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Presentation

From the digitization of culture to digital culture

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Definitions of many kinds have been generated throughout history and by many disciplines for the broad term 'culture'. These definitions fall into two basic groups. First there is the humanistic concept of culture, which views culture as referring to all kinds of cultural productions, including arts such as literature, music and the visual and performing arts. Then there is the anthropological concept of culture, which understands culture to be any human manifestation and the product of a specific way of living, feeling and doing.

Today these two basic concepts, with their many spinoffs and offshoots, are juxtaposed in theoretical and practical discussions of all kinds, causing a certain degree of confusion, debate and conflict in culture strategy plans, state support programmes and subsidies, action plans of culture centres, art institutions, cultural festivals, etc. 'Culture' as a term is difficult to define, contain or confine; it aims to embrace all reality, in a failed attempt to bring it into an all-encompassing and universal culture.

If, rather than a fixed set of practices and interpretations, we understand culture to be a process in which meanings are produced and exchanged—in other words, a process in which meanings are appropriated, negotiated and contrasted—then culture is clearly a dynamic process rather than an immutable essence. Culture, when understood as a dynamic system with flows of people, information and products, adopts different forms in response to dynamic models of the relationships between individuals, societies and territories.

The term 'digital culture' sits uneasily within the inherent dynamism of culture, as it restricts and delimits something as free and open as we understand culture to be. Does digital culture have a set of specific distinguishing characteristics of its own? Should digital culture be treated separately from the rest of culture? And

culture itself: does it really need specific treatment depending on its underlying material substrates? Or does digital culture refer to a *modus operandi* and a specific essence that confers culture with additional properties? If so, what *is* digital culture? And more to the point, given that so many areas of human action have been digitized and that the frontiers between the digitization of culture and digital culture are melting away, does it make any sense to study the part without considering the whole?

Since information and communication technologies (ICTs) came into our lives, they have inspired technophiles and technophobes, utopias and dystopias of all kinds. In the long history of humankind there have been fervent defenders of the inherent benefits of new technologies that offered the potential to change many of the foundations of culture and so develop a new cultural paradigm. As for the ICTs, they have many detractors who are critical of their alleged benefits and who fail to see technological innovation as an agent for structural change or that the ICTs have anything new to contribute to an already consolidated culture and society.

Since the advent of the ICTs, there have been fervently optimistic discourses associated with their impact on culture. They are conceived as essentially democratizing and as devoid of power and control, as the result of their allegedly non-hierarchical horizontality. Recall the unrealistic expectations regarding e-commerce in the early internet years and, more recently, regarding the participatory dynamics of the all-encompassing web 2.0; consider the expectations generated by the potential of computer simulation and calculation in the context of virtual reality substituting for physical presence, the exaggerated claims regarding developments in artificial intelligence, and experiments with artificial life reproducing the properties of what we understand to be life. Today



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we can up- or down-grade many such expectations generated in the early years of the development of digital culture—and likewise with the influence of the ICTs on culture— given how the potential attached to the imaginary of the digital compares with the effectiveness of the real.

Many kinds of technophiles and technophobes, technological utopias and dystopias have arisen in response to the different types of technologies prevailing at particular times in history. Adopting a stance that is neither fatalistically pessimistic nor exacerbatedly optimistic, however, today we can state—in view of the knowledge gained from our experience with ICTs in recent years—that ICTs have undoubtedly brought and are bringing about significant changes in our sociocultural context. We are thus in a position to draw a sufficiently realistic picture of the transformations currently under way in culture and society.

This dossier aims to provide a multifaceted view and a number of perspectives on what has been termed 'digital culture' and on the impact of the digital technologies in the field of culture in its broadest sense. It contains contributions from leading theorists and activists involved in the development and analysis of digital culture. Coming from different parts of the world, they depart from the local yet offer a global vision of digital culture.

Charlie Gere, from Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, discusses some of the implications of the changes brought about by digital technologies in relation to the concepts of subject, consumer and community. Derrick de Kerckhove, director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, reflects on changes in the relationship between passive spectators and active participants in the mass popularization of the three-dimensional technologies and in connection with the imaginary associated with virtual reality.

From Naples, the academic Tiziana Terranova contrasts certain key concepts of the political economy of culture, questioning the alternative nature of new forms of cooperative social production associated with the specific contributions of digital culture, and exploring how this cooperation may offer a real alternative to the logic of the competition-based market as the basis for new forms of production. From São Paulo, Rodrigo Savazoni shares his thoughts and experiences regarding participatory dynamics in the Brazilian Digital Culture Forum, positing the existence of a close tie between democracy, innovation and digital culture. Finally, Aleksandra Uzelak from Zagreb describes the potential of digital technologies for the culture sector and argues for the need to seek ways to properly fulfil that potential.

