The Future of Desire: Alternative Video and the Communications Revolution

A scholarly convening charting media theorist Gene Youngblood's communications utopia.

This briefing aims to orient convening participants within the Youngblood archive, focusing particularly on the media theorist's utopian program for re-architecting the structure of information circulation. This effort spans an unfinished manuscript, lectures, articles, correspondence, and other ephemera produced between 1971 and 2016. These archival materials will frame our conversation charting how the alternative film and video movement not only sought to create *content* that subverted the mass media, but also attempted to leverage newly available video recording and broadcasting technologies to reorganize communications *infrastructure* to increase individual autonomy. Youngblood's writing often veers into the bombastic, the aphoristic; but his utopian vision for communications technologies, one elaborated in cybernetic terms, stands out among works of other video guerrillas and media ecologists for its unique weaving of avant-garde artistic production, systems thinking, and political thought.

From Expanded Cinema to the Videosphere

The work for which Gene Youngblood is most remembered today, *Expanded Cinema*, was published in 1970 and largely drew from the author's columns on film and intermedia for the underground newspaper *The Los Angeles Free Press*. Multiple projection environments like Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome*, computer films like John Whitney's elliptical animations, and even early experiments with holography exemplified the "new cinema." In Youngblood's telling, such aesthetic applications of technology arose to meet an evolutionary challenge demanded by the post-industrial explosion of technology and information: the need to "[achieve] new consciousness to match our new environment" (p. 189).

But even as he was compiling his *Free Press* columns for *Expanded Cinema*, Youngblood had already set his sights on a bigger aim — inciting a communications revolution.

In the introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Expanded Cinema* published in 2020, Youngblood remarks that his 1970 piece for *Radical Software*[1] marks the beginning of "his lifelong commitment to media-centered radical political theory." In his lectures and writings after 1970, Youngblood "never once spoke about *Expanded Cinema* as such. It was always this idea of a communications revolution—the decentralization and pluralization of the social construction of realities" (xvii).

Youngblood manifested his commitment to ecosocial revolution by calling on cultural workers to upend the structure of the mass media in many forms throughout his career. Its most comprehensive elaboration is found in an unfinished, unpublished manuscript spanning three volumes which Youngblood worked on from approximately 1970 to 1987. This project, which will serve as the starting point for our convening, was originally titled *The Videosphere*, then renamed *The Future of Desire* around 1974. Between 1969 and his death in 2021, Youngblood gave over 400 lectures and published articles in publications like *Coevolution Quarterly*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and *Radical Software* elaborating his analysis of the mass media.

The following section will provide an overview of the argument for an inversion of the structure of the mass media Youngblood elaborates in *The Future of Desire*.

Inverting the Structure of the Mass Media

Youngblood identified the period in which he wrote the *Future of Desire* manuscript as one thrown into "ecosocial crisis." Society-scale evolutionary processes that began with the Industrial Revolution had entered into an uncontrolled, unchecked positive feedback loop. Revolt against this industrial organizing principle, in Youngblood's formulation, was futile; attacking a regime here or a technology there is destined to reinstate the same logics against which one rebels. Rather, those seeking change must turn their attention to inverting the context, the infrastructure upon which systems of power unfold. That context is the mass media, where our possibilities for thought and action are formed, where our desire for certain futures is cultivated.

Luckily, Youngblood reassures, the technical conditions in the early 1970s were favorable for inverting the extant structure of the mass media, which was centralized, enabled only one-way communication, and gave rise to a passive mass audience. Fiber optic cables, portable video equipment, video discs and cassettes, and home computers formed the necessary technical infrastructure for constructing a "National Information Utility" (NIU). This nationalized communications network would operate according to a cybernetic organizing principle whereby anyone could pay a reasonably low fee to broadcast

[1] Youngblood, Gene. "The Videosphere." *Radical Software*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1970, p. 1.

whatever content they could imagine to whomever chose to listen or watch. The NIU would therefore be decentralized, user-controlled, and capable of facilitating two-way conversation. “The principle of broadcasting itself,” Youngblood argues in *The Future of Desire*, “is intrinsically threatening to individual liberty and social survival, regardless of the content that’s broadcast, regardless of political ideology, regardless of the machinery through which the broadcasting is implemented.” In other words, it is the organizing principle of the communications network itself, not the content that flows through it, that brings about a mass culture and forecloses the possibility of individual autonomy and personal freedom, which Youngblood desired above all else.

If every individual acts autonomously, conversing only with those within his or her “specialized audience,” where does the basis for unity across difference, for society as we know it, exist? Youngblood thought deeply about how a media infrastructure designed to heighten personal liberty could also enable social cohesion. In his sketch for a National Information Utility, “national consensus channels” would facilitate a democratic process by which a base reality would be synthesized. Media-makers would broadcast their version of the truth on television, and viewers would vote (each week, in Youngblood’s formulation) on which version they favored. The winning “reality,” however, should not reign supreme over each individual’s reality; rather, the consensus channel serves to maintain stability within the communication system.

Undergirding this framing of social cohesion and individual autonomy is a cybernetic understanding of systems: society, much like a biological organism, must maintain internal organization or homeostasis through feedback. An organism’s faculties for sending and transmitting messages—the component parts of feedback loops—are to be found in that system’s “sensors and effectuators.” For a society, those sensors and effectuators are its communications technologies: language, the printed word, the telephone, and, crucially for our purposes, television. When these sensing mechanisms are centralized and only facilitate messages sent unidirectionally from those in power to the masses, “an increasing specialization of the system’s sensors and effectors” occurs, with “the former narrowing their range, the latter extending their size and power” (FoD 1, p. 40).

Youngblood’s organic, cybernetic conception of society and the sphere of communications were heavily informed by his engagements and collaborations with thinkers like biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and physicist Heinz von Foerster, progenitors of the second-order cybernetics movement. Indeed, two out of the three volumes that make up *The Future of Desire* are exegeses of these scientists’ work. The key insight Youngblood derives from this unlikely source is that there is no objective reality — that all observed phenomena are determined by the unique internal organization of each individual. Therefore, the mass media’s assumption (or construction) of a mass public which shares a baseline reality is false; the broadcast’s perpetuation of such an

illusion restricts the autonomy of the individual to imagine his or her own realities, to manifest their own consciousness.

Prototyping the Communications Revolution in the Guerilla Video Scene

Unlike in *Expanded Cinema*, scene reporting on the activities of the video underground does not figure prominently in *The Future of Desire*. However, Youngblood's lectures and other writings at the time illustrate how the alternative video movement both instantiated and failed to live up to his vision for a communications revolution.

In particular, Youngblood highlighted the following artists and collectives:

- Vancouver Image Bank
- The Raindance Corporation's *Radical Software* publication
- *Magentoscope*, a kind of Whole Earth Catalog for DIY video published by Video White Light
- The Kitchen (New York)
- National Film Board of Canada's Société Nouvelle / Challenge for Change program
- Open Channel (New York), a community public access production organization
- Video Free America (San Francisco)
- Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz

One issue where Youngblood and other actors within the alternative video movement diverge is that of public access television. In one particularly scathing remark, the ever-bombastic theorist quips that "the notion of public access as presently defined by those claiming to represent 'counter-culture' or "alternate video" movements is perfectly compatible with the values of the industrial society" (*Future of Desire*, p. 54). Public access programming, in Youngblood's view, addressed itself to the content of broadcasting rather than its structure.

Youngblood often cited the work of Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz as the most visionary prototype for a media infrastructure that would increase the channels available for virtual human-to-human interaction (in fact, Youngblood produced another unpublished manuscript focused solely on Galloway and Rabinowitz entitled *Emotional Bandwidth*). The duo's Electronic Cafe, originally commissioned for the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, connected computer terminals in five different cafes across the city to build a pre-internet social network. Using telephone lines, slow-scan video, a bulletin board system, and interactive drawing, members of the community could hold conversation or collaborate on creative projects with other users across the city — all for free. Electronic Café modeled how communications networks could function as a public

utility as well as the role artists could play in bringing about a communications revolution — namely, not by focusing solely on producing content to distribute to mass audiences through existing channels, but by creating new channels through which anyone could communicate with their own chosen communities.

Evaluating Youngblood's Project Against Today's Information Sphere

Considering the videosphere we inhabit today, it would seem that the inversion of the mass media structure for which Youngblood yearned so vociferously has indeed come to pass. A vast number of individuals possess tools which enable them to broadcast their own messages to specialized audiences in virtual space. The "mass media" races to catch up to the speed at which user-generated social media content moves.

However, in the post-*Expanded Cinema* work that occupied him for the rest of his life, Youngblood is very clear about *communication* as such not being the aim of decentralizing media production and distribution. Rather, communications technologies should support our ability to hold *conversation* with one another. Communications networks should be primarily dialogic, rather than primarily discursive.

"Conversation," in Youngblood's formulation, stands in for what others might call politics. The free, democratic exchange of ideas and opinions in a virtual public square would liberate individuals from the top-down corporate control of consciousness. Moreover, this public square would not be the mass audience created by centralized media producers to more effectively sell their version of reality; rather, a decentralized system would give rise to "autonomous reality communities." The broadcast becomes the narrowcast.

Archipelagos of "autonomous reality communities" might accurately describe the information ecosystem we currently inhabit, though they have not been the conduits for conversation Youngblood imagined they would be. Memetic content spreads throughout the internet like viruses, radicalized subgroups retreat to obscure forums, and, increasingly, AI-generated content populates the web with hallucinated information. Information networks seem to facilitate not communication nor conversation, but something else entirely. Was Youngblood's prescription for the ills of one-to-many broadcasting off base, or did we build the wrong kind of autonomous reality communities?

Convening Goals

Sponsored by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation, the "Future of Desire: Alternative Video and the Communications Revolution" is a two-day convening during which approximately 15 scholars and curators will gather for presentation and discussion. The goals of this meeting are:

- To surface insights that will inform curatorial research for a future exhibition, to be held at Gray Area, highlighting resonances between Gene Youngblood's media politics work and video art from 1970 through the present;
- To bring unpublished materials from the Youngblood archive to the attention of media scholars and curators;
- And to form new connections across the academic and cultural sectors.

Taking materials from Gene Youngblood's archive (including unpublished manuscripts, articles, lecture transcripts and recordings, correspondence, and other ephemera) as our starting point, we will, broadly speaking, address the following questions:

- How does Youngblood's work on infrastructures for a decentralized communications network differ from other contemporaneous approaches to media politics and activism?
    - How does the second-order cybernetic foundation of his arguments differentiate *The Future of Desire* from other articulations of the structure of communications networks?
- How has artistic production from 1970 through the present subverted or reimagined communications networks and the social forms they inculcate? In which ways have Youngblood's utopian visions resonated with or directly influenced such work, and in which ways have artists challenged Youngblood's diagnoses and prescriptions as the structures through which information flows have evolved?
- Youngblood is quite clear about not wanting his writing to be read as a forecast of the future. Nevertheless, reading *The Future of Desire* does feel a bit like reading a prophecy. What about this work has indeed come to pass, and what hasn't? Where was Youngblood's analysis clouded by utopian optimism, and where was it prescient? What useful insights might his work present for reshaping our contemporary sphere of information exchange?