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Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

Life is bigger than environment: an interview with Ed Barrett

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No. 9 – 29.02.2000

Abstract

Ed Barrett is Senior Lecturer in the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies, General Editor of the MIT Press Series on Digital Communication, and Associate Editor of the new Media In Transition Series at MIT Press. His books of poetry include "Theory of Transportation" (Groundwater Press 1990),"Common Preludes" (Groundwater Press 1994)), "Practical Lulabies for Joe" (Quale Press, 1998) and "Sheepshead Bay" (Zoland Books, forthcoming). His books on digital communication and new media include "Text, Context, and Hypertext (MIT Press 1987), "The Society of Text: Hypertext, Hypermedia, and the Social Construction of Information" (MIT Press 1989), "Sociomedia" (MIT Press 1992), "Contextual Media: Multimedia and Interpretation" (co-editor, MIT Press 1995), and "The Poetics of Cyberspace" (MIT Press, forthcoming). Ed Barrett gives courses on Interactive Fiction and works on the aesthetics of hypertext. Roberto Simanowski talked with him about digital media and education.

dd: Ed, you published your first book on digital communication in 1989. Since then we have seen more than 10 years of rapid technological development. The Internet jumped into our life, or, rather, it drags us into its life. What are the most important changes that have taken place in this period with respect to digital media and education?

EB: The biggest change was the liberation of the Web from the academy and its purist theoretical pronouncements. Early hypertext appeared to fit with modish postmodernism. So did everything else. It was too tight a fit--clearly something one should have questioned. Luckily the mind of popular culture, the living imagination of people, was too fertile to be constricted by a priestly class. The other big change was in bandwidth--the technological determinism which always ought to be viewed with both derision and fear. The big story is the human one, not the machined one. It';s like V. Bush asking "what is the scientist to do now"--who cares? This is an Oedipal question and an Oedipal fate, at leats as Bush and engineers formulate it.

Pop culture stands outside that machinery although it has its own limitations as well.

dd: When Bill Clinton visited MIT in June 1998 he claimed: "Until every child has a computer in the classroom and a teacher well-trained to help, America will miss the full promise of the Information Age." In the conference proceedings that you edited ("Sociomedia") you wrote: "Information is necessary but not sufficient to education". What needs to be taken into account when bringing computer, internet, and education together?

EB: That question of Oedipus: where am I going? But asked earlier, as an intervention, by feeling and talented people, some of whom may be teachers who are willing to accept the social derision such a question entails. A computer box in a classroom is not a bad thing, but it is not enough of a good thing to be accepted without question. In earliest designs by my colleagues in the Writing Program for an electronic classroom that made full use of the wonderful communicative powers of computation we demanded chairs on rollers so that we could physically turn away from the magnetic presence of the monitor screen. One must have teachers--humans of great mind and heart and experience. Wihtout them there is merely the reconfiguration of data, the Lucretian bitstream without an anarchic movement to the side.

dd: You are giving the course "Communicating in Cyberspace" that is being tought for the eighth time in the fall of 1999. The class has become quite popular at MIT and is regularly oversubscribed. It is reported that student projects have consistently pushed the envelope of Web technology and have received wide acclaim both within and outside the MIT community. What do you do in this course? Do you think that this approach could be used in other educational settings?

EB: The major focus in this class is on the human element in digital communication--in the design and in the audience reception of digital forms of communication. As such it is an enlargement of traditional rhetoric and rhetorical spaces rather than a 'pushing' of the envelope of Web technology. Technology is a wonderful thing, like indoor plumbing. Rhetoric, art, culture (however defined) are bigger than technology, far more lasting--closer to what human memory and fear are all about. The Web currently suffers from terminal graphic design disease and back-end, programming hypertension. My students maybe learn what simplicity can accomplish, or at least how simplicity of purpose can dictate programmatic objectives. I'd rather see a student learn humility than hubris, even if the latter has certain IPO advantages--although the most lucrative Web sites are mere replications of your local grocery and newstand, or the doorstep gossip.

dd: You are a member of the "Comparative Media Studies" Program at MIT. This program aims to develop an understanding of the historical, cultural and artistic

significance of film and other modern media. To what extent do you consider digital media? And what artistic significance do digital media have, in your estimation?

EB: I'm not sure anything is supposed to have significance, at least if you are talking about art. We may view digital media in an historical context but not to find some moral or significant sense of an evolution or progression. Relationships, dependencies, borrowings, appropriations, contradictions...all of these to be sure: digital media are so close to parental sources (the book, for example) that people who should know better have really lost it by asserting either the death of the book (Coover, Birkerts) or some new way of "being" (you know who). Such elegies and encomia are propaganda. Who needs more propaganda. Individuals should figure it out for themselves: they should read a lot, look at movies and TV, listen to radio, study graffiti and hacks, they should adore Carravaggio and fanzines. The very air we breathe is heavy with poetry. Why exclude anything?

dd: There is a nice image on the website of the "Online Writing and Communication Center" (http://web.mit.edu/writing). A pen draws ink from an inkpot that looks like the main entrance of MIT. What do you think about the relationship between technology and literature in digital literature? Will the writer of the future not only use words, but also images, video clips, and sound?

EB: In my course on interactive and non-linear marrative--a horrible title which I inherited: I have changed it to "Workshop in Potential Narrative" in homage to the OuLiPo movement--my students first create hypertext fictions, then films and performances, then games. But right from the start they mix these categories to create powerful fictional, artistic worlds accessible only via a computer--they work with and within the constraints of digital media and prove again and again that human imagination is bigger than media although incranated by media. It is all the bitstream I suppose, but we do not yet have a machine architecture that is supple enough to respnd to the syntax of our imaginings.

dd: You are giving the course "Theory and Practice of Non-Linear and Interactive Narrative", that focuses on the aesthetics of the emerging art form of digital narration. Segmentation and multiple points of view are sometimes considered not as an advantage but disadvantage of hypertext since it gives up a well considered treath trough the story for the doubtful freedom of the readers. What is you experience?

EB: My experience is filtered through that of my students and they seem to want both freedom and restriction. I seem to be much more open to fragmentation and segmentation, to loopy narrative techniques--but only because I am older than they and have a tiny bit more experience--by which I think I mean more humility--in being thrown into complicated situations as a normal state: I mean, I really know I am ignorant of most things and therefore I am less willing to bar my door to intrusive guests and stray bits of information than someone who still expects to figure it out. I've also studied more kinds of "traditional" art than they have and if you do that you quickly discover that most stories are really open and closed at the same time--all systems leak. Oedipus at Thebes is not the same man at Colonus. Life is bigger than environment.

dd: These words are well worth pondering. Thank you very much for the interview.