Questions from Pablo Gámez Cersosimo

" Wir fragen nach der Technik und möchten dadurch eine freie Beziehung zu ihr vorbereiten. Das Fragen baut an einem Weg, ein Weg des Denkens." Martin Heidegger

The email interview below was conducted by Pablo Gámez Cersosimo for his upcoming book *Depredadores Digitales: una historia de la huella de carbono de la industria digital* (Penguin Randicoom House|Debate, Mexico City) on the carbon footprint of the digital industry.

PGC: What's behind the artificial nature of our digital platforms?

GL: Platforms occur to us as mixed realities. They are both virtual yet real, material yet digital, abstract yet concrete. The everyday platforms as mixed realities are alive. We're inside them and we cannot merely observe them as objects from a distance. We should not put these 'ecologies' so easily aside as simulations. Platforms are not entertainment games in the traditional sense. They're real in the same way as game theory is real and become true in their own right. Uber is not a simulacrum, neither is Amazon. In the past years, we've made the infrastructure turn for a reason. When we hear the word platform we think of scale, datacentres, cables, delivery bikes, precarious work for little or no money. Facebook is not offering a parallel world to us—if only social media would do this.

PGC: Is it possible for you to talk about digital feudalism?

GL: This thesis was developed by US East coast theorists McKenzie Wark and Jodi Dean and takes the 'regression' thesis to a next level. What happens when capitalism is no longer a progressive force that brings progress and innovation? The platform 'serfdom' of both precavious workers and enslaved users that have nowhere else to go goes hand in hand with a rentier class that is no longer living off the profits of 'productive' capital that has been invested in factories but off bloated real-estate assets. As Dean describes it in LARB: "A property-less underclass will survive by servicing the needs of high earners as personal assistants, trainers, child-minders, cooks and cleaners." The digital element here is one of even more efficient ways of coordination of market forces in a post-industrial urban ruin landscape in last factories that exist have been outsourced elsewhere (often reallocated to Asia).

Monopolies make sure that the 'freedom' of both workers and consumers is being reduced. The feeling that there's nowhere else to go adds up to growing awareness that we're trapped, as if we fell into an abyss. A critique of the neo-feudalism thesis might be the absence of court culture. Where are today's neo-aristocratic sensibilities? The Kardashians ultimately disappoint. We operate within the narrow bandwidth of the 'premium mediocre' The global underclass really deserves a better billionaire class... The 1% is no longer cultured and in that sense mirrors the moral 'decline of the rest'. It is the historical role of the diminishing middle class to complain about the erosion of democracy, the rise of fake news and corruption. But these appeals no longer have much legitimacy, let alone hegemony.

PGC: Are the answers that societies have given to covid-19 correct to accelerate and more digitization?

GL: In my understanding, the digitization phase has already come to an end some years ago. In many affluent countries, we no longer need to invest in personal computers, scan archives or write software, for that matter. We have closed the stage of introduction. This is why people stopped using the term 'new media'. The discussion shifted to a battle over the design or architecture of large digital infrastructures. Even in so-called poor countries, this is no longer the case due to a phenomenal uptake of smartphones. The digital integrates with extreme inequality. There is still a 'digital divide', don't get me wrong, but today the issue is about ownership, surveillance and often invisible forms of data extraction.

The covid-19 regime is introducing new forms of collective control. With this, I mean that power, in its current digital form, is transcending, away from mere individual empowerment and 'privacy' violations. Digitization can easily become a myth. Let's instead talk about how self-organization can happen today, with or without apps, how we can stage community gatherings that facilitate dissidence and allows minority voices not just to heard but to enter centre-stage and take over decision making itself. The digital realm is not just yet another input device for the powers to be.

PGC: Where is the Great Digitization of our societies leading us?

GL: Thanks for this most interesting reference to Karl Polanyi and his 1944 classic *The Great Transformation*. One day the next Polanyi will stand up and write about the political and economic origins of our digital time. Will the digital lead to a market society 2.0, as blockchain enthusiasts claim or can

we make a fresh restart with a more equal and sustainable plan economy in which digital tools will help us to reward labor and use scarce resources in a better way. The subordination of society by digital monopolies and their extraction 'markets' will inevitably lead to dictatorship and uprisings. One thing is certain, the digital principles will be deeply embedded in our future political economy and the digital will not merely deal with (human) communication and the organization of information.

PGC: For our digital ecosystem to work, it takes a lot of energy. Do we need to be worried about the dimension that the digital carbon footprint is acquiring worldwide?

GL: I remain optimistic here. Soon it will be possible to measure the digital carbon footprint in a way that's accessible for individuals. These calculations will have to be all-inclusive and list the energy of datacentres and cables but also the use of rare metals and pay a fair price for manufacturing. The focus will also have to shift to maintenance and the fight against planned obsolescence of both hardware and software. It's widely known that we do not need 5G. A new smartphone is no longer the better one. A case in point is the absurd amounts of electricity it takes to mine cryptocurrencies, create and maintain these blockchains. We already know this is not necessary and can be done in much more efficient ways, including the introduction of 'data prevention' principles. Distributed ledgers will be used for specific tasks, not as a general administration principle.

PGC: Why is the digital carbon footprint not an issue of concern for The Hague?

GL: The Dutch liberal-conservative governments of the past decade has no climate agenda and couldn't care less. Soon, Dutch traders can make a buck out of the energy transition business, who knows. The Netherlands is arrogant and backwards in this respect, or 'pragmatic', as they would like to call it themselves. I am looking forward to reading your book on this issue. As a global tax haven and digital 'port', Dutch policies have a keen interest to prevent digital carbon footprint from becoming an issue.

PGC: Will the digital dependency that we have reached lead to digital submission?

GL: This is already the case. We should urgently move on and start to discuss, and try out, forms of refusal and resistance. The key here is to get

organized. What I am uncertain about is my own strategy to first inform, reflect and enlighten through a thorough form of criticism. Sadness is a case in point. Will a greater awareness about manufactured moods also lead to action? We've known for decades that the traditional middle class-bourgeois strategy of criticism and debate is not particularly effective, not the least because it gets stuck in the Gutenberg galaxy. We need new forms of visual activism. Textual critique merely contributes to the chattering (and these days twittering) classes. My work of the past three decades has tried to create awareness about platform monopolies. It is hard for me to judge the effectiveness of the chosen strategy. What's criticism in the digital, networked age in which visual culture is becoming the dominant mode of communication? This is an obstacle that digital critique first needs to tackle.