The Power of the Reader
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The digital world is self-celebratory. It celebrates with bits the conversion of everything into bits. The compliments come both from the private sector which finds in digital systems an inexhaustible source of profits, as well as from public institutions and NGOs which make services and the administration of their documents more efficient by means of the digital transformation. In our imaginary there is no room for a digital blackout, but for an intriguing and praised technological development which, in the field of everyday life, evolves from the mobile device to wearable technology and, particularly in that of music, among many unthinkable paths, it evolves from the real body to the hologram and to new forms of creation, participation and delight –Hatsune Miku is a good example of the latter.

But it is not all compliments: a critical stand towards the digital world is rising, also with bits –and with ink on paper. A radical expression of that criticism, focusing on communication, can be found in the book Frentes digitales. Totalitarismo tecnológico y transcultura. Its author, Antonio García Gutiérrez (2016), carries out an invective against digital communication which recalls the theory which Herbert Marcuse (1993 [1954]) expounded in the decade of the 1950s around the concept of one-dimensional man. To García Gutiérrez, digital technology is “an instrument strategically used by the ‘glocal’ economic, ideological and political power to control the people’s will substratum by favoring unlimited, logical and technically mediated communication, with the intention of occupying the totality of their existence by offering progress and freedom mirages and dream states […] by means of shiny and desired portable devices when, in reality, nothing but greater surveillance, control, indoctrination, consumerism, alienation and involution can be seen in the horizon“ (9-10).

Given that the digital medium –both in its academic and non-academic expression– has become the necessary condition in research into music, the dilemma between a self-celebratory and an apocalyptic vision of it should be the subject matter of intense debate. Most probably, a discussion which weighed up those two perspectives would recognize solid arguments in both of them. One of the strengths of the digital medium is related to the circulation of knowledge and, in particular, to writing and reading. The digital medium is not only recipient and vehicle of the result of research but also an environment which rules the conditions under which research is generated, developed and spread. That is to say, its presence is more than a prosthetic extension of research routines. Particularly, the digital medium has established new reading and writing
conditions which neologisms like “cyberspeech”, “cybertext”, “cybertextuality”, “technoreading”, “technowriting”, electronic word, hypertext, among many others, bear witness. Almost two decades after Manuel Castells (2001) proposed the expression The Internet Galaxy, digital information traffic has unbalanced our double role as readers and writers, as it has potentiated the reading hermeneutics as compared to the act of writing. Let’s expand this idea.

The Internet gives access to a flow of information which has no precedent as to its dimension, growth speed, ease of access and availability of search mechanisms. There is no text—article, book, multimedia work, etc.—outside the influence of the World Wide Web or unscathed by any digital instance. As a consequence, there is no text alien to a mass of information which grows vertiginously. Prior to being used in a text and/or during the making itself of the text, research data and their processing are usually enlarged, corroborated and/or contrasted against that mass of information. In particular, the enormous diversity of musical expressions which sites like Youtube contain, the open access to periodic publications and the increase in accessibility to audiovisual collections contribute to this routine. Whereas prior to the making of the definitive version of a text, everything is—or should be—excitement, dialogue, transformation and reaffirmation, the finished text means, to a certain extent, a closing, as by nature writing responds to a teleology which culminates in the crystallization of ideas. It is obvious that an author can reformulate the ideas expressed in this or that text but, unless they want to leave that reformulation in the realm of orality, they will have to express their new ideas in writing again, that is to say, through another crystallization practice.

The ideas crystallized in texts become available to readers who use the information that the Internet offers to evaluate its veracity, coherence, originality and/or fecundity. That is the moment when the reader acquires a much bigger power over the text than they used to have in the pre-digital era as, without rising from their chair and with a simple sequence of clicks, they will be able to find examples which validate its contents, counter examples which question it and other texts which will enable them to evaluate it as original, relativize its originality or even allow them to consider it as plagiarism. Also, it is most probable that the digital environment will allow the reader to know the academic and intellectual context to which the text belongs, as well as previous works by the same author which will allow them to find consistencies or inconsistencies in his or her thought. The risk is exclusive property of the author. The reader surpasses the author to the extent that they have, in theory, a bigger mass of information at their disposal, and that their evaluation usually occurs in absence of the author. The power of the reader is well known by several high rank officials from central countries who saw how individuals avid to weaken their power or by the simple fact of exercising their journalistic job, used the net to unmask irregularities in their university degrees and also by evaluators of academic articles who participate in the system of blind peer review, among others.

Doing research involves occupying the position of reader and writer successively. It is a circular game: the weaknesses and/or strengths which we recognize in other writers’ texts nurture our own texts which, subjected to the hermeneutic game of other readers, also evidence weaknesses and/or strengths. This is simply what we call “criticism”. The quantity of information which digital networks provide can be a great ally of criticism. One of the many
questions to which the dilemma mentioned in the first two paragraphs leads is whether in the near future the digital world will propitiate conditions which favor critical thinking or will become an instrument of the economic, ideological and political power capable of making its users uncritical individuals. I leave it to the reader, with all their power, to answer or widen this question, barely outlined, and to evaluate this editorial as well as the articles, reviews and interview which make up this new issue of El oído pensante.

References