



*Extended Abstract*

## **Information and religious sensibility**

**Graeme Kirkpatrick**

**Professor in Media Arts, Aesthetics & Narration, University of Skövde, Sweden**

**Box 408**

**541 28 Skövde**

**Sweden**

**Tel: +46 (0) 500 44 8881**

*Accepted:*

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This paper will suggest that the society that devolves its communicative and aesthetic practices to informational technologies re-formats meaning and value in a way that deprives itself of a religious sensibility. It entertains the idea that that sensibility may be integral to our human condition and especially to the sense we have of a meaningful future. The question whether this problem, if it is one, traces to the technology or to its specific employment in neo-liberalism is also raised but probably not answered.

George Steiner advances the hypothesis that “any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence” [1, p.3]. A transcendent presence makes human communication through language possible. Central to his project of making us aware of this presence is the distinction Steiner draws between consumption and ‘ingestion’. We consume commodities, including the transient ephemera of mediatized culture, but ingest meaningful texts. Ingestion is a process of embodied learning, memorization. In reciting poems learned in our youth we enact the historical dimension of our society and ourselves.

This argument rests upon a particular theory of language and its relation to the human that distinguishes it from mere information and in so doing separates communication from manipulation (the ‘moral’ dimension of Steiner’s theory). Linguistic meaning does not reduce to its logical or formal properties as these are grasped in the idea of a code but is rooted in the human body. Gesture, body and

*socius* are, as Merleau-Ponty put it, the humus of an “original semantic thickness” possessed by natural language [2, p.234]. Meaning and value are ‘bodied forth’ [3, p.29] from this thickness.

From the perspective of contemporary media theory, however, the notion of a weighty, embodied interpretation as opposed to a passive, superficial one is perhaps naïve. The distinction between consumption and ingestion seems too firmly drawn in an age when we have become used to *actively consuming* media – we dance the appropriate responses to video games, for example [4]. (Since the early 1980s this has included games with avowedly religious themes, including a version of the bible (Automata 1982)).

Steiner addresses this challenge in later work. There he argues that, “...current changes in the experience of communication, of information, of knowledge, of the generation of meaning and of form are probably the most comprehensive and consequential since *homo sapiens* development of language itself” [5, p.217]. These changes are associated with Steiner’s main concern, namely that we seem to be “losing the future tense”. The informationalisation of communication and meaning-making liberates the imaginary from the symbolic in order to free pursuit of self-interest from any of the constraints associated with actually maintaining a coherent self.

I will suggest that this is indicative of a change in the habitus of contemporary humans, in which dispositions and especially a specific experience of the temporal are standing in for ideology. Neo-liberalism [6] does not present itself as an ideology but is sedimented in individuals as a kind of expectant orientation addressed to the present (anticipation), commonly thematised as ‘maintaining a positive outlook’. This attitude is prior to any specific articulation and it maintains the human as a consumer and user of meanings, who bodies forth interpretations that are in his or her own interests. This sets the scene for a conflict of temporalities that underscores the antipathy between the informational and the religious.

## References and Notes

- 1 Steiner, G. (1989) *Real Presences* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- 2 Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) *Signs* North Western University Press.
- 3 Benjamin, W. (1985) *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* London: Verso.
- 4 Kirkpatrick, G. (2011) *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* Manchester: MUP.
- 5 Steiner, G. (2001) *Grammars of Creation* London: Faber & Faber.
- 6 Dardot, P. and Laval, C. (2014) *The New Way of the World: On neo-liberal society* London: Verso.

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