

WHO POINTS OUT?

by Freek Lomme

Technical resources and professional expertise, which can now be applied more and more specifically, are resulting in an increasing complexity that pertains to all levels of our culture – this could perhaps be the most important development of our times. This complexity offers opportunities yet simultaneously generates an expanding, non-transparent environment. The ever-increasing complexity also gives rise to increasing control over the complex system. Controllers controlling controllers: representatives of product or service manufactures organisations, of producers, consumers or governments. Everyone has information to dispense – either as a contribution to the system that itself hurtles onward, as unsolicited advice, or else offering alternatives to it.

The degree to which we draw on particular services to cope with this complexity can be increased through recourse to specific resources or expertise – through comparison, by using nifty devices and other things, all of which cost us time, both to acquire them, install them, service them, to write them off and to administer them. On the other hand, the choice to employ such services seems to become less of a free choice, simply because we are unable to properly oversee all the consequences, and to get that overview would entail investing an increasing amount of time. Being able to apply our choices freely is becoming less straightforward and more complex – increasingly, we are able to neither understand the

woods nor the trees, never mind articulating them or determining our position in relation to them – we can neither know everything nor oversee it.

Historically, regions have developed where technology, bureaucracy and knowledge are most deeply embedded. These are the regions we previously referred to as *the West* – and it is precisely here that the scenario of George Orwell's 1984 seems to have become most real. We could designate this a technocratic society, i.e. one which is experienced as a technocratically repressive system whereby the logic of that system curtails civil liberties at the expense of the free citizens. Our sounding boards and our relationships no longer happen face to face, with our neighbour, family member or whoever, but via portals. *Faces* are being taken over by *interfaces*. This is reflected in basic issues: in the public debate surrounding the question whether, and to what extent, individual liberties are in conflict with collective freedoms; questions of whether the public sector should be made private and if the private sector should be made to take public responsibilities; and in the philosophical discussion about whether neoliberal capitalist enthusiasms have been taken a step too far, supply and demand having become the sole, unconscious impulse propelling our minds and our bodies forward.

The proponents of this model – those who believe in its logic or simply in its fruits – will contradict this and point to the service it offers us in our dealing

and doings – a patronising positioning by the system itself – a system which we can only hope is inspired by solidarity active within that system and which makes it possible for us to contribute to a solidarity beyond ourselves, our family, business, city, country etc. Expressed in concrete terms, this service articulates itself by beckoning us, encouraging us to follow. The recent rise of *social design* is a prime example, whereby the environment is so designed that we are automatically pointed in the right direction, following a safe route and meanwhile carrying out the transactions which help ourselves, and everyone else along.

This implicit steering usually passes unnoticed – neuroscience knows what people's brains respond positively to, and determines the conditions for a bio-political environment that panders to us. Clients ask designers to mould public and private spheres into a "synergetic" whole in order to accommodate their system, the designers then give form to the appointed task. We, as subjects, are thus subsumed, in dubious manner, into the logic of a context that is modelled on the premises of the system that it serves. Here a dubious ingestion occurs – of the subject by its context – effectively pushed into service as a deterrent within the system, a system more elegant in appearance than ever before. Those receiving assignments may well attempt a dialogue but will demonstrate their autonomy only reluctantly. Clients usually insist on their returns.

Urged on by technological resources and the professional skills operating the system, a determined concept revitalises on this horizon: *nudging*. Derived from old-fashioned marketing techniques, the application of *nudging* is now spreading from the innocent window display toward a total control of our environment. It concerns an implicit nudge in the right direction. It can be given when people take out insurance or buy a book, when they go to social services or when they open a page. Increasingly, *nudging* is merged with social exchanges – care, logistics, trade and warfare – because, in order to complete the transaction, our dedication is required everywhere.

Depending on your specific personal needs when making a choice, and

depending on your penchant for basic freedoms, the technocratic society can be either a congenial promise or a doom scenario. The fact is that we are unable to consolidate many of our achievements without this complex society. We have to just accept that we can no longer handle the concrete situation within which we practice our basic freedoms. *Make believe* – in other words, a situation in which we trustingly transfer our own ability to judge, to that of a given portal or interface that acts under the auspices of a complete system – has become a vital component of our cultural fabric.

Since postmodernity, when this fiction still seemed palpable enough to be envisaged as a scenario, that fiction has now actually become reality. We live in simulacra where we outsource our basic freedoms to the portal or interface that first wins our confidence or seems to perform best, meanwhile oblivious to the programmer that set up the portal for us. And precisely now that trust is being transferred from the advice of a neighbour or friend, to that interface, solidarity becomes another issue. Doubt is something between you or I with respect to the system's interfaces – they are so well made as to eliminate all doubt.

We hear the bells ringing but cannot recognise the tune. At times, confronted with these bells, we experience an odd sense of limitation, of lack, of emptiness or wonder, about something we feel could exist, or perhaps does, somewhere. At such moments, and at moments when an intangible doubt is cast, *nudging* can, if applied autonomous to the forces in-situ, make us more aware of the breaches appearing in our freedoms. An interface can become a catalyst for deformation rather than affirmation, can nurture us by providing doubt, can create gaps which we need to fill in ourselves. It can spur us on despite there being no end in sight, or even proffer a radically different scenario, alerting us to the possibility to question or to change the meaning of something in our environment. An unobtrusive service inasmuch as it simply prods us towards the breach – a service that confronts us with the repressive context of our every move...