrity of the others. We have to face our own mediocrity directly in order to gain insights into other modes of existence. Our only hope lies in doing it radically. The core of radical medi@crity is affirmative: we want to be connected to all others. As such psycho-technologically – though not primarily socio-psychologically – everyone is interested. The German expression, applied by philosophers from Kant to Heidegger and Deleuze, is more insructive: postmodern capsular dividuals - always outside themselves, i.e. ecstatic - are first and for all in-between: the current human condition is a psycho-technological inter-esse or a being-in-between. This has been the key to the succes of ICT.

Referring to the beginning of my text this brings the argument to a close in favour of public transport. Why would we not face up to the inevitable consequences of our excessive automobility and create space for advanced and free publicness? Why would we proscribe the notion that the perceived lack of safety on the streets is probably caused, in part, by reduction of the public domain to a sum of vacuous private domains that only use the public space for shopping and transmitting politico-economic messages? Admittedly, a post-automobile existence is an unthinkable option. But as long as we continue, in our radical mediocrity, to identify our 'selves' with 'auto' and while this is the 'medium' as 'message', we will not get much further in our thinking about mobility in relation to the public space. The safety and vitality of the public space probably has more to gain from smashing open the capsule and propagating public participation and interested – as the condition of the in-between,

the 'esse' of the 'inter' – interactions.