WYSIWYG or WYGIWYS: Notes on the Loss of Inscription

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Abstract

"Content = No Cache" is a curious tag. Placed in the html code it updates the content of any on line page, erasing what was written before. It attributes a new role for writing. From now on it does not inscribe anymore. It is recycled and fades the idea of the original source. In fact there is not any difference between originals and copies just a continuous movement of reorganization of data and fluxes of information. They are identical resetting of the same informative code. But they are not identical for the experience and this is the fascinating of the clone logic. Its possibility of being identical being different.

But all those dynamic elements, no matter if they are images, texts or sounds, are now made to be seen on the move, from inside the car or any other vehicle, on the walls, in moblie phones and PDAs, in accordance to entropy and acceleration logic. And also according to a lack of logic of the market, which makes what it is seen a resultant of traffic path, connection speed, browser...

Digital culture does not assure visual unit, that kind of unity that allowed Mallarmé to revolutionize poetry, trusting the materiality of the page. In this sense, the loss of inscription points to shifts in perception, visuality and reading and poses an interesting question: How to deal with an art form conceived to be experienced in between, while doing other things?

1. Code

Digital literacy deals with a new writing condition. From now on, writing does not inscribe anymore. It just describes.

A very popular and curious tag, "content = no cache", is enough to introduce that discussion. Placed in the html code, it updates the contents of any on-line page, erasing what was written before.

This is extremely fascinating not only because we know that our culture links written data to memory, but also because an interesting paradox emerges in the context of on-line writing: in a space-built-up memory, what prevails is an architecture of forgetting.

Maybe not an architecture of destruction, signaling a bet on collective amnesia, but rather one that resembles the art of forgetting as outlined by Umberto Eco, that is, a different cultural system that questions the dialectic of contiguity/similarity in Western semiotics.[1]

In this sense, it means an effort to deal with a cultural scaffold where texts and images are permanently in transit, in a fluid environment (a network system of interconnected computers), and due to these factors are not oriented to representation through their support.

It is possible that the inconsequent metaphor between page and screen conceals this situation. But it also denotes a vocabulary gap that creates false parallel ideas such as web and site, and indicates a weakness in the field of digital culture criticism...

As a matter of fact, those false parallels and synonyms suppress the most interesting possibility of on-line writing: it celebrates the loss of inscription by removing all traces of the acts of erasure.[2]

2. Second-hand culture

By doing so, digital culture points to a new authorship condition: one that faces the novelty of the contemporary phenomena of second-generation originals.[3]

A phenomena that is more than a simple consequence of the ontological nature of digital data, given that informatics is a technology of cloning, of the duplication of code.

Digital texts and images are unlinked to the support. Save it in another medium. There is not any difference between the original and the copy. There are no originals, nor copies. Just information code.

The here-and-now of authenticity, the artwork's "aura", as put by Walter Benjamin, does not fit digital culture production.[4]

In spite of being identical resettings of the same informative code, they are not identical in experience, and this is the fascinating aspect of clone logic: the possibility of being identical on being different.

Images have left their imago>imitare condition. They have suppressed their etymological essence. They have become second-hand originals.

Texts, in turn, are now closer to their primitive Latin meaning: “texere”, or to weave, since they are more and more an edited or amended copy of another work, triggering a relational quality that fuzzes the limits between image and text.

3. wysiywg?

On-line data (whether texts, images or sounds) are visible if they are described by texts which indicate their location in a domain, rendering them recognizable by a Uniform Resource Locator, which is a type of Uniform Resource Identifier (URI).[5]

Texts are places, and all those places _actually non-places which we call sites[6] are constructed to be transmitted and conceived within a specific downloading time.

This means that space is a matter of text and seeing is a matter of writing. And both are a matter of weight.

It is really strange that any file on the web seems to be only surface. The very screen/page metaphor reinforces this statement, dissimulating that which implodes the notion of volume and horizontality of the line, reading formats adequate to the Codex historical context[7], probably, but not to the liquid texts of digital culture.

A cultural imaginary of nomadic devices and Intelligent agents, where images and texts are now made to be seen on the move, in mobile phones, PDAs and electronic panels in accordance with entropy and the logic of acceleration.

But also according to a lack of market logic: what is seen constitutes a result of monitor pattern and quality, of connection speed, browser versions and models. In sum: a set of variables that also play an interesting role in this unstable game.

Nothing ensures that these images and texts are visual units, possessing the kind of unity that allowed Mallarmé to revolutionize poetry, trusting in the materiality of the page.[8]

Art has lost its contemplative function and this makes all the difference. The ubiquitous quality of cyberspace does not point to a metaphor of dispersion but rather to a multileveled subject, disconnected from the limits that attach representations to supports and that reduce language to mediation.[9]

Digital writing in this context expands and redirects not the reading support through the substitution of paper (or film or magnetic tape) by the screen, but rather the

reading interface itself, since one does not think of a world of reading without thinking of a particular reading of the world.

In this context, one of the most famous acronyms of the Internet publishing software industry,WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get), reveals its subversive potential when transformed into a question. It points to new paradigms in the relationship between text, image, memory and representation.

A resetting which will certainly redefine reading and creating in the fluid architecture of a liquid textuality detached from inscription, stressing juxtaposition instead of complementation, and assemblage instead of substitution.

In short, cross-over and not the compensatory logic of supplement, polisemy instead of monotony, or recycling processes rather than material preservation and copyright hysteria.

How to deal with an art form conceived to be experienced in-between, while doing other things?

This is the radical question that new devices such as mobile phones and PDAs are announcing, expanding the new digital culture paradigms.

Probably, they will demand a new acronym: wygiwys, which embraces the deepest question that emerges within History after the loss of inscription: what you get is what you see?

PS: In the last three years I´ve been developing my artistic work dealing with those issues, and in many respects those notes are in fact nodes of those reflections.

The Book after the Book discusses reading interfaces through an interface that appeals to the structure of Borges' The Book of Sand

<Content=No Cache> talks about the lack of criticism regarding the loss of inscription inherent to on-line writing, playing with error messages and its descriptive (sic) function

Recycled is defined by its title: a reunion of my favourite pages recycled in a new context, organized according to some programming rules that deny stability.

Wop Art is a Wap site (http://tagtag.com/wopart) with a web interface that has the nomadic condition as a point of departure for an aesthetic configuration based on emulation instead of simulation prerogatives.