

**FROM AESTHETICS TO COSMETICS.  
THE DEEP COMPLEXITY OF INTERFACES  
IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE <sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Parallel to the dematerialization of interfaces – emphasizing their visual dimension through the progressive elimination of the tactile one –, contemporary techno-culture has also been investing in a synthesis process that condenses vision and tact in the same surface. The new synthetic interfaces, vulgarly known as touch screens, are literally screens whose contents are activated through touch. The disseminated use of sensors emphasizes the kinetic dimension of the human-technology relationship, reinstating the body as interface (a moving, active and participating one) and the skin as place of hybridism and experience.

In fact, the surface's evolution sets a new era to our relationship with the world and its images, now defined by proximity through tact and fusion.

When technology becomes able to generate an artificial reality that, by its complexity, gets closer and closer to the organic one, the association between surface and skin acquires a deeper meaning, since this last one is not only a reactive and expressive surface, but also what allows, in its apparent evidence, that each individual can acknowledge himself as such. As the body's cover, skin singularizes who it contains, generating an identity. As interface, it's both connection and protection; shows as much as it hides; welcomes as much as it repels. Being a surface, skin is all but superficial.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, cosmetics, interface, hybridism, skin, visual culture.

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The idea of what is or what isn't possible defines a limit to the human action. An important limit, since it gives meaning a horizon, placing us, guiding us and thus functioning as a frontier between concept and object, imagination and reality, project and achievement. With limits come shapes, the possible shapes, grounding us to reality. Consequently, limits inform, reform and sometimes deform.

Nevertheless, if understood as possible, limits, shapes, are also possibilities and, in that regard, what we thought to be closure may now be opening: opening to all possible(s), moving to the territory of poetics, of dream-driven action. Thought as ending, limits (far from being a rigid frontier) benefit from the semantic plasticity of this concept, emerging as *telos* – purpose, project, and objective. An objective not yet objectified, crystallised, and therefore settled as *meta* – which, in this case, can be *meta*-physics, since it is still beyond physics, or *meta*-morphosis, change, mutation, transformation, revolution.

As sign of human's ability to create, Design is project and intention towards the world, working shape as opening. Transformed by its poetic action, shape (*morphé*) is revelation (*alétheia*), reinforcing Design as a creative force through which possibility, far from restraining, stimulates transformation, replacing natural by artificial laws and getting reality closer to utopia.

Accepted as opening, Design obeys to the utopic impulse that leads creation to the realm of everything that is possible, benefiting from the plastic potential of the new technological territories, where virtual is the new real and imagination approaches life. On the opposite hand, understood as closure Design becomes constriction, limit and stagnation, contributing to the creation of an entirely visible, known and controlled universe, where the elimination of chaos, error and contingency equally eradicates surprise, the need to adjust and, possibly, evolution. In a time of ghosts, spectrums and quasi-objects, marked by the increasing sex appeal of the inorganic (Perniola), to dive in the artificial universe of its creation, *to be* part of it, raises all sorts of possibilities, simultaneously utopic and distopic, reinforcing Design's aesthetical, ethical and political nature.

This power intimidates in the same measure as it stimulates. The understanding of Design at the service of a *techno-logic* and its intrinsic rationality may be the hypothesis that could more easily justify the simultaneously euphoric and apprehensive speech that this past few years

have been building about it. Nevertheless, that speech may be covering up an ancient apprehension felt by human beings towards their creative potential and, most of all, the responsibility it implies when invested by the progressive transformation and subversion of the natural laws, replacing them with artificial logics.

Human beings have always dwelled with a permanent tension between the wish to take the power of creation, historically located in the divine, and the fear of what could happen as a result of that power, since it represents consequences we would not know how to face or acknowledge without blaming them on some god's instable humour. To create, to give life, is to generate another that, coming from the same, is no longer the same. The creator fears that *otherness* in his creature, that independent, autonomous existence, unavoidably exterior, dreading the possibility of not being able to recognize and, therefore, control it.

The unknown has always been an obscure force able to bring chaos to the order of this world we assume as our own, threatening to destroy it/us. In the same measure, the creature has always been that *other* who, if not entirely known/controlled, may represent a constant threat of rebellion against his creator. From literature to cinema, painting and myth, fiction has been profuse in the representation of this fear of the unknown, the creature, the other, so often portrayed as monster, projecting in its immeasurable ugliness the extreme nature of our fright and disruption.

Nonetheless, it's possible that what we fear in monsters, in others, is not what's unknown, but what we can still recognize; what, in spite of their distortion, mirrors us, forcing us to admit it as part of what we (also) are – the first creature that rebelled against its creator, daring to desire his place, change his world, give life to what doesn't have life, control time and space, overcome the rigidity of matter, the friction of the physical world, dreaming on being omnipotent and omnipresent and, in spite of it all, unable to this day to free ourselves from the terror of, at any given moment, see the wax wings with which we had the courage to flight so high being melt beyond control.

What is Design if not the visible face, the vehicle and the instrument of this will, this drive that can only be human? And, being so, how could it not reflect the fear that occupies and deeply defines us? We shouldn't avoid these questions, particularly when considering the enthusiasm for invention and novelty, as well as the (still) firm belief in technology and progress that

outline our times. An enthusiasm able to delude the fear of the unknown brought by every discovery, inspiring us to pursue the need to explain it and therefore build an elaborate set of myths that, for a long time in our history, manifested the different ways in which we chose to place the responsibility for our existence in a superior power, either singular or plural.

“Myth is a way to express the fact that the world and the things that rule it were not left at the mercy of pure randomness” (Blumenberg, 2003: 51). Regardless of its shape and size, myth always laboured on the suppression of randomness, task in which it would be replaced only when science prevailed as a more acceptable explanation of reality – a decisive moment to the way we would literally see the world.

In fact, when science assumed this demand as its own, our world saw itself invaded, retailed, fragmented and exposed, allowing us to actually see *it* as never before. The opacity that, for centuries and centuries, had constituted our image of the world and of nature – the obscure and chaotic unknown whose permanent threat saw itself smoothen through the mediation of the superior and mythical instances to whom we had trusted the power to control it and protect us – is now compromised by the action of an instrumental reason devoted to the study of fraction in order to be able to know and explain the whole, converting modernity in a time that can nominate and classify everything.

Technique plays a crucial part in it, developing visual displays exceptionally capable of diluting the ancient opacity into an immense and kaleidoscopic visible surface, thus installing in us a convincing, even if deluded, techno-mediated omnivoyance. Allowing us the access to an otherwise unattainable reality – from telescope to microscope, from 19<sup>th</sup> Century’s negative proofs to the photos through which Muybridge deconstructed movement, from X-ray to ultrasound, from anatomical dissection to the images produced by spacecrafts,... - technology modified the way we saw the world, tuning and, by doing so, fabricating our regard. Hence, we cannot but wonder about what is, in fact, seeing and understanding: taking into consideration that “the building of knowledge depends on images (...), machines that see what the human eye will never see”, it is vital to consider the way in which “this optical devises guide the construction of regards and, therefore, ideas” (Sicard, 2006: 16).

When they enter the surface that limits us and reveal what we otherwise wouldn’t be able to see, technical images constitute themselves as

evidence, as a truth we scarcely dare to question. Image acquires a strength that largely overcomes its iconic capacity to reproduce similarity – it becomes the contiguous trace of a physical, existing dimension, acquiring the credibility that sets it apart from other types of images that we have learned to suspect.

### **The fragmented perception of reality**

The moment machine imposes itself as mediation in our relationship with images, starting their massive production and circulation, marks the beginning not so much of an image culture as of a visual culture, which deeply interferes with the canonical and stable hierarchy historically defined to images by Western culture, establishing the need to distinguish them through their value (Benjamin, 1991). History is, to this day, that filter, that search for significance, the process through which a culture is able to set apart what's true from what's not, what's important to preserve from what isn't, achieving a *constant* hierarchy.

This constancy may, in great measure, be a product of Christianity's influence in the West. Generating a system able to fully explain the world as a whole, it has founded an *image cult(ure)* which, for centuries, has been responsible for the mediation and constitution of our connection with reality. This system started to lose consistency and coherence mostly after 19<sup>th</sup> century, compromising the matrix of totality as a model we could fully conceive or understand.

Regarding image as a whole, the moment when, due to the meddling of technique and instrumental reason, it gets fragmented and divided/multiplied is the moment when the entire idea of totality is at risk and, with it, the culture once built over its steady grounds.

One of the main reasons modernity became so problematic was its excessive awareness of the historic naivety that invented God(s), installing deep challenges in human culture. Regarding reason as a project made it impossible to modernity not to become post-modern. As a result, post-modernity, understood as the exacerbation and subsequent decline of the values defended by modernity, has always been an inevitability of instrumental reason's design.

After the disintegration of modernity and, with it, of totality's paradigm, the experience of reality within Western culture became progressively entangled with the fragment, the part, and the quote. The so-called post-modernity is

the climax of this kind of experience in a culture that not only disregarded totality, but also gives appearance of feeling comfortable without it. Paradoxically, it doesn't stop looking for it, accusing the void left by its absence.

The fragmented perception of reality that characterizes the performance of visual culture results from the techno-mediated nature of contemporary experience, focused on displays and with significant impact on the way we see. *Vision machines* (Virilio, 1998) connect us to a world that, although immediately accessible, we can only know from afar, as a sum of images, fragments we're no longer able to associate and return to their original union. Focused on what's *here* and *now*, technology fractured both space and time (and, with them, reality and experience) has continuous living dimensions, imploding them into a kaleidoscopic and eternal present, defined by the permanent refreshing of information and disconnected from any context. The present immediately archives the knowledge it produces, leaving us immersed in a reality we perceive as a random bundle of events without apparent connection or anchor that can return their meaning or stop them from diluting into the information flux that defines the network society we live in (Castells, 1999).

For about twelve centuries, Christianity operated the reprogramming of the world, explaining it in its totality and generating an image of it in which everything made sense as part of a/the whole. The problem with totality is deeply political, since it often implies a severe control operation and, in that sense, it becomes an equally ethical issue. We believe it's impossible to think politics and ethics without aesthetics.

Nevertheless, the aesthetical question posed by contemporary times is mainly a cosmetic one, since it confronts us with the possibility of changing the appearance of things. Only aesthetics will allow us to be able to grasp the ethical and political impact of the cosmetic operation performed by techno-mediation.

The cosmetics of the world confront us with an issue Western culture could never solve. Since Plato, the metaphysical theory has been a pursuit for perfection, trying to lead the world to an ideal condition. Around 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century, approximately, Christianity set off a strategy (of platonic matrix) to perfect reality, to which has been vital the consideration of a second space, exterior to humanity, nature and everything we could never control and stabilize in it. From Plato to Christianity, the thought that assembled us was

the one of division, difference, and opposition, defining nature as *other*, a place of death, contingency, threat, unpredictability and chaos. It's possible that Western culture is one of the few in the world to think nature as death instead of life, something capable to destroy us instead of something that generates and nourishes us, simply because, in spite of all the historical efforts to stabilize it, nature as remained to this day at the edge of our controlling capacities, constantly managing to escape. A second space became paramount to the possibility of conceiving a perfect condition – a *paradise* – to which human beings could actually aspire.

With 19<sup>th</sup> century, the permanent discoveries that revealed the performance and the structure of reality also exposed the cosmetic tricks with which its camouflage had been attempted. Knowing *too much* disturbs our ability to conjecture and speculate, preventing us from recovering an unified image of the world and restoring the illusion of totality. Thus, all possibilities are left open and chaos installs where order had been before – in an inevitable inversion of the modern logics, since now, contrary to what the Enlightenment ideal had proclaimed, order comes from ignorance and chaos from knowledge. It seems that, opposite to what we may have hoped for, the more we know of the world, the more we fill misplaced and lost in it, reinforcing the need to preserve the possibility of a second space, which led 19<sup>th</sup> century to the reinvention of utopia.

Since nature has always been the only model we have from totality, it also inspires the creation of its replica. Due to the fact that it lets itself be mirrored (by the quiet waters of a lake, for example), it's nature that teaches us the possibility of division and copy, origin of human's ancient fascination with reflection, projection and, of course, the possibility of creating another version of himself and the world. The structure of replica coincides with the structure of dream, resulting in the West's idea of imagination – so is humanity: we create the logic of control at the same time we fabricate the illogic of the impossible.

Nonetheless, as technology takes over the connection between humans and the world, it reinstalls the second space, perfection and totality (as well as control) as possibility, as something to what we can aspire again. The advantage of machines is that they seem able to accomplish what God(s) only presented as promises, making our ancient fantasies an everyday reality. Be that *new world* cyberspace or something else entirely different and yet unimaginable, something of it is already there and no longer a

dream, although it seems to be made of that same material – reason that caused William Gibson (1984) to define it as *consensual hallucination*. It's a space without space, matter, map, apparent limits, or shape. It's flux, rhizome, opening, and possibility.

### **The utopia of totality**

Through its association with technology, Design gives expression to that utopic impulse, that intention to create, becoming the instrument with which the new world begins to be thought, drawn and conceived as sign of our relish for perfection and creation of an ideal world where life and men can also become so. If the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Richard Wagner, had dreamed the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), the 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed itself to believe in its accomplishment. A polemic concept as much in its origin as it remains today, demonstrative, on the one hand, of how aesthetics, ethics and politics implicate each other (due to the bond between totality and control, easily compatible with the ideologies of the dictatorial regimes that overcame Europe throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and, on the other hand, of aesthetics' deep and structural implications, usually misunderstood due to the confusion between surface and superficial.

Surface is probably one of the most complex contemporary subjects. When, in 1882, reverend Edwin Abbott wrote *Flatland*, a thorough description of a two-dimensional world, he could hardly imagine that would become the main tendency of technological evolution a century later, as surfaces acquire more and more expressivity, turning into visual and tactile interfaces. Nevertheless, contrary to the literal flatness of *Flatland*, "today's new, real and two-dimensional world overcomes the old three-dimensional world, becoming its skin" (Manzini, 1993: 55).

In a moment when technology can generate an artificial world as complex as the organic one, the association between surface and skin acquires a deeper significance, since this last one is also a reactive and expressive surface, mostly because each individual feels and recognizes himself as a whole due to its apparent evidence. As the body's encasement, it singularizes whom it contains, generating an identity. As interface, skin is connection as well as protection. It shows as much as it hides, welcomes as much as it repels. Being a surface, skin is everything but superficial.

Working the surface of the world (or the world as surface), working its skin, enables the possibility of conceiving it again as totality, suggesting the most

diverse combinations between functional logic and aesthetical-emotional values. The moment when we can refer to artificial surfaces as *sensitive skin* may not be far. "The possibility of surfaces revealing the mark of past events (reactive surfaces) or evidencing the mutations that took place within the system of which they are skin (expressive surfaces) is a deeply current subject today" (*Idem*: 50).

The surface's evolution sets the beginning of a new era to our relationship with object and image (*object-image*), defined by proximity: not only as tact, but mostly as fusion. Therefore, we believe that visual culture, which once replaced image culture, may now give room to a *Design culture*, from which the emphasis on the interactive nature of our connection to *object-images* is only a preview.

As the third vortex of the triangle *technology – Design – human*, this last one benefits from a progressive empowerment that makes him believe he may finally be able to create and totally engineer a world to his measure and similarity. Nevertheless, the protection from which he profited while the techno-mediated connection to the world maintained it at a distance vanishes as this connection begins to value proximity and fusion. Diving in the artificial universe of his creation, being part of it, allows all sort of possibilities (simultaneously utopic and distopic) to emerge.

The rational and scientific basis of technical progress is one of the pillars that, in our times, still support the belief in a one-directional idea of evolution, according to which regression is not even a possibility. Corollary of this evolution process, our eminently technological visual culture warrants the continuity of the utopia for an ideal world, place of opportunity and (eternal) restart. A place beyond all deception, able to finally overcome reality's antagonisms, obstacles and frustrations.

Nevertheless, this desire for transcendence that seems to move us may be the reflection of our inability to deal with a fixed existence, difficulties and disappointment, recognizing and accepting the boundaries and constraints of reality such as it is (Robins, 2003). Since the world of simulation exists without body, chaos, catastrophe or limitation, it's possible that dreaming it may constitute the expression of human's resentment against our own condition.

With the removal of reality comes the removal of experience itself, category bonded to physical and placed existence, arming our ability to learn (also grounded in experience and in everything unknown and chaotic reality has),

escaping all predictability and demanding us to adjust, transform and accept the intolerable possibility of *not knowing* (Bion *apud* Robins, 2003). Even if it represents everything that is precarious and frightening, living with the unknown may be the only way to overcome the consolidated and obsolete order of past experiences, opening way to the institution of new meanings.

Paradoxically, the contemporary and technological idea of progress we subscribed as a culture subverts and perverts progress' deeper meaning, referring to the protective stagnation of a totally visible, known and controlled universe to which humans are sovereign – without body, suffering, memory or need.

The idea we have today about technology confronts us, not with our boundaries, but with their absence. That's partially responsible for man's loss of the structure and coordinates through which he historically learned to define himself and, considering he is now capable of being and achieving everything imaginable, also for his loss of who and what he is, seeing his life emptying as his exclusive faith in technique grows (Ortega y Gasset, 2009: 80).

These are the most intensely technical years in the history of mankind. The possibility of them also revealing to be equally empty emphasizes the need to improve the appearance of technological surfaces and, with them, our perception of their role, allowing us to remain firm in the belief on their solutions to our lives.

“More than an instrument or a form of control, but remaining so, technique gives itself to be seen as Design” (Bragança de Miranda, 2004: 5). Supported by the development and acceleration of technical procedures, Design frees itself from objects, focusing on images and working human experience through them, broadening its range of action indefinitely and completing a seemingly unidirectional path to *total Design*.

Bauhaus widened Design's scope, from the imaginary to the mirroring of contemporary. But one thing is Design's widening in order to encompass objects and world itself, another is its merging with techno-economical devices that immediately inscribe it in existence and life itself. Besides aesthetical imaginary, Design had implicit the tendency to a total encompass of existence (*Idem, Ibidem*).

The notion of encompass worked by Design acquires new thickness as it stands as project to duplicate reality in cyberspace, presenting it aesthetically as interface.

The door to cyberspace is open, and I believe that poetically and scientifically minded architects can and will step through it in significant numbers. For cyberspace will require constant planning and organization. The structures proliferating within it will require design, and the people who design these structures will be called cyberspace architects. (Benedikt 1991: 18-23)

Benedikt (1991) was a pioneer in his anticipation not only of cyberspace's relevance within contemporary technological dynamics, but also of this ever so fluid connection between Architecture and Design. Nevertheless, today Design seems a more appropriate response to the technological challenge of reimagining reality.

### **Technological illusions: visibility and transcendence**

Contemporary expectations on image and its technological support are quite remarkable. "It's as if the technological future could be another world, an utopic world, a world more entwined with our desires and ideals. As if the present world, with all its frustrations and limitations – all its reality, sort of speaking, could be denied and triumphed over" (Robins, 2003: 27). We hope this essentially imagetic universe can enlarge our knowledge and awareness of the world, granting us an infinitely bigger set of experiences and fantasies, sustaining innovative forms of sociability while connecting new and unsuspected types of communities, and maybe, at a less conscious level, providing us extra safety and protection against the perils of the world.

There's nothing new, surprising or unexpected in the promises of this techno-rhetoric, actually. What it sells us as revolutionary becomes more meaningful if understood as reinstatement, since the technological utopia is the solution with which modernity has been perpetuating the ancient desire of transcendence that defined human beings since the genesis of their existence.

Within Kevin Robin's curious grasp, shared by an interesting assemblage of authors such as Elias Canetti, Zigmund Bauman, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, at the root of this longing for transcendence would be the most basic and primeval of human instincts: fear. More accurately: fear of the unknown. According to them, visual technologies are psychologically alluring because they provide a sense of safety and protection against a primal fear that inhabits our bodies, granting, more than ideas, the means through which we're able to distance ourselves from everything that incites it: what we can't see, classify, categorize, name, and thus know.

To this author, the dynamics between fear and its obstruction is crucial to understand the maintenance of technological illusions. Adorno and Horkheimer had already understood rationalization as a project to free man from fear and establish his sovereignty. "Man imagines himself free from fear when nothing remains unknown" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973: 3). "Absolutely nothing can remain outside, because the mere idea of exteriority is fear's source itself" (*Idem*: 16) – the fear of what we don't know and therefore can't control.

When considering the technological response to fear, Robin focuses on visual technologies and the way they organize our regard. That's not an unusual approach. Most cultures bestowed image with special powers, many of them protective. "Technologically mediated vision developed as the decisively modern way of assuring distance towards what surrounds us, withdrawing and isolating us from the terrifying proximity of the world of touch" (Robins, 2003: 29). To those who have access to them, visual technologies are enabling a wider departure and rupture from the world. "Vision is being withdrawn from experience and the world is rapidly assuming a desensitized quality" (*Idem, Ibidem*).

Robin's thesis emphasizes the connection, within modern technological culture, between the domain of vision and the desire for disincorporation, on the one hand, and the abandonment of physical experience as well as the possibility of being touched by the unknown, on the other hand. Thus, he summons two fundamental concepts: order (connected to vision, reason and technology) and chaos (linked to touch, otherness and the unknown). The source of this contemporary concern would, therefore, be the most primal of human instincts: fear – and a subsequent defensive and protective impulse. Cornelius Castoriadis (1993) believed human existence emerged from chaos. The dilemma of being human would be, in his opinion, the inability to accept and relate to it. Consequently, order would be human's resource to conceal chaos. Zigmund Bauman also convenes this idea: "Human beings exist in the never ending, since never completely successful, effort to elude chaos. (...) Society, we may state, is a massive and continuous operation of disguise" (1999: 12). In Bauman's perspective, modernity refuses chaos through faith in reason and technological progress.

Placed at the core of the permanent sense of catastrophe that defines the essence of human existence, fear would be the constant vertigo of being human – fear of death, disease, change, isolation, abandonment, predators,

burning, asphyxia, fall, and so on. Nevertheless, instead of assuming fear's interiority, man projects it to the exterior – the place of others, the unknown, which justifies his constant efforts to create a protection against the threat he imagines “out there”. According to Serge Moscovici (1993), the aversion to touch is deeply rooted in human culture, associated to contamination and infection. Robins recovers this idea: “There's nothing we fear most than the touch of the unknown” (2003: 37).

Fear becomes central to this author's thesis about the physical investment required by visual technologies and techno-culture. “Our technologies keep the world at a distance. They provide the means to keep us isolated from the disturbing immediacy of the world of touch” (*Idem, Ibidem*). Technology has been continuously developed and perfected in order to ensure visual sovereignty. Therefore, today's continuous sensation of living in a world of images is not inconsequent. In Robin's point of view, the permanent intensification of vision's rationalization has always aimed the dissipation of darkness and the exhibition of all the strangeness it contains.

The reference to darkness as place of the unknown is interesting. Within this context, the technological mobilization of vision – the human sense more associated with distance and separation – is of particular significance because it contrasts with the rejection of touch – the sense of proximity and physicality. The association between vision and modernity's rationalization project connects with the possibility of controlling the world at a distance, combining dominance with alienation. Rational vision would be a sort of “absolute eye” (*Idem, Ibidem*) and, in its transcendent perspective, the world could be inspected in its totality, because nothing would remain invisible or out of reach. The visible world, surveyed and scrutinized, is the world of order and control, empowering men. This is the core of the utopic impulse.

Referring to the city as it was at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Simmel mentions fear of contact (*Berührungsangst*) and the way vision was already part of the modernist strategies to control and neutralize every source of anguish. Modernist architects projected cities of glass and, through them, the ideal of transparent society. Transparency as a consequence of rational order has been summoned by the contemporary panoptic we came to know as vigilance camera – the disincarnated eye that allows us to control the world at a safe distance, disguising control as protection.

Our growing ability to recreate the world with the tools of reason is rapidly leading us to the transformation of the way we perceive reality. The

replacement of the physical world of atoms with the immaterial lightness of the world of bites is often seen as a '*natural*' consequence of human evolution. The desire to escape from our physical dimension seems inevitably connected to the aspiration to improve human condition through the departure from everything that constrains it, transposing the idea of salvation directly from theology to technology and thus perpetuating the dream of transcendence and eternal life in a perfect alternative dimension.

"Originally, utopic desires and dreams had religious, i.e. transcendental backgrounds, and were projected towards incommensurably distant spaces" (Fisher *apud* Robins, 2003: 31). Throughout history, utopia became science fiction and, with it, distopia, culminating in cyberspace, the moment when utopia approaches our *here and now*. Technology makes possible and present what had always been projection, dream and distant. In common with paradise remains the notion of an immaterial space, located in a mental geography, a world more conformed to our desires, dreams and aspirations, except that now it has the potential to finally replace our physical, imperfect and limited reality, allowing us to overcome the constraints of both time and space and thus achieve the old reverie of transcendence.

### **Hybridism: the world as skin**

The wish for transcendence may entail, as we've seen, the urge to abandon the body, perceived as anchor to the contingencies of a world that is, all of it, obstacle and resistance. Nevertheless, although it remains object of fantasy and yearning, the departure from experience towards image and appearance may still be felt as loss. Loss of reality. Loss of *being*.

The focus of Kevin Robin's work in "*Into the Image. Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*" (1996) is the way sensorial, cultural, and intellectual experience has associated with vision (the sense of distance and dissociation), repressing the meaning of touch. What modernity and post modernity present as cultural innovation is actually the persistence of the long historical project to escape the imperatives and limitations of human existence in a body. Techno culture encourages us to fantasize with the end of that physical dimension, and to think ourselves exclusively as immateriality, image, spirit – *avatar*. Therefore, it's easy to understand the way modern environments celebrate the removal from all that is incorporated, material, organic, present, and mortal.

Nonetheless, in these last few years we've watched an unforeseen turn.

Simultaneous to the dematerialization of interfaces, emphasizing their visual component through the progressive elimination of their tactile dimension (recognizable, for instance, in the proliferation of multiple wireless technologies), techno-culture has also been investing in a synthesis of vision and touch in a same surface. These new synthetic interfaces, vulgarly known as touch screens, are literally screens whose contents are activated by touch. In these electronic devices, the place of vision is also the place of touch, allowing it to regain an unpredicted protagonism. In fact, the dissemination of the use of sensors calls attention to the kinetic dimension of the human-technology relationship, reinstating the body as interface – not passive and ecstatic, but a participating interface, responsible by the success and intensity of our new interaction with machines.

Either demanding or discarding it, technology has acted continuously on human body, gradually less dense and more permeable. A similar investment to the one made on the surface of the world, or on the world as surface.

In a moment when technology can generate an artificial world that, due to its complexity, becomes increasingly closer to the organic world, the association between surface and skin acquires a meaning that's all but superficial. Expressive and reactive, it's in skin's apparent evidence that each individual recognizes himself as such. As the body's envelop, the skin singularizes the one it contains, generating an identity (Anzieu, 1997). A cover we must not think as constraint, closure, but as interface, connection and, simultaneously, protection and place of touch, showing as much as it hides, welcoming as much as it repels. Being image, it's hardly just appearance. It's presence.

The shape of the world, its surface, its skin, is Design's final object, since it is the one that conceives that shape, managing the penetration of technology and the results of that prosthetic intervention. It's the work on the skin of the world that allows the permanent dialogue between *out here* and *out there* that characterizes technological action, installing not only a *body hysteria* (Cruz, 2000), but also a *world hysteria*: a world we experience both as presence and absence, opacity and transparency, reality and virtual.

The skin of the world's permeability allows the fusion of what we used to define from division and antagonism. That fusion generates hybridism. In which other way can we understand our contemporary world if not as hybrid? Radically affected, the skin of the world becomes an *open shape*,

systematic integration of the other, of prosthetics, of ghosts. If, on the one hand, the possibility to increase questions its existence and definition as limit and from that limit, on the other hand we can not forget that prosthetics, as extensions and, most of all, as merging, become possibility of mutation and transformation, subjecting the world to a permanent metamorphosis that, as any other infectious process, would be difficult, if not impossible, to control.

The hybrid world can no longer define itself through the notions of natural and artificial as separate entities, because the moment when it incorporates them is the moment it becomes a *third*, the result of the mutation of its intrinsic structure, of the merging that makes A and B turn into C. This transformation demands the integration of a new paradigm, able to manage opening as possibility of infection understood as mutation and evolution, and therefore accept the impossibility of knowing and controlling everything.

It remains to know if, by bringing the transcendent to the immanent, we would be able to cope with the ambiguity, the grotesque (Bakhtine) and the transformation of meaning implied by such opening. Limitation, closure, the clean separation between opposites allowed the dream of an aseptic ideal, entirely controllable and therefore free from threat and danger. Hybrids, open shapes, merging, on the other hand, recover all the drama of the baroque imaginary, tragic, gloomy, and without happy endings.

Design would be responsible for the cosmetic operation through which technology becomes able to manage the mutation of sensibility and experience. Nonetheless, although apparently dealing only with surfaces, Design's cosmetic action is deep and complex, because this surface, this skin, becomes identity and memory through its ability to register the passing of time.

Skin is the most intimate and vivid witness of our personal histories. The overvaluing of aesthetics in techno-mediated visual culture – highlighting sensation, fluidity, speed and, with it, instant, momentum, *now* – erases the traces skin had retained from time flow, replacing memory (as register and continuity) by permanent novelty and uploading. This results in a fragmented and discontinuous world, set away from context as warrantee of massive and collective distraction and anaesthesia.

When the artefacts become immaterial, they lose conscience of the material way to feel the world, now manifested through simulacra. In this cybernetic age, we are watching the progressive and systematic disappearance of all the information holders. Electronic messages such as e-mails or texts don't

bring any trace of their sender, besides the digital content that will disappear unless the support is electronically charged. With the disappearance of messages, memory, history and the possibility of their archaeology will also fade away. Without any material records, the active memory will only hold concepts. Therefore, the importance of memory in the age of Design and dematerialization of affections is not fortuitous. It allows us to understand the way crisis seems to have become a mark of the contemporary, being it the crisis of historical reason, great narratives, ideologies, values, systems, models, meaning, body or, of course, human beings. In a moment when all probabilities seem possible, it's imagination itself that's threatened and, with it, the entire idea of future, menaced by the disappearance of trajectory and cohesion previously granted by a three-dimensional time.

In such a context, the lack of definition, even if scary, may also be our best assurance of continuity, turning hybrids into a metaphor of life itself, symbol of the endless adventure that may come with opening ourselves to the unknown and, with it, to the experience of a world permanently felt as skin.

It's our vision of the world and, with it, our experience of it that are at stake. Technology fragmented our perception of the world, mediating our connection to reality with all sorts of displays and interfaces, most of them visual. Through these devices, we've learned to see the world at a distance, as a collection of images. This is where Design, with its cosmetic operations, becomes crucial, because in a way that's a solution to return us the world as totality. This is important because, even if it equals the ability to control, most of all totality translates the possibility of knowing and therefore experiencing and remembering the world as a whole, not as a collection of dispersed fragments.

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