



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A BLOGGER

an interview with Cory Doctorow by Hans Ulrich Obrist

Genealogical links with the author E.L. Doctorow are not proven but contribute a nice mythical dimension to the inspiring and expanding networked world of author, journalist and blogger Cory Doctorow. Since his first books, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Science Fiction* (co-written with Karl Schroeder) and *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, he creates a universe where creative freedom and alien, yet familiar events and ideas shape an alternative existence based on sharing information, junk, technology and magic realism. Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed the author on the subject of producing a new kind of reality.

Hans Ulrich Obrist (co-)curates uncountable exhibitions building bridges between art, architecture, design and science. At the moment he is Co-Director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

All images Philippe Parreno, *Performance #3 (Le cri ultrasonique de l'ecureuil)*, 18 september 2006, Studio 28, Paris. Production and courtesy Air de Paris

This morning I was preparing an interview with the artist Philippe Parreno, who shares my enthusiasm for your work. He would really like to ask you a question about the production of reality since there is this whole idea of you as a novelist not just writing novels for novels' sake but that the novel in some kind of way can produce reality. I have always collected information as a kind of "bricolage" in the same way that I collect junk because when you juxtapose two seemingly disparate elements, you get a new kind of insight, an unexpected result emerging from it. It is a science-fiction writer's greatest hope, that you coin the term "cyberspace" and the web comes into existence. I sometimes have a bit of a creeping horror when the stuff that I imagine turns out into reality because the stuff that I write about is often a mere *Gedanken*-experiment. The book *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, is very much a book about...

It's a scary book.

A little bit, yes. The reputation economy in it, I think, is a really interesting one. People can live as long as they want, everybody is hardwired into a world computer network and society has abandoned money in favour of "whuffie", an economy of status and respect. It was a fun concept to think through but I think that it will have really giant problems as a political system. The biggest one being that it punishes unpopular ideas. In a democracy you hope that minority viewpoints are protected and given space but in this system, minority viewpoints disappear off the radar; saying something unpopular has a direct economic impact.

Or becomes sanctioned.

Right. A lot of people read it as utopia and many of them came along and said, "Wow, I want to make one of these things". Luckily I think there are some technical things that would keep it ever from ever being implemented in the real world; the biggest one being that we don't have any good mechanism for gauging how people feel about stuff. "Whuffie" is built on the idea that you can use the computer to find out how people feel about things and then start comparing. But it turns out that it's really hard to find out how people feel about things; even asking someone how he feels about something is not a particularly good way to find out how he really feels about something. But I do think that there is a potential to conjure up reality or at very least to shift the direction reality is moving in. I don't draw a really hard distinction between science fiction, journalism and blogging. I think that they are all ways of analysing and reflecting back social and technological events.

What the internet does is because you can target ads to a search, it takes the search costs down essentially to zero.



How would you see the notion of the production of reality in terms of blogging, *Boing Boing* is one of the most, if not the most, influential of all blogs, in my opinion. I was wondering how that production of reality enters there and if you could tell me a little bit about how *Boing Boing* came about and how you see it now?

Boing Boing was not founded by me. It was founded by my co-editor, Mark Frauenfelder and his wife Carla Sinclair. It started out as a print magazine and I grew up reading it. Then they met with a financial crisis when their distributor went bankrupt and ended up owing them a lot of money, so they couldn't afford to continue doing the magazine. In the mean time, the web had come along and Mark got a job at *Wired* magazine. He became very successful as a tech writer and tech journalist but I think he missed the fun that he had with *Boing Boing*, which had always been much more irreverent and eclectic than say *The Red Herring* or *The Industry Standard* or *Wired* could ever be. So when *Blogger* came out Mark decided to resurrect *Boing Boing* in part, I think, just to play with *Blogger* and find out what web blogging was about. I think January 21st 2000 was the first post.

Just when the technology was ready.

Right when it occurred. Mark invited me to be his guest blogger while he went on holiday. Just before leaving he broke a big story. Do you remember there was a lot of talk about what the *Segway* (a two-wheeled, self-balancing transportation device – eds) was before it was officially presented? There had been this big rumour that Dean Kamen had invented something and nobody knew exactly what it was. Mark looked at the patent drawing and said, "Oh, here's what it is!" and he ran a picture of the patent drawing. CNN featured the blog on the

(...) one of the only things we have left to distinguish any artist from any other artist or any amusement from any other amusement is kind of personal feeling, a personal connection with that artist.



air that night and it went from one hundred readers to seven thousand readers that same night. So he emailed me because we knew each other a little and he said, "Would you like to guest blog while we are on holiday? Some of these seven thousand people might come back tomorrow and it would be nice if there was something new for them to see". So I guest blogged for a couple of weeks and then Mark invited me to stay and the rest is kind of history. We invited a couple more editors to come in and the blog has really grown; we now have about 1.7 million unique readers a day and it's a big source of my income. We have incorporated a business around it and so on. In terms of shaping reality with it, I think that blogging is a system that is designed – the blogging practice and the tool suite RSS blogging, the TrackBacks, the comments – for disseminating ideas quickly and for hatching them out and hatching them over from a lot of different perspectives. So if you can successfully inject ideas into that realm, they can spread really fast and far and they can find themselves in a lot of novel places. People in the State Department or in government or in technology firms write to me and say, "I find what you write very influential and I found it serendipitously". I think one of the things blogs are really good at is making their information findable through serendipitous fashion. Blogs are designed to have little chunks of them ripped out and forwarded in the way that people forward jokes. This practice of saying, "Here's this funny thing I've found. Let me show it to you." is real and manifesting itself daily. I think it's an instinctive thing to do for a lot of people; it's something that is deeply human, it is deeply rooted in us.

So it is a more participatory way of sharing news, one could say.

Yes, I think so and it's also more explicitly advocacy-orientated than news per se is. Paul di

Filippo, the science fiction writer, published a story in his column in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* about me; a short story in which the Internet has collapsed and bloggers have become street people who compulsively roam San Francisco with satchels full of bits of paper with interesting things written on them. They run up to people and instead of asking them for change they go, "Did you see this? Did you see this?" I think he is right. There is a real addictive quality to showing people interesting stuff and getting feedback from it. For me it's also very effective as a tool for gathering and organising information that I use in other areas of my life, in writing and in political advocacy. So I think it's an excellent tool; it's like a writer's notebook crossed with a newspaper crossed with a pulpit at Speaker's Corner. It's the combination of all of these things. One of the things I think blogging does really well for an artist is that it enables him/her to engage in conversation with his/her audience, truly direct conversation that previously had been very hard to pull off because it's one thing for the Beatles to send out their Christmas album every year where they horse around and you get to see a little back-stage with the Beatles, but it's not really immediate and it's not really personal.

I think the most profound impact that the Internet has on the world is lowering search costs. I think that very high search costs or prohibitively high search costs are a major factor in a lot of the economic transactions we normally think of. I was just reading an article today about click fraud on Google ad links and so on. One of the people who had been targeted is a man



whose business is flying charters out of Miami. His customers come from all over the world and they are people who need emergency medical evacuation or they are rock stars or they are people who want to get away, they are billionaires or whatever. In order for him to advertise to all of those people traditionally, he would have to take print ads or film ads or whatever in markets all across the United States because his customers are everywhere. Let's say he has one potential customer in every city in America. So his business would essentially be impossible because the search cost of finding the potential customers and informing them about the quality of his service, would be prohibitive. What the Internet does is because you can target ads to a search, it takes the search costs down essentially to zero. So for fifteen or twenty cents a customer, he can send his pitch to them instead of sending it to everyone.

It's anti-spam.

It's the opposite of spam. One of the areas where search costs have really come down is in finding substitute goods for all manner of things that we used to think of as non-substitutable. We tended to think of art as a non-substitutable good, or news as a non-substitutable good. The *New York Times* considers itself to be a non-substitutable product. The whole nature of branding is that even though you can manufacture an identical can of fizzy sugar-water, the brand is non-substitutable.

What the Internet is showing us is that there is a great deal of things that we previously believed to be non-substitutable that are in fact quite substitutable. News, right. Straight up news reportage. If the *New York Times* puts up a pay wall, you simply go to Google News and you can find another news site that carries essentially the same story that doesn't have a pay wall or where you don't have to register and still can get the same information. So to the extent that the *New York Times* long-term business fortunes rely on this strategy that even though people come to them, even though they are harder to get to than anyone else, because the brand *New York Times* is more valuable, I think is a doomed strategy. And for artists this is really becoming the case. Where I sit down to do something in front of my computer to kill an hour I can look at pornography, I can read a novel, I can get into instant messaging, I can play a massively multiplayer on my role-playing game and they are all one click away to finding the thing that's just as fun as the thing that I was planning on doing. If the thing that I was planning on doing costs too much, or is too hard to get to, is a pain in the ass, or is down, it is actually getting easier every day to find something else to divert yourself with for an hour or two, or day, or whatever, and something that's just as good, something that's just as educational, uplifting, interesting. You can read a fantasy novel or you can play a fantasy role-playing game and a fantasy role-playing game is just like reading a fantasy novel, except maybe you'll meet someone attractive of the opposite sex or the same sex and have a nice IM with that person and end up meeting and getting married. So it's like reading a book except maybe you get laid at the end, right! You've got to compete with all of these things and one of the only things we have left to distinguish any artist from any other artist or any amusement from any other amusement is kind of personal feeling, a personal connection with that artist. What blogging does is allows you to be conversational and when you are conversational with people they feel a personal attraction to you and that's a lot harder to substitute. It's not a brand, it's conversation, it's a friendship, and friendships are much harder to substitute than anything else and the entertainment that arises from the friendship, is an idiosyncratic relationship.

So that would be then the new non-substitutability. *The New York Times* is the old non-substitutability and what *Boing Boing* will create is a new substitutability.

Yes, it's a personal thing. It's the opposite of, say, the *Economist*, where none of the writers get a by-line. You have no relationship with the *Economist* except as a kind of general mind; there is no personal connection.

Blogs are designed to have little chunks of them ripped out and forwarded in the way that people forward jokes. I think it's an instinctive thing to do for a lot of people; it's something that is deeply human, it is deeply rooted in us.