
Aphasia+Parrhesia: Code and Speech in the Neural Topologies of the Net

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ABSTRACT

An allegory of the net as a site, body, and voice of neural trauma. The net is imagined as a cyborg brain. Aphasia denotes recursive, perseverant, garbled speech patterns caused by aneurysm or traumatic shock. If the cyborg's aphasia is contemplated as "fearless speech", or *parrhesia*, iconoclasm and algorithm mesh in the dark space (amygdala) of a neural-electronic universe. Foucault's observations of unequal power relations as a signal characteristic of *parrhesia* play through a critique of artificial intelligence as an atopic net.

KEYWORDS

Trauma, entropy, parrhesia, aphasia, iconoclasm, amygdala

INTRODUCTION

The image of the net as the site of neural trauma, particularly one of low grade memory function brought on by post traumatic stress, is an artistic trope that occurred to me during a year spent recovering memory and awareness following

an experience of sexual and emotional violence. Topologies, or overlapping and nested worlds, are a commonplace of graphic design on the net, so that we contemplate a universe behind the screen which is, simultaneously, an array of code. A Piranesian world of wired ruins [1] was the landscape that came to mind. I surveyed an imaginative landscape that formally derives from montage and from the art of the fugue, and instantiated an exploration of violent memory and trauma. From 'behind' the screen, I moved to a zone 'below' -- topologies of an underground. Linking this thought to the principle of

entropy as a sustaining principle of life, counterintuitive as it may seem, I found myself quickly engaged in the pursuit of an allegorical cyborg. Her body was a brain, her brain a city, or series of cities; the passageways and routes through the cities were in states of constant erasure and disclosure; she was a body of information in continuous entropic decline and, at the same time, live communication.

With Calvino as Virgilian guide, I made a series of cinematic net art works about the landscape of the cyborg, visualized as a disappearing body, heard as a submerged voice, or felt through the mouse as a haptic presence within code (<<http://www.naxsmash.net>>). I spun out these spatialized tales as a series of narrative recursions, or loops. On a formal level, the recursive aesthetic led at once to an analogy to neural topologies, specifically, visualization in post-traumatic stress syndrome, and, in terms of sound, the condition of aphasia. Now it became possible to generate a more developed allegory of the cyborg brain as a site of entropic communication, and to loop this allegory into a way of critically thinking about the cultural artifact central to myths of artificial intelligence: semi-autonomous agents, or artificial life entities are both icons, functional subjects and sites of operation/mutation. The essay that follows is meant as a literary fugue, that casts an ear towards the rhetoric of posthuman communication between 'human' and 'machine' in the context of the net. I ask the reader's indulgence of allegory, as a kind of ironic play. It is, after all, the embodied cyborg who initially appears as the object of our gaze, but quickly morphs into subject, site and speaker in our inferno. In this essay, themes are introduced as a series of recursive nonlinear loops. Arguments are developed as points and counterpoints to make an architecture of associations. All of the points stem from traumatic memory as a generative suggestion, towards a phenomenology of cyberspace, and especially, the internet.

TRAUMA AND ENTROPY

Post traumatic syndrome impairs the sense of the experience of self as a discrete and functional whole. Triggers, both external and internal, at random and without premonition, instigate the amygdala fear response. The freeze frame visualizations typical of this kind of memory are primitive. They have a dispersed quality. One is quickly reminded of epileptic flashes of light in darkness. I find it interesting to figure out a way to represent this kind of visualization, particularly

because its origins are in the preconscious amygdala. For me, the visualizations had a detached and alien quality: they did not seem to connect with my identity, of course, since the defense mechanism of post traumatic stress apparently functions to both prevent full-blow memory of the violent incident and to protect the sufferer by warning of potential danger. The amygdala stores violent memory in small, film-still like caches. Each memory is like a land mine. The explosion is like white noise. The metaphor that compelled my net art became a nocturnal space lit by flashes. From this rather ominous perspective, I wonder about who might be inside the invisible city, a virtual Baghdad. The aura of a net-based cyborg, arising from this psychic split or detached visualization, resides in a dark space [2].

If cyborgs embody linguistic peripheries, transgress boundaries, erase and accentuate difference, it is also important to understand them as material projections from a biological basis, and specifically, from human information technologies and protocols. So they are both at the centre and at the margins of culture, especially in the topologic system of information flow and entropy we experience as the net. It is perhaps evident how the uncontrollable aspect of post traumatic stress visualization is interesting in this context. Like triggers, cyborgs are dangerous and fascinating in part because they embody otherness and they are not always under control. They are we/not we; we are them/not them. In the jargon of artificial intelligence, they are semi-autonomous agents. Their presence as cultural icons is a collective hypnagogia, that is, a waking dream. I don't mean to suggest that cyborgs are not real on a material level: but I am interested in how they function on the level of abstraction as figurations. With Donna Haraway, we observe qualities of mutation and habitation in the shared space of cyborg and human: "I do not think that most people who live on earth now have the choice not to live inside of, and not to be shaped by, the fiercely material and imaginative apparatuses for making 'us' cyborgs and making our homes into places mapped within the space of titanic globalizations in a direct line of descent from the cybernetic Gaia seen from NASA's fabulous eyes. The global and the universal are not pre-existing empirical qualities; they are deeply fraught, dangerous, and inescapable inventions. The cyborg is a figure for exploring those inventions, whom they serve, how they can be reconfigured. Cyborgs do not stay

still"[3].

If the reader will follow this narrative of traumatic visualization as a series of disruptions and hallucinations to formal conclusions, it may be seen how cinematic continuity in a net art work might be developed through the flashes of nightmare triggers, like mines in a nocturnal landscape. Poorly discerned by humans, barely heard, the cyborg, as a topology rather than a subject, does not develop a discrete identity or story. Her presence is a play on the distributed and globalized identity of data based artifacts on the net. Her aura exists at the edge of vision, at the edge of the net's ability to visualize and remember and hear itself think. As an aesthetic construct, she is a neural topology that shifts across boundaries and checkpoints, that keeps crashing and coming back, a city on fire in the darkness of ubiquitous *carceri*, labyrinth of prisons.

Moving imaginatively from on a virtual topography "below" the screen, to the daylight hours of the 'real' world, we notice the labyrinth of screens in material culture, in urban spaces, as surveillance, display and interactivity. The ubiquitous screen comes into its own as an environment and ecology, not just a virtual space, as humans generate and simultaneously accept the phenomenology of cyberpresence. Even "the VR apparatus may be reduced to a chip implanted in the retina and connected by wireless transmission to the Net [and] we will carry our prisons with us" as Lev Manovich speculates[4]. Lacking the surgical implants at the moment, we still inhabit a screen medium characterized by flow of code is in recursive flux, whether we can see past the graphic interface or not. In this analysis, we are inside the net as an aesthetic and technological medium, just by the psychological process of transference and projection. If we are inside the net, the space of the net becomes neurological, but only if we permit a metaphor of the brain as disembodied code. This choice, I think, leads to an evocative poetics of the net as a place of forgetting or amnesia, and as a topologic series of neural traumas. In this sense, the tropes of the screen generate an aesthetic of net topologies, whose subsistence is maintained through entropic crashes and erasures.

If life form or life like, the net, then, as a neural model, needs a flow of entropy in order to subsist. "For a form to be consistent, a thermodynamic imbalance is required. The eddies whose morphological persistence Leonardo marveled at and those

now rendered by mathematical models have something in common: the existence of a flow that maintains their form; if the flow is interrupted, the system breaks down and is ruined...Rather than destroying the system, the flow feeds it, contributing to its very existence and organization..." [5]. Put this idea together with "a new media format whose logic reflected the possibility of the space between generations of routes, displacements, remappings, as one connected new types of topography...into a state labyrinth" [6] and you get a labyrinthine topology that is slowly falling apart. Efforts by the state large oligarchies to censor the net, if taken as an entropic force, is continuously countered by subjects--users, coders, agents-- seeking ways to communicate around the blank spots, the amnesia sites. The resistance to entropy causes new flows of information, wave upon wave, yet there is continuous flow in the other direction, of loss of information, amnesia. This aesthetic of the net as place suggests a zone of low grade memory function, like a stroked-out brain. The labyrinth of control and surveillance creates a drama of amnesia, a sustained remit to forget where and who and what, what came next, even; and in its expression through the flood of filmic image, as drift, anomie, restlessness and pathos. The problem of remembering becomes even more acute, and through memory, the imperative to bear witness, to speak within the context of a belief in a truth, becomes more and more attenuated. Thus we arrive at a vision of the electronic universe as a wired ruin, or alternatively, a topology of neural trauma. Perhaps to imagine such a place is also to inscribe a cyborg, like a carytid on the columns of the Parthenon, inside the net architectonics, like a "magical" mimetic impulse[7].

If code's labyrinthine complexity risks-- and sustains-- continuous entropy, there might be an analagous loss of cyborg memory, in continuously degrading half life fragments. In this negative landscape, I imagine that questions of the origins of trauma and violence plays out without recourse to mimetic sacrifice or desire, in a hell of modernity, as imagined by Rene Girard[8]. All that is left is the algorithmic presets. This image of the net evokes a formal understanding of its topologies as engendered and sustained by traumatic collapse.

PARRHESIA and APHASIA

A recent set of terms to define intelligent agency -- "autonomous..can act without the intervention of others...reflection. able to

reason about its behavior...deliberation...ability to manipulate symbolic representations...reactivity, ability of an agent to respond to changes in its environment within an appropriately small amount of time" [9]—ironically inspired the contemplation of the cyborg as an aphasic neural site. Born of utopian hopes, these terms forget to include the construction of a posthuman 'self' or location who might be capable of a kind of rhetoric. It exposes the erasure of the body that typifies much of the discourse surrounding artificial intelligence and communication [10]. The semi-autonomous agent could be a system programmed to trigger strategies that extrapolate or interpolate based on generative algorithms and number theory, but at the same time, could this program be capable of creating a fiction of the self, as an identity or subject? Of the cyborg we can speculate that she knows herself as a distributive neuralscape. She can partially 'speak' her 'mind' . In this regard, the figure of the cyborg as a brain has a reflexive quality, which is why it is interesting to imagine the dark side of this reflexive nature as a fugue-like aphasia. Reflexivity as an aesthetic principle becomes a generative process: reflexivity, in the cogent definition of Katherine Hayles, "*is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates*"[11]. The fugue like recursions of speech in persons who suffer stroke or trauma signal the condition of aphasia, characterized by perseverance, that is, that the sufferer tries repetitively to communicate, but cannot but repeat and restate in loops that do not generate complete messages, despite the desire for coherent meaning.

Michel Foucault, in a series of lectures at Berkeley in 1983, offered an extended comment on the Greek notion of parrhesia, or "frankness in speaking the truth." Foucault's analysis observes the sequelae of an inequality of power between the one who speaks, the *parrhesiastes*, and the one to whom he is speaking frankly. To extend the thought of parrhesia into the allegory

of speech in the cyborg, I suspect that the cyborg speaks what she knows to be true because that is the only truth she knows, e.g. hers is a reflexive, and, thanks to entropy, aphasic rhetoric.

"Parrhesiazesthai means 'to tell the truth'... there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth. It

would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia. It appears that parrhesia, in this Greek sense can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework.”[12] An interesting point here is to speculate on an epistemology that would claim to include the rhetoric of the cyborg. Maybe she is incapable of speaking anything other than parrhesia: this, then, removes the Cartesian subjective doubt as a characteristic of cyborg speech (although it certainly remains the epistemological condition of her interlocutors, those of us in the space outside the electronic universe). The cyborg's speech, allegorically, expresses a resuscitation [13], a breathing back, in a reflexive looping wave. But, what does it mean?

ICONOCLASH AND AMYGDALA

‘Amygdala.

“‘what does it mean?’

‘Nothing. It’s a location. It’s the dark aspect of the brain.’

‘I don’t—’

‘A place to house fearful memories.’

‘Just fear?’

“We’re not too certain of that. Anger too, we think, but it specializes in fear. It is pure emotion. We can’t clarify it further.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well—is it an inherited thing? Are we speaking of ancestral fear? Fears from childhood? Fear of what might happen in old age? Or fear if we commit a crime? It could just be projecting fantasies of fear in the body.’

‘As in dreams.’[14]

Could iconoclastic violence come out of our biological experience of traumatic memory and visualization? An inverse ratio between violence and memory, whether personal or cultural, seems to characterize iconoclasm. Things are smashed in order to forget them, to

generate a tabula rasa. Futile, since the act of smashing itself is violent, the violence encodes itself in memory, in the amygdala. A crescendo of increasing crashes and clashes leads to an algorithmic escalation of violent impulse. Smashing images and sounds, seeking to lay waste to fixed meanings, seems to trigger an antidote to the pain and horror and surprise of a traumatic memory. It is as if to quell and subdue the sense of the chaos of mimetic violence between the subject (us) and the object (the image flood), we keep smashing away, and in the act storing more violent memory; like the addict, we can never get enough to make the indictment of failure go away. What is this failure but the experience of the loss of control of the image, the condition sine qua non of net art. A continuous feedback loop ensues: the resort to violence intensifies the distillation of traumatic memory as freeze frames, like film stills, poorly articulated, barely glimpsed, nightmarish, in the amygdala. Repetitive actions of ‘mindless’ violence dulls the intensity of the triggers to the amygdala, while at the same time, adds to the layers of storage of violent memories in the amygdala; thus there is an ever escalating impulse to smash, to destroy, to deface, as a method of dulling the sensation of terror. Could a terrorist impulse appease the intense nightmares of the amygdala by acting out, in broad daylight, the smashing of images? If the neural topology of the net is, in one sense, an elaborate poetics of memory, and if this memory is, like the amygdala, a cache of images and sounds at the point of erasure, then it is possible to contemplate the net as a self-reflexive site of iconoclasm and violence. Isn’t it because, as Marc Lafia wonders, “we can imagine ourselves at times, both inside and outside the event, the event of time, the event of duration, the event of utterance, the multiplicity of all these engines running their programs. What are they up to? We don’t any longer really like to talk about this and in turn that’s why no one talks about allegory any more, just metaphors, metonymy and other rhetorical tropes”[15]. Maybe a neural post human topology that is both aphasic and communicative, entropic and generative, is a strange projection that we don’t want to admit we love--our double, our sister, ourselves [16].

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