

## The Living Desert The Culturization of the New Medium

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### 1 Desert

“The Living Desert” is – as it says the information leaflet accompanying a broadcast by the TV channel RTL2 in May, 2005 – “maybe the best known and most perfect film on animals and nature ever to come from the Disney Studios. James Algar’s pioneering 1953 work was the first of altogether 13 ‘true life adventures’ subsequently released by the Disney Studios.”

The film was said to show: “Through almost the entire year ... there is such a drought that seemingly every kind of life is impossible. But that what for the human eye may seem to be ‘dead’ nature, wakes up to life in front of the eye of the camera.”

Thus, this film’s fascination was due to a surprising “paradox”: seemingly a dead space, in fact – that is in front of the eye of the camera – the desert proves to be a space of a variety of colourful life.

Probably the most popular visual depiction of that what our common awareness understands by the word “desert” is the never ending sandy vastness of the Sahara: nothing than sand, as far as we can see; no life, no forms except those which the wind makes of this homogeneous material of smallest sections and which it makes disappear again.

It is precisely this popular image of the desert which I take up and use as a metaphor: it is supposed to symbolize the space of informatic construction of information. At the same time this is the space which I call “new medium”.

Thus, this space - from an immanent point of view – is characterized by the following features:

- it is not provided with any visible borders behind which there is something else.
- it is completely empty, except for these smallest parts without difference which however – each of it in the same way without difference – make the fundamental difference between nothingness and existence.

The space of informatic construction of information is such a desert insofar as it does not know any borders behind which there would be something else (such borders could be defined only from a point of view not being immanent to the information space); it is “empty” insofar as nothing exists within it which has anything to do with real life; on the other hand it consists of nothing else than identical, smallest parts about which we can only say that they “make a difference” and that insofar there is something and not nothingness (according to Bateson’s definition of the Bit [Bateson 1981: 408]).

Thus, the metaphoric point of reference is not the “true” desert, confronted by Disney’s film with our untrue, common image on which it is based at the first look, but precisely this untrue desert, symbolized by the infinite sandy vastness of the Sahara. Disney’s film wants to show that this kind of desert does not exist at all, that actually also the apparent desert is a habitat with a variety of species; that there where there seems to be emptiness (of life) there is actually a variety. When Disney’s film speaks of “The Living Desert”, this is an objection against the first impression of “dead nature”. However, when I speak of “The Living Desert”, this is not an objection against a supposedly wrong first impression but it is supposed to mean: the fact that here there exists no life is the condition for life; the fact that here there is emptiness is the

condition for variety. The new medium is truly (and not only apparently) a desert. And life in it is based precisely on this condition.

## 2 Culturization I

The culturization of a desert means making an originally uninhabitable space habitable. Something is taken into it which originally was not there; in the case of the desert we think of water as an element of life. But of course also of seeds, of tools for agricultural work, not at last of humans settling in it. Then, the desert is something like an original, found reservoir of material, shapeless material for human, forming activity.

Now, while following Kant, the culturization of a desert – even if this is definitely a simplifying statement – may be perceived as a symbol of the original encounter of human imagination with a shapeless world. This statement is a simplification insofar as Kant does not speak of an a priori given, shapeless and homogeneous material but of a “manifold of pure intuition”:

“Synthesis as such is the sheer effect of imagination, of a blind yet indispensable function of the soul, without which everywhere we would not have any insight at all, we are only seldomly aware of, however. The first we must be provided with for the purpose of a priori recognizing all objects is the manifold of pure intuition; the synthesis of this manifold by intuition is the second but does not provide us with insight; those terms as providing this pure synthesis with unity and which, after all, exist only by imagining this necessary synthetic unity are the third to help with recognizing an existing object, and they are based on reason.” [Kant 1781: A 78f]

Instead, I would like to make an objection following Žižek, and by way of Žižek following Hegel, whose convincingness is of decisive relevance for possibly speaking of education within the new medium. Slavoj Žižek turns against Kant’s one-sided definition of imagination as a synthesizing ability:

As obsessively as he dedicated himself to the striving for synthesizing in order of summarizing a scattered manifold given for every intuition, as silently Kant ignores the contrary power of imagination which is later emphasized by Hegel, that is imagination as the activity of dissolution which deals – as a separate entity – with that which actually exists only as a part of an organic entirety.” [Žižek 2001: 44]

The passage Žižek then refers to is found in Hegel’s manuscripts on his Jena lectures on the philosophy of nature and spirit from 1805 and 1806. In the quoted passage of his lecture Hegel explains how the spirit emancipates from the object, with which it is initially filled and by which it is dominated, and thus from being determined by the object:

“... he liberates himself from this immediately ...; this pure subject which is free of its content; but which is also its master ...; he starts out from this existence and incorporates that same into him as something non-existent, as something sublated at all, thus he is imagining imagination at all”. [Hegel 1805-06: 171]

If I translate this objection into my image of the culturization of the desert, it says something like the following:

The desert which is to be culturized is not something we find originally and then change into culture by help of shaping activity so that culturization starts with synthesis but: we already find an organized world which tries to tie us to its conditions, as servants and obeying people; and this organized world must be devastated for a start so that there is space for designing and realizing a new world which comes from ourselves. Thus, the existence of the desert is by itself a cultural achievement; it is an image of freedom which man takes for himself, gives to himself because it is not given to him.

As I speak of the desert, in order of this way describing the nature of the space of informatic construction of information, but as the latter is doubtlessly the result of human dissolving activity,

my statement that the desert is not an original challenge for cultivation but the latter's first result may be supposed to be comprehensible as an implication of my metaphor.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between the indifference of informatic "material" and the "manifold" in Kant which must not be withheld: it shows qualities which will have to be distinguished. Also in Hegel the result of the mind's negativity is something fragmentary, but it is not formless. This is due to the fact that in Hegel the manifold is not precondition for but the first effect of imagination. Imagination works first of all as an activity of distinguishing (=criticism), Hegel states. It is, he says, "the power and the work of reason, of most astonishing and greatest or rather of absolute power. The circle which ends in itself and has its moments as its substance is the immediate and thus not astonishing relation. But the fact that the akzidental as such, being separated from its extension, that what is bound and what is real only in context with others, gains its own existence and separate freedom, that is the enormous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of pure I." [Hegel 1807: 35f]

This "enormous power of the negative" is the self-releasing power of imagination which together with the principle of freedom necessarily establishes also the principle of criticism (of distinguishing, of dissolution, of separating, of abstracting) and with it education as the founding process of the modern, both individual and collective subject. Criticism becomes a human right. Education in the modern sense as empowering the subject to autonomously use its (critical) powers of reason cannot be imagined without this release of the subject, just as modern economy where the principle of criticism becomes manifest as the law of competition.

And finally: the principle of criticism becomes (information) technology. This common origin of the political-social, educational, economic, and technological principle of criticism from self-releasing imagination is still terminologically discernible if one of the meanings of the word *information* is i-magination. By way of modern politics, education, economy, and technology there is a turnaround of the meaning of imagination: instead of "I imagine (something) (or even: something is imagined into me) now it says: I imagine myself (into the world) by programmatically inscribing myself into it.

In the field of information technology the dissolving activity of imagination is taken to its last extremes. In respect of information technology, in the space of the new medium we are confronted with the world by its highest possible dissolution. Here there is no manifold anymore; and just the same there are no remnants of remembering a destroyed and ghostly de-realized world of which Hegel spoke in respect of imagination.

The space of the new medium is absolutely empty.

### 3 Space and Emptiness

Often space is defined by that what is within it or what is happening within it; by its fittings which make it suitable for something. E. g. libraries are considered spaces of education because in them books are stored, thus they open up access to the sources of knowledge. Classrooms are considered spaces of education insofar as in them there are chairs and tables to work at and on them, blackboards, media aso. to communicate something to learners. Not at last insofar as teachers are found in them. However, what I would like to draw attention to is emptiness.

Let us have a look at the machine room of a fully automatic factory. In the mathematical-physical sense such a room is a space; it shows length, height, and width. But one of its typical features is not to be empty. Everything is filled with machinery and function. Seemingly empty space is just waiting for programmed movements, whereas other objects and apparatuses cross it or occupy it for a longer time. If indeed there is unused space, this is a flaw or a waste; the physical space has not been completely utilized.

For a cleared building site, instead, obviously precisely its emptiness is typical: here something is to be created. The emptiness of the place – often still marked by the traces of previous devastation by the wrecking ball – is a challenge for the architect's creativity.

Finally a space being prepared for working and learning in it. Just like the machine room it is filled with a variety of equipment, tools and material. But just like the building site it is still waiting to be filled and determined by the people who use it. This space does not only *exist*, it is even more important that it *provides* space.

Being provided with space is different from having a place one belongs to. Just like in the machine room every machine is at the place where it best fulfills its defined function, I could also equip a machine room with humans. Emptiness, however, is essential for a space insofar as it is not only that objects and humans are not yet where they belong but as it must still be defined what and who belongs to which place, which movement he/she/it will make, thus insofar as it remains open in what way it is to be filled.

#### 4 Culturization II

The emptiness of the space of the new medium is a cultural achievement, insofar as at the same time it is an achievement which makes culture possible. Indeed, emptiness is not the meaning of that abstraction of meaning which leads to it: the building site is not supposed to stay empty; in the informatic room of construction something shall be constructed. By asking the question about the "what for" of the opened up freedom also the question about the self-determining sense of the possible new creations is raised. However, in a space of abstraction of every meaning it is not possible to find an answer to this question.

But it must be answered. For the emptiness of this space is an emptiness within man himself who is related to it. It is not an objective characteristic of this space, which might be constructed without reference to man. It is *his* space which is empty. Appropriate to it is an *inner* emptiness, but one which did not simply happen, into which man has somehow been placed by his fate, but one which he has been looking for, which he has made: as that space into which he may stretch, extend, into which and through which he may walk on still undetermined paths, which he may fill or let stay empty, which he may close or keep open.

The empty space suggests itself as an undetermined possibility which must still be self-determined. It is the space of education, insofar as self-determination is its credo. It is space by education, insofar as also education must still create its space – in a critical way.

The space of the new medium would be a senseless abstractum if I did not consider it the space of man and his education. Education happens within the new medium because the latter has its centre not somewhere out there but within man himself. The fact that the space of the new medium exists refers doubly to education – as its precondition and as its fulfilment.

When insisting so much in the emptiness of the space, then I stay – to express it by Hegel's words – with the negative, with the dead, with the desert. Here there is the point where dissolving power turns to be constructive imagination, an intermediary realm where the existing world has dissolved but a new one has not yet been designed, let alone shaped. At this point, in this intermediary realm, however, we cannot stay permanently, for at this point and in this space we – being defined beings with a biography, hopes, wishes – are ourselves extincted. Here there is night, as Hegel said:

"This night is what we see if we look into man's eyes – into a night which will be terrible – here the night of the world confronts us." [Hegel 1805-06: 172]

Only because this night is within ourselves but we do not completely belong to it, because we – to stay with the metaphor – are beings for which night is again and again separated from day, there can be a way out of it, that is the transition from abstraction to concreteness, from dissolution to synthesis.

The emptiness of the new medium refers to something outside it, to a certain absence. On the one hand it is absolute, insofar as within it there is not the slightest reference to an outside world, to anything existing. On the other hand, however, it is conditional, as it was created by people who remain belonging to the world to which there is no immanent reference anymore, as it refers to an act of emptying.

The now possible free act of computation (or synthesis in Kant) is not the origin of the new, it happens against a hidden back-ground: the mostly forgotten or suppressed or denied founding act of the emptiness of the space, the act of ruthless liberation and emancipation from a given world. But even this act is not its own reason-giving as it is more than it is capable of doing. “It gives” its possibility, this “it” not referring to any identifiable subject of giving. In other words and following those of Michael Wimmer (to which my attention was drawn by Torsten Meyer): its possibility is a “gift”. [Wimmer 1996; Meyer 2002: 215]

These thoughts now refer to the meaning of the word “culturization”. Culture comes from Lat. colere = cultivating, inhabiting, caring for, also honouring. That what exists is not left as it is by culturization, but also it is not simply negated and replaced by something completely new. Rather the new follows, it develops from the old. The latter’s negation is connected to an at least partly restitution. Elsewhere I used the term “recompensation” for this, in order of making clear that the new good is not simply freely positing the subject but taking up again in the old what has already existed in the potential of the good.

Doing this, it does not only connect at the manifest of the existing and continues with it but it connects at the blanks, at the breaks, the gaps which cry for healing or rather for whose healing man cries. In this respect, the critical dismantling of the existing is not only the arbitrary destruction of something apparently intact but means to uncover its cracks and wounds which have only been ideologically veiled by world views of absolute order. Thus by the founding act of the emptiness of the space, by this revocation of obedience, there works something original, there articulates a previously experienced and suffered conflict which is discussed in a confrontative way – for the sake of overcoming it.

It may be supposed, however, that pain and suffering from the world always also express the unrealized longing for a better life, a better world. If this is true, one could call the culturization of the desert a longing attempt to recompensate. In this sense it would not be a purposeful activity, also not simply a driven one. In contrast to purposeful activity, longing refers to a passive moment: it infects, it overcomes man. At the same time longing, in contrast to being driven, shows aspects of being drawn towards something which is at best sensed. Being an addition, it also does not let go of man, it makes him constantly anxious to not leave things as they are, to make room for something new which will be appropriate to himself because it is his. If here we like to speak of responsibility, this is because on the one hand the new cannot be referred to any other authority than man himself, on the other hand because this way man answers a question which is not asked by himself in the first place, as he finds himself to be within it or he finds it within himself.

## 5 Space and Limit

The fact that, however, now also the limit counts among the definition of the space I would like to illustrate by an older media space, that is the library.

At first sight, a library with its stocks of books appears as a space “full of knowledge”, insofar as a space made for education if the latter, as common in most cases, is understood as individually appropriating the social stock of knowledge as accumulated, stored, and made accessible in libraries. But this is precisely the way in which education must not be understood – at least not without strong reservation.

To give reasons for this impression I come back again to Hegel’s Jena lecture on the philosophy of mind, in the context of which he spoke of the night of the world. Namely, shortly before the passage I have just quoted also Hegel mentioned a “stock”: as he says, the space of mind does not at all serve that object which occupies it in the first place but rather it grasps it as *its* object which, by being inside it, belongs to it, over which it is the master. Thus, he says, the imagined object is the potential image of the thinking mind itself: created by itself and thus at the same time giving evidence to itself in its power.

“This image belongs to it, it possesses it, it is its master; it is kept with his stock of treasures, in his night. ... Man is this night, this empty nothingness keeping everything within its simplicity – a wealth of an infinite number of imaginations, images, none of which he is aware of at the moment – or which do not exist as present ones. This is the night, nature’s innermost – *pure self*”. (Hegel 1805-06: 172) (Italics by the original).

One may not misunderstand Hegel here: as if there was a place of keeping remembered images, a kind of treasure chest out of which the mind, so to speak, draws images when imagination starts to work. This cannot be meant if elsewhere it says that this night is “an empty nothingness”, a nothingness which, however, despite (or due to?) its emptiness is “a wealth of an infinite number of images”, of “images none of which he is aware of at the moment” “or which do not exist as present ones”. The wealth of mind (its “treasure”) is thus not its actual richness but its power of being able to create infinite richness.

What has this got to do with the library and its books?

Also here it is true: it is not access to knowledge included in books but the development of the ability to create knowledge by oneself what makes the real wealth of the mind. But for this the individual needs space, space which is not blocked by knowledge, space which at first must be cleared of present knowledge, so that the powers of one’s own mind may unfold.

Education, I thus like to pointedly formulate it, is primarily not appropriating knowledge but the destruction of knowledge, the negation of everything “accommodated” by the library (as far as it claims to be “knowledge”) or, to say it more cautiously: doubting every knowledge which is not one’s own creation, a basically critical attitude towards every stock of knowledge.

(Of course, this is not meant to deny the subversity of books which by themselves destruct knowledge and encourage a critical attitude towards knowledge.) In the first place, education does not happen by but *against* library-accommodated knowledge.

It is important to note this, so that the now following limitation and relativization is provided with a correct accentuation.

In a lecture for architects I expressed this relativization by this thesis: *Walls of knowledge protect spaces of ignorant designing*. ( Only limited spaces can be shaped.) And then I explained this thesis in respect of architectural work as follows [Sesink 2006, 51-53]: Spaces need limits. An unlimited, infinite space could not be shaped, indeed it could not be experienced as a space.

Every building site is ‘surrounded’ by built-up space which is not available. Its being untouched is the condition for perceiving the freedom to make a new design. If he/she is at home there, the architect is able to stand the emptiness of the building site he must create and to productively change it without having the bottom drop out of his world. At the same time this is the world the new will have to follow.

Thus, also for education it is true that in this field buildings of knowledge can be torn down only if the one who shall be educated knows that he/she is safely rooted in his/her world. If every

knowledge and thus every known thing which exists was questioned, he/she would be lost in a bottomless emptiness without any point of reference from which the new could be created. Thus, also here the freedom to design newly needs the security of undoubted knowledge from which the venture of not knowing and utopian designing of something existing in future may be risked, which then can be known again.

Education is directed towards the possibility of the coming. For its sake it must leave every knowledge behind. But nevertheless: also education *exists*. And thus there can be knowledge of it. However, knowledge of a special kind.

In a twofold way this kind of knowledge is referred to process, to movement. First, it is itself a moment of the process, that is it comes from not-knowing, that is the destruction (criticism) of knowledge, knowing to be process itself and constantly exposing itself to criticism, doubting itself, knowledge which keeps itself moving. Second, it is knowing about process, knowledge of movement, that is knowledge of the limited nature of the possible horizon of knowledge which can only refer to what exists, but which must hand over that what is to the practical designing of world which does not represent that what is but designs and realizes it.

This double reference to movement is also found with architecture. First, architecture creates its own leeway by clearing the building site. ... Second, for that what it then creates, what it builds, not only that what is erected to exist is essential: that is, those physical elements the building consists of, but just as well the empty space between them, the space it creates, so that humans will be able to move there. Architecture needs space, and it creates space; it needs space to be able to create space.

For education, the double reference to movement can be grasped by the concept of 'educational space' or – taken over from the British psychoanalyst, Winnicott – of 'potential space' [Winnicott 1974]. Education liberates itself from existing knowledge and thus creates space for spiritual movement which will create new knowledge. This happens while knowing that knowledge itself can represent only that what exists but is not able to fill the emptiness resulting from the undermining activity of education, that here rather the space for drafts is created which can only be realized by practical work, that is they may become that what exists, of which then there may be knowledge again."

## 6 Conclusion

Education cannot be understood to be an answer to a – regrettable – emptiness which is said to be due to new media intruding our previously rich culture, or even as a counter-draft. Rather, in the new medium it moves within its very own environment: by itself it is something devastating, creating emptiness. In the emptiness of the informatic space of construction it meets its own original driving force. Giving an answer to the latter does not mean to fight it off, to suppress it, to deny it but to take over responsibility for it.

This is the reason why the field of the new medium is not something for which education could offer normative orientation for behaviour from a supposedly media-neutral point of view. It must move into this field because there it is offered the chance of constructively organizing the world, something in which a kind of education committed to the task of educating has always been particularly interested, and thus it must expose itself to that danger which is not really due to the new medium but which is in principle connected to education: the danger of existential emptiness to which it is exposed by this medium is that danger which is inherent in freedom. It is only that by the new medium the latter becomes much more obvious than with traditional media, as here every referential relationship to life world must explicitly be *decided on* and not only happens.

In principal, the new medium does not place any restrictions on imagination. Even more, humans are confronted with their responsibility there, their responsibility of how to use this constructive freedom, and they are confronted with that tension between freedom and commitment which in the course of reflecting on imagination became obvious as the latter's conflicting nature in respect of analytical-destructive and synthetic-constructive activity. Responsibility means that it is not that synthetic-constructive activity starts without any precondition at an a priori given, formless "material" but that it is already committed to something: to make good the previous destruction, that is to legitimate by way of new constructions the thus connected analytical dissolution of that what exists.

Less than elsewhere, in the field of the new medium it is possible for the author to refer to definitely valid normative rules. Less than elsewhere, however, here it is possible to deny one's own freedom and to refer to the forces of a material and social environment. If "anything goes", an answer to the question of what shall be done for which reasons must be given, that is disclosure of the rules, the norms, the concepts of order to which one is committed, and giving the reasons why they are valid. It would be a misunderstanding to understand the critical function of education as an uninvolved observer commenting on what is happening in the world. By its dimension of deepness it will only be effectful there where education is understood to be designing (here: within the new medium), as only there the subject finds itself exposed to solving the fundamental tension between freedom and education without being able to flee to the irresponsibility of convenient criticism from the off, of regrettingly referring to the practical restraints of life, or of autistically insisting in fancy-free, arbitrary freedom within the construction space of the new medium.