# FROM THE GRAMOPHONE TO THE COMPUTER

An odyssey of memory by Serge Muscat

For centuries, writing, painting and sculpture were the only media available to preserve traces of the past. This long period was what might be called "the period of silence." Then, in the early twentieth century, the invention of sound recording, photography and film completely changed the cultural behaviour of our societies.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the various technologies used for the conservation of information (other than writing) were fully differentiated and independent. Photography and film used silver bromide, and sound recordings used magnetic tapes controlled by an electrical signal and then analogue transistors. There was no convergence between the various technologies. Then at the end of the twentieth century the computer was invented. With this technology, all digital media found themselves joined together as one. The computer has become a "hypermedia".

Faced with this ability to gather all media into one, a number of questions now arise. The memory of the past is dependent on electronic technology and the software that accompanies it, how then is such information to be stored and disseminated, while most computer technologies are restricted by patents? The importance of having access to the memory of the past without having to rely on the companies that hold the patents to manufacture equipment capable of decoding this information, causes many conflicts.

Never before has the issue of the conservation and restoration of information stored on computers been raised as a problem. Most software products are patented, therefore it is

impossible to have true independence with respect to the information created or stored in them. We have arrived at a point where the digitization of information has gone too far to turn back. It is therefore very important to gain independence for the preservation of our history.

Since the invention of the tape recorder and camera, we have been able to maintain sound and film archives of our society. These inventions have greatly expanded the field of history, which was once confined to written documents. With the invention of these technologies, oral culture has become a kind of "oral-written culture" no longer undergoing the initial deformation of the oral culture of the past, where the stories were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The riches stored in these archives now pass through the filter of the computer to be accessed.  There is therefore a grave risk of the disappearance of valuable information that the book can not convey. Sound poetry, for example, is impossible to transcribe on printed paper as it often uses sounds that are not part of conventional language. The ability to maintain oral discourse in its original form is a significant advance, to which we do not pay enough attention in our daily lives. If the tape recorder had existed at the time of Socrates, probably the behaviour of individuals would have been different, but we also would have had a totally different approach to philosophical research.

If there was a prehistory, then the written word created a history, with audio and video recording we have entered a new age of history that will allow us to better understand the meaning of our past actions, our passions and our mistakes.

_____

E-mail : contact@serge-muscat.com