The International Urban Elite and the Culture of Instant Transmission

The Nation State is passe, the mega-city is omnipotent. Alex Ferentzy studies the implications of this shift.

With the consolidation of the cities as the nodal points on the dispersed board of international capitalism, there has emerged a culture specific to these urban centers.

W hat Steinfeld and Strange in Rival Firms: Competition for World Market Shares call a "privileged transnational business civilization," is not merely a passive recipient of social pressures, but is actively engaged in a process of creating culture simultaneously delineating its identity and establishing barriers to deep entry to outsiders. While many such barriers are spatial and economic, others present themselves as the site of an innovative enterprise at cultural definitions. In order to understand these endeavours, we have to clarify the changes and continuities between current practices and those that were apparent in earlier periods. In this way we will be able to specify what is new, what is an exaggeration of previous trends and what assumes a different form in relation to what some have called the informational mode of production.
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In his classic essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” George Simmel argued that the sheer number of formal, rational and abstract institutional permutations that the urban dweller living in a money economy must perform as part of his/her everyday activity, combined with the frequency of encounters with strangers fosters a mental attitude that is abstract, rationalistic and aloof.

Simmel attached the role of money in this process of forming a rationalistic attitude. Insofar as money represents an abstraction that is rationally manipulable and removed from where and how its value was produced, it lends credence to a notion of the existence of an abstract reality that is graspable in a rational and detached manner.

Language is the scene of an ongoing power struggle that demarcates the above slates: its refractions of meaning signal intimate political battles. Every GRRRL knows this. As does that self-titled heirlooming RAG Mary Daly. To look at current words and expressions it is necessary, yet again, to get a sense of where they come from. Without this historical perspective everything seems simply to fall from the sky for no particular reason.

To have a device that involves the introduction of a verb between the participants in an event and the event itself. Perhaps it’s more obvious in the way that “to dine” becomes “to have dinner.” As the verb becomes a noun, it is objectified; it becomes the object of the action and the people become the actors. The event is mediated by the verb “to have” introducing an element of possessiveness into the utterance. While the event is now possessed, it is also at a greater distance. What is this little possessive wishness that has come between us and our dinner? In a society that validates the act of possessing it should not be all that surprising that the emphasis should be on consumption rather than on the experience, just as earlier the expression “to take one’s dinner” expressed the arithmetical situation. I am leading up to that most annoying yuppy phrase of “doing lunch” which goes farther than merely having lunch and exaggerates the level of activity yet again. The doing of “doing lunch” operates as a signal of a certain status and a way of being in the world which must push the object of its intentions more hurriedly than merely having lunch can indicate. It is also a magical act which attempts to make all the trivialized and non-instrumental aspects of life disappear. Perhaps most importantly, the agreement to do lunch marks a deal between parties that the event will be contained within the codifications of the professional elite. Though they are laughing, there is no need to fear that they will lapse into a temporarily passive state, that the social encounter might be non-instrumental. No, they will do it.

Nike’s slogan “Just Do It” universalizes this doing into an order-word. The command to “just do it” sets things rolling and organizes the world by giving this kind of senseless activity priority. It is in relation to this order-word that we must appreciate the ramifications not only of GRRRLS and RAGS but also of those schizophrenics who look at the world in order, perceive the order-word, and transform it all into a new whirled order.

This splitting of expressions into their component parts has other related effects, particularly in those areas of human life which can only be expressed in qualitative terms and which Simmel spoke of as “cultural, instinctive and sovereign traits and impulses.” I am thinking of moods, emotions, desires, beliefs and delusions. We say “I want an apple” or “I want to have my staples piced” or even “I want to go home,” and we abstract from these different desires a unified transcendental DESIRE. They are separated from their situation and then reinserted in the abstract. Of course this is still Platonic thinking. The myriad different tables participate in the ideal form TABLE, which is their deepest truth, their essential nature. This is evident in the study of emotions where every anxiety, fear or panic is said to reflect the universal condition of which it is a more imperfect particular. As we degenerate everything of its validity outside of its adaptability to our technocratic purposes, we create a metaphysics out of our very alienation. And because it is a metaphysics it is apparent in our language and unavoidable in the world. We find that we “do it” to the world or to others, without in some sense doing it to ourselves.

This process generates a plane of abstraction (the set DESIRE, Desire of apple, Desire of staple picing, etc.) which is available for analysis. We have seen a large expansion of the territory (moods, thoughts and emotions which are of no immediate use-value to our society) which is first problematized through posing the impossible question “what is your anxiety exactly like?” and then reintroduced to the process of capital accumulation through the experts’ privileged access to the plane of abstraction, where every anxiety, phobia and panic can be clearly delineated and approached in a rational, instrumental manner.

Though I deny their rational character, there is no denying that these planes of analysis have become what David Harvey calls “concrete abstractions.” It becomes impossible to approach them from outside their cultural existence, from a purely rationalistic point of validity of this presupposition. Quite the contrary, it is here in the power of their cultural existence that they must be encountered.

Such concrete abstractions are no longer understandable in the monolithic forms that typified modernism. They have moved, along with everything else, to a technocratic rationality and so it should not be surprising to find a host of cybernetic terms invading the language of sociability. I am thinking here of keeping in touch, touching base, networking and so on. They all affirm the importance of maintaining contact, of being a point on the grid. Within this grid there is a space of flows, and we delude ourselves if we think that there is no politics in this grid and that a little seduction will make everything alright.

The vast territory that is problematized in this manner is also a cybernetic
grid because we have generated too many overlaps, too many nuances of detail for a single asylum to hold. The truth of the asylum (as Jean Baufraind and Donna Haraway have pointed out) is no longer in the site, but in maintaining electronic–
chemical contact. Like the cybernetic chart of information flows, the individ-
ual is merely a point of contact, a point of possible feedback, and the new discipline is characterized by being on this grid, and having the truth of any specific point removed from localized access. This is why it is so important to be in a cluster. The point on the grid only makes sense in relation to the flows which surround it; without a dense cluster, these flows can be removed without the least consula-
tion with the points in question.

The only way to follow through to the question of the truth of an experience is to chart a path back through the grid. But the grid can only be navigated with the kind of educational and social skills which make radical feedback unlikely, or in any case provide the individual with the kind of resources which make unwanted external control improbable, though as the history of psychiatry con-
tinues to prove, by no means impossible.

The demarcation of the point on the grid is not merely a technological–informational complex. It is being carved into city landscapes. According to Marvin Camfield in The Information City, The new industrial space and the new service economy organize their operations around the dynamics of their information–generating units, while connecting their different functions to disparate spaces assigned to each task to be per-
formed; the overall process is then reintegrated through communica-
tion systems. The new professional–
managerial class organizes exclusive spatial segments that connect with one another across the city, the country, and the world: they isolate themselves from the fragments of local societies, which in conse-
quence become destructured in the process of selective reorganization of work and residence.

In the movement from a fanacy to an information society we see a reduction in the distance between the economic and the social. The number and complexity of abstract–sional calculations increase tremendously in an information econo-
my since the means of information exchange involve learning technically specific processes (using automated telex, logging onto databases, program-
ning your VCR, playing video games, etc) and enacting them with consider-
able exactness. So it should not be sur-
prising if each of the above elements is best understood as an exaggeration and an extension of earlier developments, rather than as an entirely new form. Taken together, however, they do present a distinct cultural complex which takes its meaning from the shift to an informa-
tion economy and reflects an attempt to legitimise the views of those groups that have privileged access to the new tech-
nologies and its social–economic organi-
zation.

The emerging international urban elite expresses its alignment with the dominant orders of the day and is continu-
ously poised to re-align itself along the possibilities of its flexible specialization and, from there, to transmit its function-
ally imperative unilaterally, with no internal resistance, all the while present-
ing itself as a clear, smooth package of this same political positioning; it is refined and capable of the most subtle transmutations of its aesthetic or ideological nature. The guest is to be fully immersed in the flows of the grid: to have the channels cleared of all extremes material and to create a social space out of this same sensibility, to create a society of smooth transmitters.

Alex Ferranty writes about the cybernetic asylum.

by Steve Reinke