



Walking Billboard © Pedro Meyer

The African Mirror

by Juan Villoro

A few months ago, I saw a Chinese film that started off with a journey by boat. To keep themselves entertained, some of the passengers were text messaging with their cell-phones, and others read to each other the palms of their hands. Two systems of communication coincided in this journey, telephony via satellite and chiromancy. The artifices of technology mixed with far-off behaviors.

To what extent does the atavistic coexist with the new? Certain misunderstandings shed light on reality, and one of them allowed me to approach the Internet in a surprising manner. I was introduced to a black writer that spoke French and had wandered through several countries in search of refuge. Since my French is deficient, the conversation took place without fully understanding each other. I think he told me he was a "chat author". I thought that it was very interesting that the new technologies determined the way he wrote. He spoke about oralism and the tribal sense of narrative, of the polyphony of voices blending in the web page. Indeed, I thought that the web users represent a community that demands multiple testimonies. The web is a virtual campfire where the pilgrims tell their stories.

The writer spoke of polyphony and the traditions of his country, which privilege the collective narrative. Since the Internet is a place with no location that gathers disperse people, I asked him if he registered non-African French-speaking testimonies. He looked at me as if I were a Martian and explained everything all over: He wasn't a "chat author", but an author from Chad! The Oralism he was referring to was not the result of a new technology, but of an ancient tradition.

Despite my gross misinterpretation, I wasn't that mistaken about the profound meaning of the web. The virtual community allows a return to ancestral forms of collective communication.

For those of us that grew up in the era of electric house appliances, we take the features of the new for granted, with no further desire of understanding them. It is possible that the babies of the digital era grow up with no knowledge of how an iPod works. But this small artifact won't strike them as strange. In contrast, someone that thinks of him or her self as modern for using a six-velocity blender sees things that go beyond electricity controlled with knobs with astonishment.

The Century of Enlightenment prospered without lightbulbs. What would be Diderot 's feelings towards the possibility of turning reality "on" with the flip of a switch? Could he tolerate the existence of all these devices not contemplated in his encyclopedia?

Those of us that belong to the first generation that used personal computers feel sometimes as time travelers. Our environment coincides with science-fiction contraptions, or at least with devices that defy understanding. People trained in slow-motion traditions (there was a time when you had to wait a whole year to get a phone line) now have the bewildering possibility of making instantaneous contacts.



Scape to... © Pedro Meyer

A way of appropriating unfamiliar inventions is to attribute them a life of their own. I thought of this during a writer convention, in which there was a novelist that was never away from his laptop. I supposed that he was afraid of losing some valuable information, but it was something else. When his turn to speak came, he read directly from the screen. He apologized for this, because it could come across as cold for some, but for him it was the opposite. "I got separated from my wife a year ago" -he said, in stammering voice- "now the computer is my partner". This confession was received with the kind of respect

caused by those intimate details that we don't want to hear. I was moved by the loneliness of my colleague, and the way in which this IT prosthesis had become his companion. What could we do for him? I would have loved to be able to introduce him to a friend. Since I couldn't, I was tempted to offer my computer to him, so at least he could have an affair with it.

When this happened, I felt I was a witness of an alien story. This colleague was over humanizing his computer. I continued to travel with my G4, until a week ago, when I had an accident. I dropped it to the floor, and when I tried to turn it back on, I just saw a design of transparent ultramodern buildings. I thought it was some kind of commercial. This idea (or should we say nonsense) reveals an irrational relationship with technology. Those were not buildings at all. They were simple color bars that appeared caused by the impact. In addition, there was no way they could have appeared without being online. I was in denial of what was evident: My computer was kaput. A black diagonal line went across the monitor: plasma screen blood. I know this is probably an incorrect expression, but it is the only one I can think of to describe what happened.

I had used the keyboard for so long, that the letters were gone. If someone asked where the "e" was, I could not tell (this one was the first to go), nonetheless, my fingers found it on their own when I wrote.

I understood my colleague's loneliness, which a few years ago seemed to be excessive and fetishist. I looked at the screen as a broken mirror: Would this mean seven years of bad luck?

For ten years, my most used object had become increasingly indefinite. I didn't know where the letters were anymore, but I could find them in an intuitive way, just like a fortuneteller reads a hand palm.

The only thing I really understand about a computer is its absence. Now that it is gone, I dedicate these words to it, written on a borrowed computer, in which I make one mistake after the other.

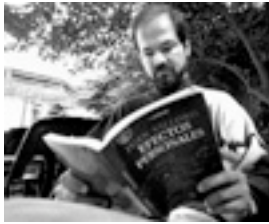
Radical novelties take us back to the origin. Every new computer is an African mirror.

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May, 2008

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Juan Villoro was born in Mexico City on September 24, 1956. He has a sociology degree by Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. he was the host of the Radio Educación program "El Lado Oscuro de la Luna". He was the Cultural Attache of the Mexican Embassy in the People's Republic of Germany. He was the director of the supplement "La Jornada Semanal", He imparted several workshops and courses in creativity in Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

He has collaborated in several magazines and news papers supplements. He was a grant holder of INBA in he Narrative Area and of the Mexican System of Artistic Creators and was awarded the Cuauhtémoc Prize for translation and the Xavier Villaurrutia Award in 1999.