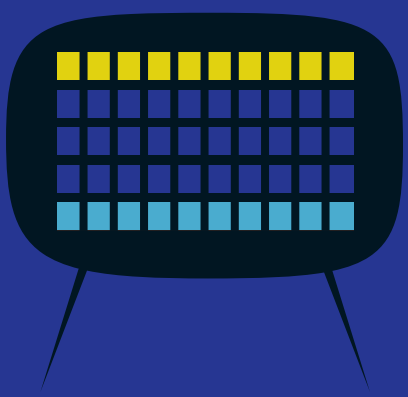
Teletext in Europe

From the Analog to the Digital Era



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NORDICOM

2 Is It Just Text?

Raquel Meyers

Abstract

This chapter looks at teletext from the perspective of an artist and of its artistic value. It is argued that teletext is not just news on demand provided by television networks or a character set, and that it is about much more than nostalgia, profit, constraints, domesticity or zombie technology stored in a garage, because teletext performs in ways we have not fully designed it for and not yet fully understood. Teletext is compared to brutalist architecture with which it shares many similarities: text is used unadorned and roughcast, like concrete. Brutalism has an unfortunate reputation of evoking a raw dystopia and teletext evokes an "object of nostalgia," It is a challenge and has the universal language of silence. The text further argues that using old technologies, like teletext, is a commitment that is at the same time a risk because it does not seek to forge a self-identity. It is a dialogue of possibilities rather than an ego-trip monologue with technology. And these possibilities are irrelevant to the individual's self-identity and pursuits. Finally, the chapter also explores how teletext is not a physical object; it is the dark band dividing pictures horizontally on the television screen, used by the PAL system. Vertical-blanking-interval lines like REM (rapid eye movement) sleep intervals. A door to unlock the Imagination.

Keywords: teletext, art, grid, text characters, brutalism, imagination, media art

Introduction

Teletext is a news and information service in the form of text and graphics, transmitted using the spare capacity of existing television channels to televisions with appropriate receivers. What the viewer sees on the screen of his teletext TV is a page of characters, 40 in a row, 20-24 rows, 800-960 characters per page. These characters can be presented in a limited number of colours, including coloured backgrounds, and the character set contains all the letters of the alphabet (both uppercase and lowercase), numbers, punctuation marks, special symbols, and graphics. Teletext is a silent medium, as there are no narrators, but users must read the information from the television screen, transforming the characters with their imagination.

On the 23 September 2014, teletext turned 40. As an artist, I feel this calls for celebration. For me, teletext is not just news on demand provided by television

networks or a character set. Teletext is not only about nostalgia, profit, constraints, domesticity or *zombie* technology stored in a garage, because teletext performs in ways we have not fully designed it for and we have not yet fully understood. Today, television networks are killing off their teletext services, as in the case of the 2012 termination of the original teletext service Ceefax (see the previous chapter in this book), because too often technology over 30 years old is proclaimed as a case of "dead media" (Sterling 1995). Yet, just because consumer society decides that they are electronic waste or "digital rubbish" (Gabrys 2011: 17), it does not mean that I do. Before business interests or the Internet took over, teletext was a free technology. The first teletext artists were unknown workers from television broadcast companies. Today, they have names and web sites. Similarly, according to Graziplene (2000: 22), in the late 1970s "the earliest users were home electronics enthusiasts who had built their own decoder units as add-ons to their television receivers using plans published in a popular electronics and wireless hobbyists' magazine."

Today, teletext is free again, not because of the Internet but because hobbyists are working with it again, with open source inserters to create their own teletext signal, like Peter Kwan's VBIT (USB Teletext Inserter https://code.google.com/p/vbit/). "Ceefax was brief, but art is long" (Cheshire 2012). In this chapter I shall explain why I think a negative view of the (future/end of) teletext is wrong because the best is yet to come. As Giddens (1991: 81) pointed out: "We have no choice but to choose." I choose not to consider teletext junk or *dead media*.

An artist's perspectives on teletext

My journey with teletext started in 2011 when I got in touch with the teletext engineer Peter Kwan, who had developed an open source USB teletext Inserter (VBIT), and we started to work together in a long-term project for teletext live visuals. The reason for this was that I did not just want to use a teletext graphics editor like CebraText, a free teletext editor made by Danish company Cebra (http://www.cebra.dk). I wanted to use the teletext signal. That means to push the bottom on the remote control and trigger the teletext on the television screen. I wanted to create an eerie universe with text-characters, a brutal storytelling instead of using teletext for news on demand. One of my biggest influences in deciding to work with teletext was *Hands Up!,* a ten-episode-long 1980s series about sign language, developed by Ian Irwing, produced by Intelfax, broadcast on Channel 4/4-Tel and made in teletext. It was one of the first examples of storytelling and teletext and a huge inspiration to me as an artist.

My first, childhood, memory of television (not teletext) is the Spanish TV Show called *La Bola de Cristal* (The Crystal Ball), a Spanish TV show broad-

cast on TVE between 1984 and 1988, the brainchild of Spanish writer Dolores Rico Oliver (better known for her artistic name, Lolo Rico) and was hosted by pop singer Alaska. Its main character was the Breakdown Witch (*la bruja avería*), a puppet who proclaimed "Long Live evil, long live capital!" *(¡Viva el mal, viva el capital!)*. The programme had fake advertising spots meant to ridicule real ads and propose alternatives to the consumer society (Rico 2003). One of the several spots declared "Use the machine, don't be the machine." This idea stuck in my mind and never left. Not only as an anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist and anti-authoritarian message but as a quest for freedom through knowledge, imagination and creativity. Discussing the "painter of modern life," Baudelaire (in Baudelaire & Mayne 1964: 8) wrote: "The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs forms and colors." When I use teletext I feel *drunk* with joy, in a childlike barbarous way. The simplicity of the colours and the character set make the process of making teletext graphics straightforward.

In my opinion, teletext has a lot of similarities with brutalist architecture (cf. Clement 2011). Text is used unadorned and rought-cast, like concrete. Brutalism has an unfortunate reputation of evoking a raw dystopia and teletext evokes an "object of nostalgia," according to Ernst and Parikka (2013). Teletext and brutalism have more in common than the raw aspect and unpretentious honesty. Both heralded a new age, a changing socio-economic society, and captured the spirit of their time and contradictions. They were meant to be useful and functional rather than refined and ornamented.

My generation grew up with the fax, early home computers (like Commodore, Amstrad, Acorn BBC, Sinclair), arcade machines, video game consoles, photocopiers, cassettes, Walkman, VHS, 35mm film camera and Polaroid. However we were not spoiled by technology; it was our playground. According to Olivares (2007: 21), "Play is part of our lives like language and desire." Technology felt the same way and, even more importantly, impressive. But, as the Spanish journalist Ramón Colom in *La bola de Cristal* said, "to play, toys are not necessary." Only imagination is necessary, and it does not belong to a specified period of time.

Teletext also reminds me of the "Zone" in Andrei Tarkovsky's movie *Stalker* (1979): a wasteland. Because teletext is a technology designed to die and to be forgotten. As Green (1993: 94) elaborates: "The Zone – a place of terror, or the repository of dreams; a lost domain, another place or time which one feels nostalgia; uninhabitable earth, or ideal realm; a memory of childhood. Or death?" The Zone is also home, a place known and loved by the stalker: "Here is my happiness, freedom, dignity" (Green 1993: 94). In this case, Teletext and the Zone are allegorical, a condemnation in favour of a new understanding. A place for revealing instead of burying.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on these different approaches to teletext.

Media archaeology and dead media

Looking at research into teletext use by audiences, it appears that, today, teletext is used mainly by older people (Van Selm & Peeters 2007) and by men (Graziplene 2000). As a result, it is probably not so strange that teletext gets mentioned in relationship to the concepts of *dead media* and *media archaeology*. In this regard, some would consider teletext ready to be given a chapter in the *Dead Media Handbook* that Sterling's Dead Media Manifesto (www.deadmedia.org) refers to. However, as Ernst and Parikka (2013: 56) replied to the Sterling's Manifesto:

> Rather than being a nostalgic collection of "dead media" of the past, assembled in a curiosity cabinet, media archaeology is an analytical tool, a method of analyzing and presenting aspects of media that would otherwise escape the discourse of cultural history. As long as media are not mistaken for their mass-media content, they turn out to be nondiscursive entities, belonging to a different temporal regime that, to be analyzed, requires an alternative means of description.

Although formulated as a criticism, *media archaeology* and *dead media* are two sides of the same coin. It seems that you can only choose one of them when you talk about old technologies like teletext. There is no room for the possibility of still using or developing it. Why would you want to do that?

Gabrys (2011: 74) called it "The 'Social Death' of Electronics (…) As electronics break down at end of life, they enter several stages of devaluation, salvaging, recycling, reprocessing, and decay." However, I argue that teletext is not broken. Teletext is not dead. You cannot kill the vertical blank interval.

Teletext's past is clear, what about its future?

If we agree that teletext is not dead, then what is its future? Is it little more than a *Zombie* technology? Is it an Archive? Or is it, as I shall argue, Art? Art is "useless, yet crucial." What is more, for art to move beyond "the fusion of art in the realm of culture, the advent of which, paradoxically enough, is considered as a result of the development and triumph of our liberal-capitalist society!" (Chateau 2014: 32), making art useless is the only way to avoid this triumph. Why is it then also crucial? Because it is a quest, it is a challenge and there is no goal. You do it because you like it. Art has many theories but there is no

absolute truth, as Kittler and Johnston (1997: 100) pointed out: "In our current century which implements all theories, there are no longer any. That is the uncanniness of its reality." Teletext is useless, yet crucial.

What about teletext as a technology, *Zombie* or otherwise? Here the concept of *techne* is crucial. Etymologically, it is the Greek word τέχνη, often translated as craftsmanship, craft or, interestingly, art. As Tabachnick (2004) noted, in contemporary discourse:

> Contemporary technology … most often refers to the product itself, instruments and machines (i.e. the computer is technology). However, the earliest uses of the word still describe a knowledge or systematic study of the arts (e.g. metalworking) rather than the products of that knowledge. So, at least by these definitions, techne and technology are quite similar if not the same.

I propose to look at teletext as *techne*, i.e. as knowledge of techniques and knowledge of a skilful or artful use.

But with the Greek always comes the tragedy. And the tragedy should not be translated into the fear of technology and the aim to control it, like a tragic dystopia in text-mode where zombies hide in garages waiting to be reanimated. I am, however, not a technological groupie. I prefer to have a conversation instead of a parasitic (Niebisch 2012) monologue with technology. I prefer to use it instead of collecting it for pure storage or archive contemplation. According to Turkle (2007: 10), "When objects are lost, subjects are found. Freud's language is poetic: 'the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.'" Teletext is not lost, it is only hiding – on spare transmission lines in broadcast television signals; a ghost in the television. In this regard, Kittler (1997: 96) noted that, "[a]s we know, however, ghosts do not die," in which case the question emerges: What about the ego? In the next section I will examine the relationship between ego as narcissism and the use of technology as commitment.

Narcissism versus commitment, control versus fear

Narcissism and technology are very close, as Giddens (1991: 170) pointed out:

> Narcissism presumes a constant search for self-identity, but this is a search which remains frustrated, because the restless pursuit of "who I am" is an expression of narcissistic absorption rather than a realizable quest. Narcissism stands in opposition to the commitment required to sustain intimate relationships; commitment places restrictions on the opportunities the individual has to sample the many experiences demanded in the search for self-fulfillment.

As humans we want to be special, unique, and we will do whatever it takes to achieve it. Commitment requires the sacrifice of new experiences that the

narcissist thinks will lead to self-fulfilment. And we do not want the obligation that restricts our freedom of action and control. We only demand and reject the possibility of "giving to others" that this implies. To me as an artist, using old technologies, like teletext, is a commitment: you give up your ego. That commitment is a risk because it does not seek to forge a self-identity. It is a dialogue of possibilities rather than an ego-trip monologue with technology. And these possibilities are irrelevant to the individual's self-identity and pursuits.

At this point, it is very important to mention the use and abuse of technology in the narcissistic quest, as Niebisch (2012: 9) recalls about Dadaists and Futurists:

> They were not satisfied with the intended functioning of media systems and attempted to expand the possibilities of the newspaper, radio, film, or whatever media they encountered. Such a manipulation is parasitic, because it depends on the supply of new media gadgets through science and technology and it does not intend to engage in a dialogue or equal exchange with these fields. The avant-garde artists were not interested in a discursive dialogue with media engineers.

The parasitic abuse of technology cultivates a detachment necessary to the maintenance of narcissistic ego. Conversely, the narcissistic approach to technology chooses to form an ego that fears commitment because it requires giving up control. Old technologies require skills and patience. The control of them is not instantaneous, like using the latest technologies, that are ready to use and function in a click. You need to spend a certain amount of time to be able to understand and use them, so the control of your persona and practice takes second place and even disappears. The shortcut is the emulation, which requires just a basic knowledge to be good to go. It's fast and you gain an illusion of control. In this regard, we can refer to Svendsen's (2008: 43-44) interpretation of Sartre's concept of fear:

> The analysis of fear is a clear example of this, since fear is claimed to be an intentional strategy where the subject attempts to remove – in a "magical" way – an object. It ought to be fairly obvious that this magic is not very often successful, as an object seldom disappears simply because one fears it. When this magical tragedy fails to work, the subject resorts to flight.

Maybe we use this magic to control technology until we cannot do it anymore, either through lack of interest, or because something shinier and newer comes around. Let us be honest: we are lazy. We want things to come easy with no effort at all. As such, it is not fear, it is boredom. Why spend my time on anything? Better to say that it is dead because it is old. And from there you have only two options. Put it in the trash and forget about it, or put it in a box in your garage and wait some years to sell it on Ebay for a considerable profit.

"Cultural imaginary is at the heart of the composition and decomposition of modernity and modernism" wrote Shanks, Platt and Rathje (2004: 64), in relation to the *garbage imaginary* of electronics and waste.

This is not about collection, garbage imagery or archive; this is the Diogenes syndrome, created by the capitalist society we grew up in. This is the real tragedy. As Giddens (1991: 81) wrote:

> A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity.

At this point I feel that teletext (and any old technology) has a crossroads ahead: one road heads for control, fear, narcissism, speed and nostalgia; and the other one for intimacy, commitment, play and imagination. At the intersection, only one choice can be made. One way dissociates and the other confuses, because it seems like a waste of time. I choose confusion, but not as a mistake or error; as a complex and less understandable path. I choose the challenge and mysterious one rather than the inertia and apathy of day-to-day life, even if it ends nowhere.

Is teletext a hobby? Are hobbies art?

In the late seventies, Heidegger (1977: 5) wrote:

> Technology itself is a contrivance, or, in Latin, an *instrumentum*. Most of the times technology does not reach the peak of full development before something new and faster comes around. We have no time, and even worse, we have no patience. Even though teletext emerged in the late 1970s, it is still in development.

This is the idea of teletext as a medium in search of an audience that would be rewarded from its use. It turned out to be a great hobbies' medium, for anglers, artists, florists, or dozens of other hobbyist groups, as Graziplene (2000) noted. Well, in my view, today "The hobbyists are back!" And teletext's possibilities are not yet fully discovered.

So is teletext a hobby? Are hobbies Art? To answer these questions I asked two of my favourite teletext artists, Dan Farrimond (UK) and Max Capacity (USA) how, when and why they started to work with teletext. We share the same starting point to working with Teletext: 2006 and the *Microtel* project organized by Emma Davidson and Paul B. Davis from Lektrolab. *Microtel* was one of the projects curated by ambientTV.net as part of VBI [voluptuously blinking eye] – a submission for the exhibition "Satellite of Love." This project was presented at the 35th International Film Festival Rotterdam in association with Witte de

With Center for Contemporary Art and the TENT Centre for Visual Arts (http://projects.lektrolab.com/microtel/). Dan, Max and I met for the first time at the International Teletext Art Festival ITAF in 2012. *Microtel* was not the only project outside broadcasting. Other examples included, *För Text-TV, i tiden* (2010) by Fredrik Olsson and Otto von Busch, who mixed cross-stitch and Teletext to convert pictures from the wedding of the Swedish crown princess Victoria that people could send via mail or SMS; and *Teletext Babez* (2000) by Dragan Espenschied and Bodenständig, a video first broadcast on 6 October 2001 on P.A.R.K. 4DTV Amsterdam, featuring teletext pages from German cable TV (collected by me) and a hot euro-dance tune by Bodenständig 2000, all put together by Maarten Ploeg (http://drx.a-blast.org/~drx/projects/teletext/index.en.html).

Regarding the first question about how and when the two artists started to work with teletext, US-based Max Capacity wrote to me (21 July 2014):

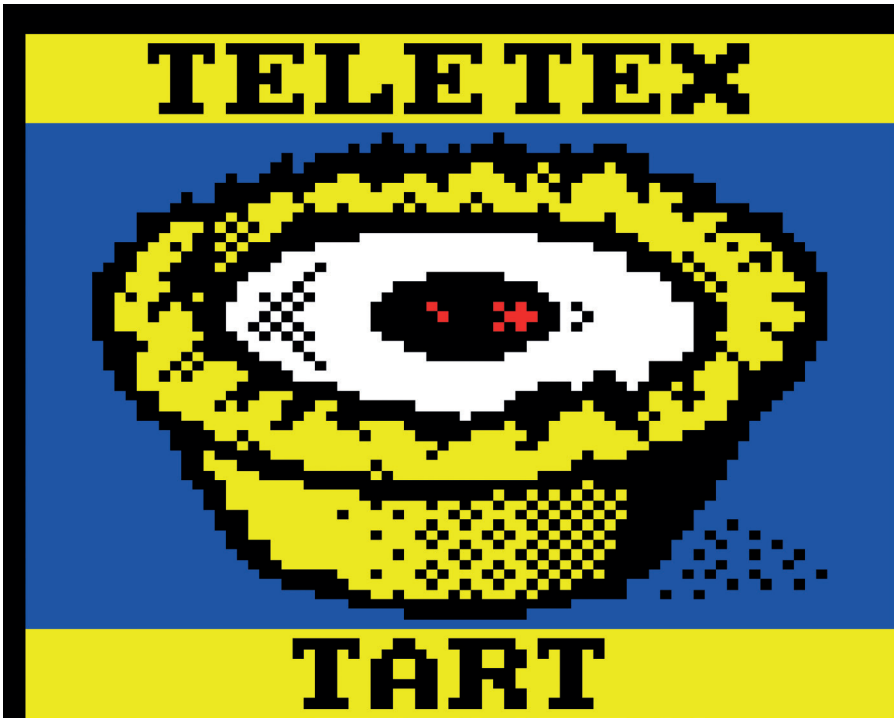
> Here in the U.S. we did not have a very robust or popular teletext system, so I did not actually grow up with teletext. But the aesthetic was similar to American public access TV stations and some networks' schedule and info screens. It was later, when I was working with pixel art from ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 graphics protocols and experimenting with pirate analog TV broadcasting, that I was recommended teletext (by Rich Oglesby from Prosthetic Knowledge).

***Tiger 3* by Max Capacity. Courtesy of Max Capacity**

> I did some research and was really captivated by the low-resolution graphics produced for teletext. Rich pointed me to CebraText at Microtel.

UK based teletext artist Dan Farrimond replied (23 July 2014):

> I sketched out some experimental designs in the teletext format while researching my university dissertation in 2006, which just so happened to be based around ... teletext art. I did not pick it up again until I discovered an open call for entries to the 2012 International Teletext Art Festival, but I have been working with teletext ever since.



***Teletext Tart* by Dan Farrimond. Courtesy of Dan Farrimond**

Max, Dan and I have different ideas about what we like about using teletext. Max wrote (21 July 2014):

> I really enjoy the limitations of the software. The constrained options for resolution, color, and placement really force me to be more creative than I might otherwise be. If something isn't going to work for me in teletext, I have to make it work somehow (with the limited options and tools) or I have to move on to something else that will work. Also the technical constraints of teletext means that the finished product always fits with the teletext aesthetic.

And Dan replied (23 July 2014):

> I enjoy the challenge of the teletext restrictions, and the fact it is very hit-and-miss – for every half decent piece of art, there are at least three previous experiments that did not work. But when it does work, it is a wonderful accident. Above all that, though, I love the aesthetic and its simplicity. To me, it will always represent the future, specifically that predicted by countless 80s sci-tech films and TV shows. Though they might not have been 100% correct, teletext does continue to thrive as a counterpart to the Internet. So they were right that the medium's lifespan would stretch well into the 21st century.

These answers relate to what Connor (2013) wrote on *rhizome.org* about the 2013 edition of the ITAF festival:

> With the seemingly limitless creative software available today, it can be difficult to understand how complex technological tools shape one's creative output. With teletext, the constraints imposed by the tool are entirely out in the open, making the relationship between the artist and the technology that much more transparent.

For me, teletext has always been related with the TV signal and not emulations. Made in teletext for teletext! It was not until 2011 that I started to work with it seriously; once I had the teletext inserter VBIT, I was able to create my own teletext signal, so I can combine hardware (teletext inserter) and software (teletext graphic editor). I do not share the idea about the constraints. Rather, teletext presents an opportunity for the imagery. But I do agree with the argument of it being a challenge, the patience you require for doing it and how much fun it is.

Working with text-mode

Kittler (1997: 150) wrote that, "[w]hen meanings come down to sentences, sentences to words, and words to letters, there is no software at all. Rather, there would be no software if computer systems were not surrounded by an environment of everyday languages."

I use text-based graphics like teletext and PETSCII, (PET Standard Code of Information Interchange), also known as CBM ASCII, the character set used in Commodore Business Machines' (CBM) 8-bit home computers, as my language and for the joy of text-mode – i.e. the computer display mode in which content is internally represented on a computer screen in terms of characters rather than individual pixels. Both technologies share the grid as a framework and text characters as instructions, its complete method of craft that I define as *KYBDslöjd*, which means drawing and crafting by typing. For me, text-graphics are meant to be typed, a conversation with the machine that is translated into graphics and animations with a character set; i.e. a dialogue stored in text.

In an article from The New York Times about the Spike Jonze's new film *Her*, Yu wrote about romance and technology and how this relationship changes our vision of the world and ourselves:

> I fell ardently in love because of how it shaped my conception of the universe. That's what the Commodore 64 did. Even with its blocky, ASCII interface. Without any graphical representations, it was purer. You looked at text on a screen. You were never under any illusion that this machine was trying to be your friend. It did not want to talk to you – and if you wanted to talk to it, you had to learn its language. (Yu 2014: SR1)

Yu finished the article with "We're holding magic boxes, boxes that want to serve us and coddle us, instead of challenge us. And how can you love something that doesn't challenge you?" (Yu 2014: SR1).

Do you dare to use Teletext? I do.

As part of my teletext "I dare" quest, in 2012 I took part in first ever International Teletext Art Festival (ITAF) that was inspired by the 30th anniversary of Teletext in Finland and organized by FixCcooperative/ FISH Helsinki, an independent artists co-operative founded in 2007 (http://www.fixc.fi), in collaboration with the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE. "The art works can be viewed with teletext editors or made into animated images but the true forum for teletext art is of course teletext itself," wrote the organizers on their website. And the artworks were shown on the YLE Teletext pages 525-545 from 8 March until 8 April 2012.

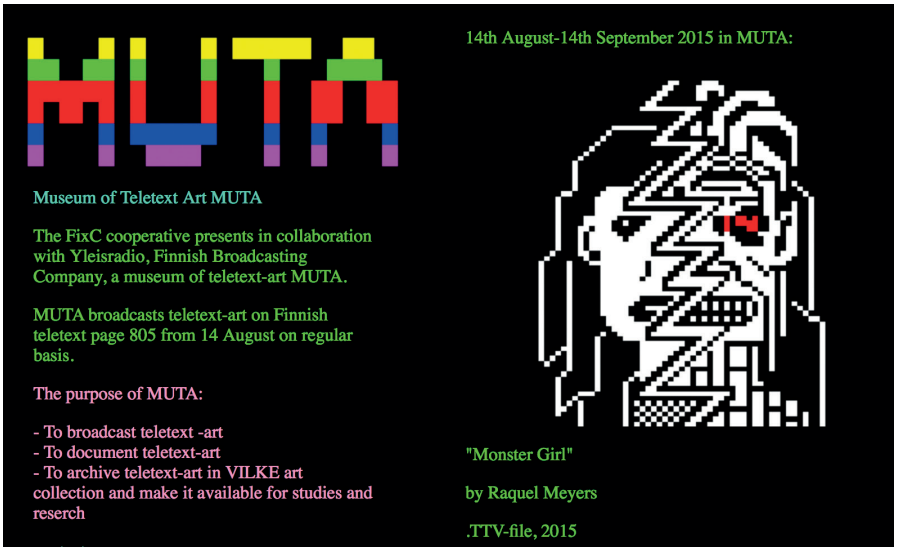
> The potential of Teletext as a tool for artistic expression has not yet been fully discovered though the aesthetics of Teletext have slowly creeped [*sic*] in to the most fashionable street ware, graffiti and fine art. Is the next big word in intellectual small talk of the hip, rich and famous going to be teletextualism? Time will show, but since it happens The International Teletext Art Festival gives the possibility to the ARD Text users to decide for themselves. (ITAF in ARD and Pflüger68 2012)

ITAF 2012's participating artists included Ashley Anderson, Bym, Frederic Cambus, Max Capacity, Cordula Ditz, Maria Duncker, Dan Farrimond, Kathrin Günter, Francis Hunger, Juha van Ingen, Dave Needham, Rich Oglesby, Seppo Renvall, Janne Suni, Jarkko Räsänen and Kari Yli-Annala and myself.

ITAF proclaimed "Teletext as art," and since 2012 they have been on that quest. The festival ran not only on YLE. In 2012, it was also on the German teletext service ARD Text and the 2103 edition was a collaboration with ARD Text, ORF TELETEXT and SWISS TELETEXT and was selected to participate in the ARS Electronica Festival in 2013. In March 2014 the FixC cooperative in

collaboration with Yle Finland founded the Museum of Teletext Art, MUTA, with a permanent teletext-page 805 in Yle teletext, and all the works donated to the museum by artists are archived in digital format in the Collection of Finnish Electronic art VILKE.

From 14 August until the 14 September, 2015, MUTA was broadcast on the Finnish teletext yle page 805, my TTV-file "Monster Girl."



***'Monster Girl'* by Raquel Meyers. Courtesy of Raquel Meyers**

ITAF 2014 was broadcast at ARD Text, ORF TELETEXT, Swiss Text and ARTE Teletext from 14 August until 14 September. As the Breakdown Witch mentioned at the start of this chapter would have said: "Long live the Teletext!"

In 2014, the ITAF (2014) jury decided to give me the first-ever Teletext Art Achievement Award. They stated the following reasons for me deserving the honour:

> Raquel Meyers was rewarded for her highly elaborated and unique style of her own; her outstanding technical expertise and ability of storytelling through the teletext format. The jury acknowledged especially how teletext art plays an integral role of her overall artistic work including embroidery and old computer technologies. (http://www.teletextart.com/information/teletext-art-prize/)

After I made the Teletext series *Do you go where I go* for the ITAF 2012, I started to work with teletext for live visual performances and installations. I used a teletext inserter (VBIT) and a television (with a teletext decoder) to display my own teletext graphics to be browsed with the remote control, just like normal,

broadcast teletext. Below I list the projects I have completed so far, including several collaborations with Swedish musician Goto80 in 2013:

Mind the volcano! (2013) is a text-based, TV-performance using teletext signal for the first time for live performance visuals. The music by Goto80 was composed live in text-based software and shown as part of the visual story. It was performed for the first time at Transmediale festival 2013 BWPWAP, and it probably was the first live teletext performance ever.

At the LWLVL Festival 2014 in New York, I did also a live performance set using teletext technologies and PETSCII Graphics with a Commodore 64. Probably the first teletext VJ set using PAL signal in the United States. For that I had to carry a Television with the teletext decoder and the VBIT hardware to be able to make it. (https://youtu.be/Loq56ibUx3c)

Datagården (2013) was a teletext installation with obituaries based on real information from the Internet. It was made by Possan, Goto80 and myself; the interface was developed by Peter Kwan. It was made at Art Hack Day (Larger than life / Loggen över ditt liv) and exhibited at Bonniers Konsthall (Stockholm). It was most likely the first installation in the world to use a custom teletext signal and featured video input, video feedback and Twitter-feeds along with custom-made graphics/text/software and C64-music.

Thread of Fate (Teletext Norns) (2014) is a solo project with teletext, where the user enters a page number to choose his or her destiny ("Thread of Fate, enter a number from 104 to 300 to choose your destiny with teletext!"). It is based on teletext technology and PETSCII graphics, where the Norns, the female beings who rule the destiny of gods and men in Norse mythology, become the vertical blanking interval (VBIT) that hide in the PAL signal of the Television and the animations are typed manually as a form of keyboard craft. The animation works symbol-by-symbol rather than frame-by-frame.

In ancient times the development of events beyond a person's control was determined by a supernatural power. Mythological characters like the Norns ruled our destiny but, today, we change the fate of gods for a fate in computers. We substitute beliefs for rationality. Computers can analyse true consequences of human nature and tell us what to do, but this is a machine fantasy, a dream of the machine. We twine the thread of fate in a computer screen, into a grid that provides a framework to determine the final output. It's an oblivion metaphor of our times and fate, a storytelling about technology and mythology, a weaving dystopia in text-mode on the two-dimensional regularity of the grid.

As Giddens (1991: 109) said about fate, fatalism and fateful moments:

> To live in the universe of high modernity is to live in an environment of chance and risk, the inevitable concomitants of a system geared to the domination of nature and the reflexive making of history. Fate and destiny have no formal part to play in such a system, which operates (as a matter of principle) via what I shall call open human control of the natural and social worlds.

Thread of Fate **by Raquel Meyers (2014). Courtesy of Raquel Meyers**

The definition of technology remains "obscure and groundless," as Heidegger (1977) pointed out. And it is not about speed re-production like most of the works posted on the Internet. "We can only make ourselves understood (well or poorly) if we maintain a certain speed of delivery," (Barthes & Heath 1977: 191). Especially since teletext is not just decorative, like a wallpaper. As Baudelaire put it:

> The more beauty that the artist can put into it, the more valuable will be his work; but in trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist. (In Baudelaire & Mayne 1964: 4)

Teletext is a challenge and has the universal language of silence; a complete absence of sound.

Related to that, I wish to mention my collaboration with Goto80 and his *Teletext Music Software* project (http://youtu.be/CE5mhct5L0Y). It was an Internet joke about a magical software application, but that is the beauty of fantasy: to do something that is impossible and to master it. The only real thing about that software was the teletext itself but not the sound (made by him with a tracker in an Amiga computer, and added to the video in post-production). I

send the Teletext pages live to the television, for him to be able to manually trigger them in real time as he was pushing the buttons of the remote control to simulate the tracker. The success of the video on YouTube and the number of people who believed that the software really exists might be related to Giddens' (1991: 3) idea of Postmodernism as a risk culture. But Beck (1992: 72) goes even further: "We are dealing not with 'second-hand experience', in risk consciousness, but with 'second-hand non-experience'."

Teletext vs www

> We live and work in a world in which the telephone, the television, and the computer are being linked together. With that linkage will come whole new ways of learning, relaxing, playing, and working. Indeed, we may be beginning to reach that impossible ideal of Johann Gutenberg in the fifteenth century: all information in all places at all times. (Eder 1985: 90).

Teletext was the precursor of the Internet and the promise for the new link world of real-time information. But it was a dream that had already started in the 1960s with HOMEFAX, developed by RCA. It finally arrived in the late 1970s when "teletext was the name given to systems that distribute text information on spare transmission lines in broadcast television signals for decoding and presentation on specially modified television receivers" (Graziplene 2000: 21-22).

Teletext was created to become the elusive key to dominating the home of the future. We simply had to push a button on a remote keypad to switch to the main menu screen of the teletext. A one-way service with one page at a time to be displayed on a television screen. The www offers information which is to be navigated by the visitor. With teletext the interaction is realized merely by the users' initiative to consult the page using the remote control: "The simplest form of interactivity operates along the spatial dimension only, making possible two-sided or multilateral communication." as Van Selm and Peeters (2011: 662) argue.

Information is power and we want to control it. As Lunenfeld (2011: 39) observes: "There are an exponentially growing number of people who cannot but see the world as information itself. This is the key to understanding the aesthetic effects of the culture machine." We want to control the machine and put it on our knees as forced labour. I am your master, you are my slave. Do what I want. Already in 1985, Cornish wrote: "In the future, we may find that computers are increasingly becoming artificial friends – providing us with helpful reminders about what we need to do, remembering addresses for us, playing music for us that we have indicated we like, etc." (Cornish 1985: 5). The Internet has a multilateral control over us (what we do and what we want or are looking for); we choose less and less because we are overloaded with

information. We want to get a selection made according to our meta-data, even if it is made by robots or commercial strategies. It does not matter anymore. We create and are spam in the www. Information becomes opportunism.

What is more, "[t]here is a world of difference between the most complex randomness and the most elementary combinatory scheme, and it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules," Barthes (1977: 80-81) wrote. The narrative of the Internet is long gone and it is not getting any better. Robots write books using Wikipedia content. Pagan Kennedy discovered this and wrote about the writer droids in an article for The *New York Times* called "Do Androids Dream of Electric Authors?" – about Lambert M. Surhone and Amazon (Kennedy, 2011). It is not strange that this is happening; we are spoiled and we want even more. A writer cannot generate such an amount of content in such a short period of time. Teletext was the first type of digital journalism and, still, there are no robots behind it, only humans, concrete writers.

Hui Kyong Chun (2011: 184) claims that "[n]ew media, like the computer technology on which they rely, race simultaneously toward the future and the past, toward what we might call the bleeding edge of obsolescence." Instead, I rather say that Information is becoming obsolete on the www. And it is ironic to say that teletext is archaized. However, as usual, the market is the one that decides if the dream is profitable or not, and if it should end, like the fate of the early home computers from the 1980s (for example the Commodore 64). Once the dream is gone, we can only emulate it, and hope for the best.

Teletext for art's sake

For Kluitenberg (2011: 66): "Imaginary media, when understood as machines that mediate impossible desires, should be regarded as impossible machines."

This raises the question: How can teletext be a form of Imaginary media if it is functionless? This brings us to teletext for arts' sake. In my opinion, the use of technology is not only about aesthetics. Most people do not care if you use the real technology or if you just emulate it; the only important thing is that the result looks real. There is no quest in that, only shortcuts. Artefacts as parasites of technology, fitting in perfect harmony and success with the economy system we are dragged into.

> The parasitic abuse of technology is thus not simply a destructive rejection of hegemonic discourses, but a creative intervention that exploits, bends, and shows the limits of established practices. The avant-garde exploitations did not demolish existing forms of communication but irritated media discourses and forced these systems to generate new creative transformations. (Niebisch 2012: 9-10)

This parasitism is the only way to constrain technology and *reanimate* it as if it was a corpse. Still according to Niebisch (2012: 17), "[t]he genre of the manifesto, the most important means of the avant-garde movements to communicate their ideas, invoked the parasite." But this is old history; what about today? Lunenfeld (2011: 39-40) confirms, with regards to the culture machine tagged as the ultimate in postmodernism, that:

> Our moment is *unimodern* in the sense that it makes modernism in all its variants universal via networks and broadcasts, uniform in their effect, if not affect, and unitary in terms of their existing as strings of code. In the *unimodern* era – as bits, online and in databases – a photo is a painting is an opera is a pop single.

Maybe the intrinsic value of teletext is divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function, like the 19th century expression l'*art pour l'art*. As Walter Benjamin (in Benjamin et al. 2008: 42) said: "the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *'art pour l'art'*." It may sound like an old glory, talking about the past, who never goes. As Hui Kyong Chun (2011: 188) wrote: "The major characteristic of digital media is memory." As well as "By saving the past, they were supposed to make knowing the future easier."

Teletext has been imagined as a futuristic device that could transform the idea of art. As Chateau (2014: 32-33) wrote: "Valéry prognosticated the metamorphosis of art along with the invention of a new kind of device, the main function of which was to enable remote data transmission – a sort of television ..." At least, I would like to think that Valéry meant Teletext.

Teletext is not only a domesticated technology because of its daily life characteristic, as mentioned by Markus Stauff (2014: 139) with regards to the domestic character of television:

> One of the most decisive aspects of television's "ecology,", though, is its domestic character, which raises more general questions about the consequences of the domestication of technologies and the interrelation between media technologies and other technologies involved in daily life.

This is one of the reasons that people cannot take it seriously; it is homelike and not post-modern or *unimodern*.

> Revolution has been co-opted by the marketers, on the one side, and fundamentalist death cults, on the other. Technological determinism is not the answer. Technologies certainly open up spaces, but they also close them down. (Lunenfeld 2011: 131).

In my opinion, challenges are becoming like animals in danger of extinction: a memory of the past. We are engaged in a taxidermic tragedy, a lifelike ef-

fect. But this is not a competition; there is nothing to prove and only choices to make. And I choose to go slow, because in this hi-speed society we are losing so many things on the way (not only technology). We have no patience or time: "To live in the 'world' produced by high modernity has the feeling of riding a Juggernaut" Giddens (1991: 28).

Teletext is not a physical object; it is the dark band dividing pictures horizontally on the television screen, used by the PAL system. Vertical-blanking-interval lines like REM (rapid eye movement) sleep intervals. A door to unlock the Imagination.

This is not a manifesto, a sales pitch or a fiction. It is real storytelling about technology. John Giorno (1994) said: "You Got to Burn to Shine." Teletext already did it, what is left is up to us.

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