Six Memos for This Millennium

In the beginning of the 1980s, right before his death, the Cuban born Italian experimental novelist, Italo Calvino, was summing up a list of six memos, six characteristics to be considered by the emerging cultural producers at the verge of the new millennium. The memos were in fact meant for a lecture at Harvard that was never delivered. Nonetheless, before his death, Calvino was able to expand on five of the six memos with as much as examples drawing from people belonging to his circle like George Perec, collaborating with him on the Oulipo project, using constraints to generate new literature, but also from culture at large. The memos are: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. This as far as or the next generation of culture producers. Yet, what about the next generation of knowledge producers?

Forty years earlier, the American scientist Vannevar Bush, at the pick of his career and right when the Second World War was coming to an end, also, in a less systematic way, got out with memos for the next generation of scientists. Up to that point, all scientific efforts had been focusing on the invention of technology for mass destruction. Bush was actually at the very head of this, acting as main coordinator of the scientific community heading to research and develop warfare technology, particularly aiming to equal as in the case of the V1 and V2 missiles, and later subdue, as in the case of the atomic bomb, the German and Japanese enemy.

At this point of time, 1945, Bush asks himself the question on how should the scientific effort be apply next. He is concerned with a good application of science after decades of "bad" employment. And yet he sees right away an issue, the issue of knowledge overflow and incapability of keeping up with the constant scientific production. In this respect he is far from being Nietzschian, or probably he is, proposing a "super human", an augmented scholar, or better, not to rush, a scientist who should keep in mind the following characteristics, at least in relation to the media he can utilized to conduct his research: philanthropic, compact, augmenting, on-the-move, exploratory and sharable.

The invitation to think philanthropically is rather clear, future technology should be of good use for humans, it should enhance its knowledge and be able to structure is thinking so as to be able to make use of the overall and constantly increasing knowledge. In this respect Bush comes up with the idea of the Memex, an augmented memory device. The device should be compact but more importantly it should allow the augmented human to organically creates trails of knowledge, to easily compare and

juxtapose and bring together in a non-indexing fashion, various elements of knowledge to come up with a conclusion on certain topic or to accompany a certain discussion like the resistance to innovation by the English people who did not at first acknowledge the superiority of the Turkish arrow. In Bush ways of describing, knowledge creation becomes like an exploratory act of retrieving and navigating, further enhanced by Steve Mann and other wearable computers pioneers in 1980s in which knowledge is further augmented through a personal system to annotate reality.

It is out of this group of wearable computers pioneers, once media corporations took over, that we find certain of them being quite disgusted with such an overtake, such commercial dictatorship, and others completely devoting themselves to it like Thad Starner, a former wearable computer guy, the technician behind the to be popular Google glass. With Google glass one could definitely see that Bush's memex vision have come true, possibly only in form of a gadget since, by looking at what the glasses can do, they only add additional overflow on reality instead of helping individuals to sort it out, to augment their conscious and subconscious. They are, in other words, another device for fiction and not faction, disconnectors from reality, a reality needing humans' engagement.

In other words, or to better phrase it in a McLuhian perspective, the latter development of technology is not augmenting but numbing the user. Within the commercial mantras in which the users are placed, it is certainly not a mean to augment one's understanding of the reality which is enhanced, but rather to place the user in an realm of oblivion of the human senses, or worst, in the opposite extreme, in a state of total hedonistic liberation. Not only sex applies, put also the political soap opera promoted by the new mass media and shooting video-games. The peaceful vision of technological development proposed by Bush, seems then only a dream brought forth by pioneers like Mann, dreamers in their own like.