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THE REDEMPTION OF THE AMATEUR

BY GENE YOUNGBLOOD

We must create at the same scale as we can destroy. The counterforce to the scale of destruction is the scale of communication.

—Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz of Mobile Image

We approach the millennium with a particular sense of our fallibility as a civilization, our mortality as a species, our responsibility as a generation and, alas, the inadequacy of our culturally limited imaginations in the face of prodigious challenge. The wisdom of our time is that we are culturally and politically unprepared to face the perilous circumstances we have created, circumstances caused by the very institutions that were supposed to prevent them. We find ourselves in a crisis of imagination and creativity, a crisis of consciousness and desire. We know we must create at the same scale as we can destroy, but we seem incapable, as a nation, of imagining such a thing, and what can't be imagined doesn't exist: Inconceivability is the only mark of impossibility.

From all this there can be only one conclusion: We must resocialize ourselves. Resocialization presupposes an ability to hold continuously before ourselves alternative models of possible realities so that we might visualize and conceptualize other ways of being in the world and learn how to desire another way of life. This is what is meant by creating at the same scale as we

can destroy: *We must create ourselves* as imaginative beings, as what Jacques Lacan called "desiring subjects" who accept or reject the world that we ourselves have constructed through the very same ability — or inability — to imagine and to desire. Resocialization, in other words, requires nothing less than cultural revolution, which requires in turn a *communications* revolution — that mythical transformation of culture and consciousness which, for at least a generation, has seemed perpetually about to happen.

The idea of a communications revolution used to be about video; today it's about the computer as a universal machine, a metamedium that will contain and become all media. It implies widespread access to tools for the simulation of audiovisual reality (computers) and to user-controlled networks for creative conversation about those realities (two-way computer/video networks). Ultimately, however, the myth of a communications revolution isn't about technology at all; it's about possible relations among people. It implies an inversion of dominant social relations whereby today's hierarchical mass culture would disperse into autonomous, self-constituting "reality communities" — social groups of

politically significant magnitude realized as communities through telecommunication networks and defined, therefore, not by geography but by consciousness, ideology and desire. Only as constituents of such communities could we both produce models of possible realities (art) and also control the cultural contexts in which those models are published and perceived (politics). I believe this is not only possible but essential for human dignity and survival: The continuous simulation of alternative realities within autonomous reality-communities represents our only hope of effectively addressing the profound social and political challenges of our time. Freedom and creativity are impossible without control of meaning; if we don't control the cultural contexts that define the meaning of our lives, the Mercantile Masters will.

The electronics revolution, bringing tools of ever-higher quality at ever-lower cost, is erasing the distinction between amateur and professional insofar as that's determined by the tools to which we have access as autonomous individuals. Surely no motivation is so pure, no achievement more dignified than that of the amateur who does it for love (the word literally means "the lover"). Yet in our professionalized society this most noble aspiration has been reduced to a sneering joke — the amateur as some kind of bozo — as though doing it for love were synonymous with ineptitude, an absence of quality and value. The amateur isn't good enough to make money. As a matter of fact, economic gain *per se* defines neither amateur nor professional. Certainly professionals can love their work and in this sense also be amateurs — in which case the most important thing about them is their amateurism. Conversely the amateur can be a professional, but in a different sense: one who is ethically or politically motivated, one who needs to communicate rather than simply earn a living in communications.

The relevant distinctions between the professional and the amateur, then, have to do with commitment, values and ethics. These are particularly vivid when differences in technical capability are erased: When both amateur and professional have access to the same tools of production, the

only thing that distinguishes them is commitment. The professional is committed to profit or to an institutional role (or both) rather than to the practice which that institution professionalizes, or the broader social and political context in which it is embedded. As a result, professionalism doesn't raise standards, it lowers them: Professionals are frequently proficient, even "expert," at something they have no ethical insight into or concern about. In contrast, the practice of the amateur is inherently ethical: Love beholds the world from a metadomain of wholeness and unity; it means concern for the consequences of one's actions and those of others. Love is not blind, it is visionary.

The redemption of the amateur will be one consequence of the communications revolution that is gradually decentralizing our hierarchical mass culture into a republic of highly specialized autonomous networks (a heterarchy). For as a network becomes more specialized the concept of audience becomes that of constituency and the distinction between producer and consumer becomes increasingly meaningless. The professional, as hired expert in the techniques of producing commodities called "programs for mass distribution to consumers" is replaced by the more appropriate model of the skilled amateur as a constituent of a community of desire. He or she pursues this work not as a hobby or an avocation, but as a vocation — not in the industrial sense of a trade or profession but in the classical sense of a calling, as to a religious career or to the life of the artist or the revolutionary.

The call to cultural revolution through a communications revolution is heroic, and those who conspire in it are heroes in the classical sense, which is very different from the idea of the hero in modern times. The modern existential hero suffers adversity in the name of a principle that gives meaning to his or her life: Through courage and individualism meaning is found in a meaningless world. In contrast, the classical hero is called upon, either inwardly or outwardly, to find an entirely new direction, a new perception of reality. This distinction is profound, for only as classical heroes — that is, only as a nation of amateurs, not professionals — can we resocialize ourselves and create at the same scale as we can destroy.

As Joseph Campbell showed in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the path to classical heroism is the same in all cultures and in every historical epoch. Certain things happen: First there's the "Call to Adventure," which the subjects refuse initially;

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but they're drawn to it, and if they're to be heroes they go back and answer the call. This call is to wider perception, attainable only through a shamanistic odyssey from which they return as avatars, exemplary embodiments of the new reality. They step out of the culture and a new culture forms around them. And by following the visionary hero, society evolves. The view that civilization evolves by increments is a relatively recent quasi-Darwinian notion; in fact, cultural anthropology shows that societies advance by quantum leaps, by mutation, by what we call Renaissance — and classical heroes are the initiators of these great resocializing leaps. They are the avatars of resocialization: Their lives are art.

The need for resocialization requires that everyone's life become a work of art; and only a communications revolution can furnish the "technologies of the self," as Michel Foucault would define them, with which we might begin the reconstruction. Only through these instruments can the social construction of reality — hence of the self — be rescued from the tyranny of cultural imperialists (media professionals) and returned to the artists and amateurs who conspire to secede from this profane union and to constitute in its place a republic of autonomous reality-communities, as the laboratories of resocialization. Behold: Armies of amateurs gather even now, preparing for the Image Wars, conspiring to abolish once and for all the ancient dichotomy between art and life, destiny and desire. ■

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