

Making Access

Dušan Barok

This talk was presented as part of the Winter Night's Copyright Fairytale, the evening program of the FREE?! A One-Day Journey Into the Cultures of Sharing event held on November 29, 2013, in the New Institute in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. (<http://freeculture.info/winter-nights-copyright-fairytale/>). I was invited to speak my mind for ten minutes about Monoskop Log, an online resource of writings on art, culture and media technology I edit. This version was edited and posted online on December 9, 2013.

Whether it is in the Folklore Valley or in underground networks of tunnels and caverns under it, what is not about to change any time soon is a way how we access publications. Whether in libraries, archives, museums, bookstores, or their online counterparts, we always deal with a repository, a catalogue, a collection, whose primary access point today has the form of a web interface. What is more, public memory institutions have begun to fashion *themselves* as media, extracting, processing, and providing information from their collections to the public.

Their interfaces play a key role in their communication with the outside world. And whether they provide PDFs, EPUBs, other media files, locations of objects, or of people selling books second hand, the interfaces tend to influence in a remarkable way what one is able to find and more hopefully, *discover*.

One can hardly escape the *machine-like* feeling these catalogues produce. A densely hyperlinked interface, drop-down menus, lists and sublists, classifications and entry forms. The ideal of objective knowledge goes hand in hand with a high level of abstraction that structures and orders the experience of finding objects through an interface. This experience rarely gives way to the joy we know from bookstores and libraries when a book 'jumps off a shelf' at us. The web interface tends to minimize the random, the noise, the arbitrary for the sake of an exact fulfillment of query. It is a science of formulas and results that assumes we know exactly what we are looking for. Here, books are *a standing-reserve*, stripped of their agency, as merely something orderable, brought-forth when queried.

This scenario is a case of the complete subsumption of public memory institutions to the notion of media in a very narrow sense, known from communication studies, as a mere information channel, transmitting zeros and ones from source to receiver.

But we have another understanding of the notion of media at hand, rooted instead in art theory, that of media as *a means of expression*. Florian Cramer noticed

a widely spread confusion stemming from the ignorance of this distinction a while ago and it is indeed a very productive realisation. On one hand there are media as channels of electronic signals, indifferent to the actual content and context of encoded messages. The other notion has its history in sculpture, literature, painting, photography, film and so on. The way these two notions clash for instance in discussions about 'media culture' is for another story. What we take out of it now is that besides serving as communication channels, the Internet and the Web provide electronic interfaces also with *means of expression* with a *specific aesthetic* and *sensitivity* shared among "receivers". There is hardly any communication without expression.

One aesthetic quality is a domain of time, the experience of temporality of a medium. In its early days, the internet communication was taking place in the forms of email and BBS, structured in a linear chronological manner. The information was accessed through lists ordered primarily by time, with latest emails and posts positioned at the top. For a brief period, this changed. The HTML Web lacked the element of time and saw its pages structured spatially, new versions each time replacing previous ones. The generation that had its formative experience with the Web in the 1990s may still perceive it primarily as an asynchronous atemporal structure of interlinked pages, as if they were book pages with 'links' to footnotes and subjected to a table of contents. It did not take long though and soon blogs, RSS, and most recently, the social-media defining "timeline" shifted perception again to scrolling through chronological lists. This widely shared sensitivity is in a surprising mismatch with how the majority of catalogues are presented today. This is of course only one element in the many-faceted experience of temporality.

Another such element is for the internet a relatively recent phenomenon but I guess you know it all. It relates to the distributed instantaneity, or put simply, to *the shared moment*. I experience it, to give one example, when after going through a few pages of a book I realise I am reading a great or otherwise important piece and post it online. On the blog, on Twitter and Facebook, and imagine other people joining me. My meditative contemplation in solitude, a somewhat defining characteristic of reading, moves closer to the feeling of watching a film in a cinema parallelly observing myself melting into the imaginary others. And it goes further now when with all those reading devices those others can be bathing in a spa, having a quiet moment at a picnic, or sitting in a train. Providing information to others in the way of a 'shared moment' moves beyond treating a book as a commodity, or a gift, or a cultural status. There is an aesthetic experience.

There is of course much more to temporality, that itself is a part of the many-faceted aesthetic experience. We could go on and on, and I hope we will.

It may seduce one to romanticise certain things, but a more sober point is to

take the aesthetic judgment in its widest sense into account when contemplating about the design, use cases as well as *content* of online catalogues today. We are curious, we certainly enjoy to be pleasantly surprised, and if we like something, we return. Publishing is not just about delivering information but is also a means of expression.