

A black smartphone is shown at an angle, its screen displaying a cosmic scene. The screen features a bright, glowing nebula or comet tail in the center, surrounded by dark space filled with stars and faint, wispy clouds. The text "MUTANT DESPITE MYSELF" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on the left side of the screen. The phone's physical home button is visible on the left edge.

MUTANT DESPITE MYSELF

A documentary project
proposed by
Philippe Baylaucq and René Barsalo
2015



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Mutant Despite Myself focuses on the massive and permanent changes currently underway in humans and their societies as brought on by age of digital communication. It chronicles and explores the premise that the advent of digital media has disrupted the age-old process whereby each generation transmits established cultural values, beliefs and processes to the following generation(s).

The film invites us to reflect on the impact of the digital tools we create and demonstrates that these tools have, indeed, already begun to shape us in new and unexpected ways ...

The film tells the story of the evolution of media up to and including today's ubiquitous digital capabilities, and explains how the massive innovations of the last 30 years make the digital environment much more than an additional communication medium.

This new paradigm calls into question many of our certainties, notably, our relationship to identity, space and time.

13333

The Grunt | - 200 000 + years*
Birth of Homo Sapiens

MUTANTS DESPITE OURSELVES?

3333

Speech | - 50 000 years

Humanity emerged with the birth of speech
and signs. Sharing information is at the heart
of the human condition.

333

Script | - 5 000 years

* A new generation is born every 15 years.
Therefore 13 333 generations equals $13\,333 \times 15 = 199,995$ years.

Modern Homo Sapiens grunted at each other
for about 10,000 generations before learning
to speak 3,333 generations ago. This was
the first major phase-change in the evolution
of human communication. The subsequent
phase-change, nearly 333 generations later,
enabled humanity to start recording speech
in the form of written symbols and text

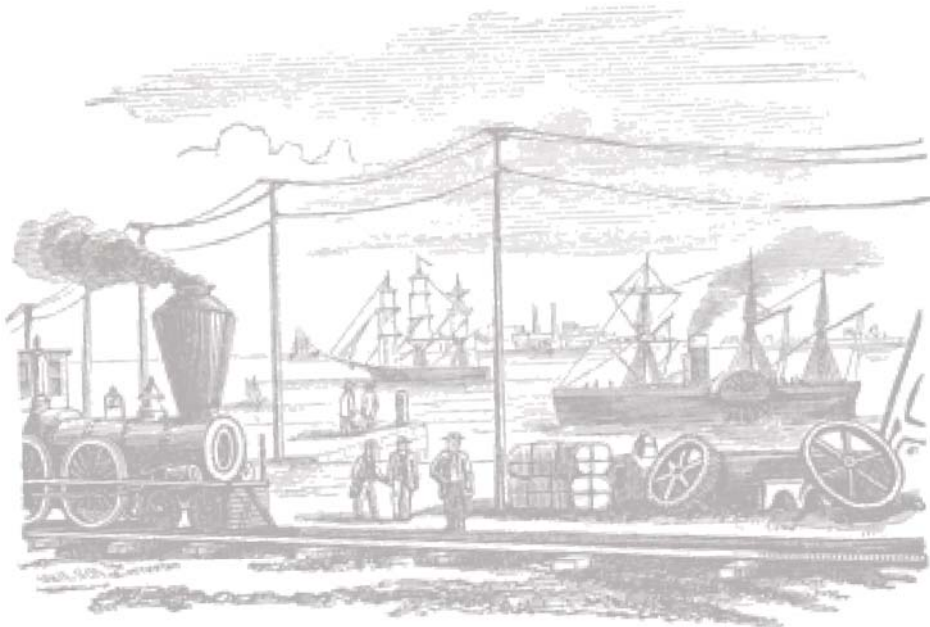
Then, the invention of the Gutenberg
printing press, just over 33 generations ago,
accelerated the spread of written information
and knowledge.



1445

33

When computers think for us, they typically make us think faster, thus extending our abilities to perform. But what price do we pay for the enhancement of our cognitive abilities?



This accelerated spread of knowledge was a key element in triggering the industrial revolution of the 19th century. Several new forms of communication appeared in succession during this seminal period.

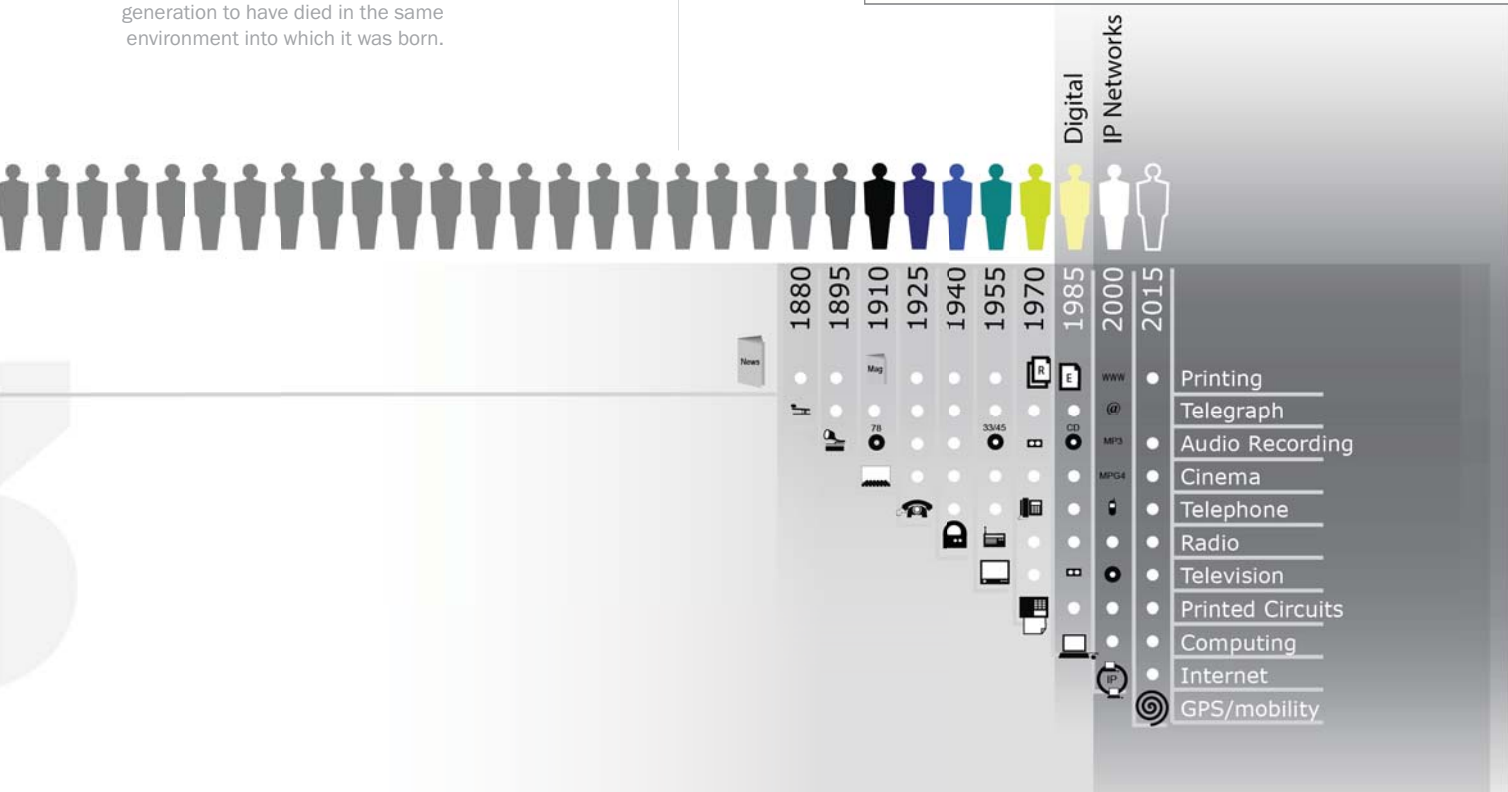
Since this turning point, and for the first time in human history, within their lifetime, ten consecutive generations have had to integrate a new mode of communication that was unknown to the previous generation.

With a new generation arriving every 15 years or so, the first seven generations born during this intense period of accelerated evolution witnessed the invention and development of electrical communications. As a result of this evolution, more information travels further and faster than was imagined possible 100 years ago.



Photographed here is the last generation to have died in the same environment into which it was born.

Computerize | - 30 years



If the change was frantic and dramatic for our ancestors - and indeed it was - it was nothing compared to the dizzying acceleration experienced by the last three generations. Progress is now measured differently because the nature of information, its speed and its applications have evolved exponentially. Digital information is now interpretable, calculable and malleable. It can be exchanged instantly and this changes everything.

The «processing» tool

Today and from now on, we live in the digital present. This marks the start of a new phase-change in the ways humans communicate. Increasingly we now create «meaning» from combinations of text, sound, still or moving images that reach us instantly via our « smart » machines.

From our beginnings as a species, our senses have allowed us to extract from our environment data upon which we decide to act or not to act. In the present digital age, the environment is not solely scanned by our senses but also by machines that can do the reading for us thanks to sensors that process, correlate, compare and evaluate information for us. Based on this collected data, the machines can initiate actions independent of our will.

These digital tools have become more than transmitters. They have evolved into processors, actors... bodiless robots.

They generate and call up content, they scan and analyze data and then connect the information that has been gathered into networked solutions that satisfy our needs. Our expectations and desires are, in turn, increasingly determined by the computing activities that surround us and in which we are almost perpetually immersed.

Ubiquitous computing

Fuelling our societies, information in its digital form now flows in all directions via hyperlinks and through space at the speed of light, from anywhere to everywhere. Standards evolve and constantly change ... nothing remains fixed, everything is in flux.

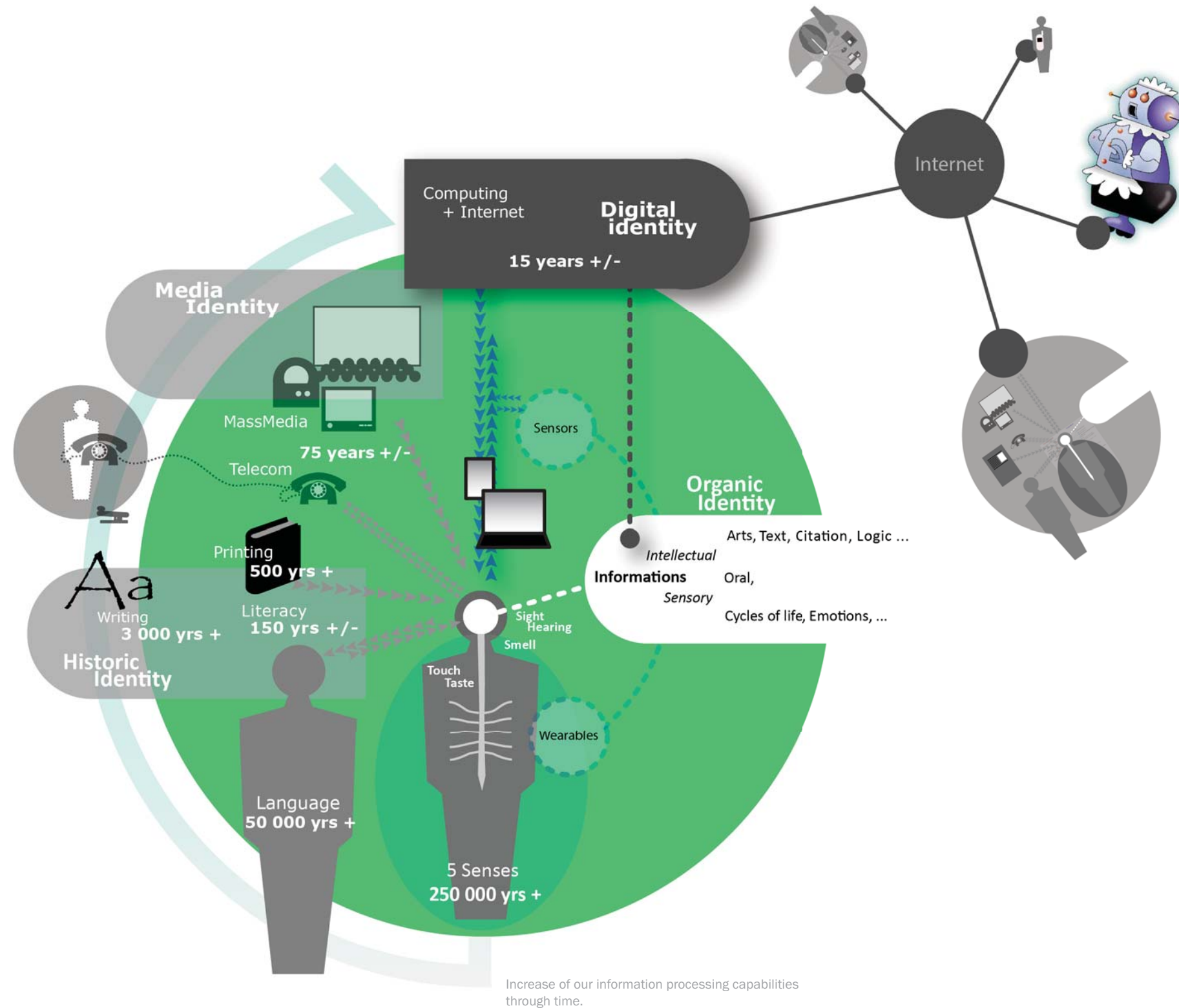
Unsolicited, digital communication has gradually crept into our existence. It acts as a manic witness to our lives, an advisor to our tastes. Every day, every millisecond, it surveys our choices, our interests, our impulses, at times, learning about us with greater intimacy than those in our innermost circle of family and friends, and this... for better and for worse.

This general phenomena goes far beyond a mere technological leap, this is the advent of a new paradigm.

All these changes bear heavily upon that thin thread that has united families and societies since the beginning of humanity. The intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, at the heart of the human condition, is being severely tested by the omniscient new paradigm.



Do we not put our human sensitivity at risk when we cede, without thinking, the interpretation of our senses and the control of our perceptions to computers?



The challenge: to maintain the transfer of values and culture between two historically key generations.

The transfer of cultural values and beliefs has always been a process carried out from one human to another, directly or through the use of specific communication tools. But digital technology is much more than a conduit or a tool that humans handle. It has become a virtual territory, an environment of perpetual exchange.

With an accelerating pace of transformation, there is less and less time for learning activities in general and less time to pass on insights or reflect on the changes at hand. This inevitably disrupts the process of cultural transmission and creation.

In this context, how do we evaluate the difference between culture (in its broadest sense) previously transmitted by humans and the culture that is now transmitted, between us, by machines? What happens when human presence is drastically reduced or eliminated from knowledge sharing, when physical humans beings disappear from the stages of storytelling and debate?

Can we really ignore the meaning of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and the commensurate contracting of knowledge between humans by channelling more and more of all transmission through digital technology?

Are there no consequences to severing the natural and historical connections that have always existed between people, carried forward from generation to generation? What are the consequences of abandoning that form of human intimacy, of breaking the thread?



* From Lud, the name of an historic individual who, resistant to change, is said to have destroyed looms at the beginning of Industrialization in England.

Luddites?

Our view is not that of some 21st century Luddites *. We are not nostalgic. On the contrary, we propose that the arrival of the digital environment be celebrated as normal evolution, both promising and prodigious ...

When there is mutation, a fundamental change such as this emerging paradigm is a leap into the future and a break with existing realities.

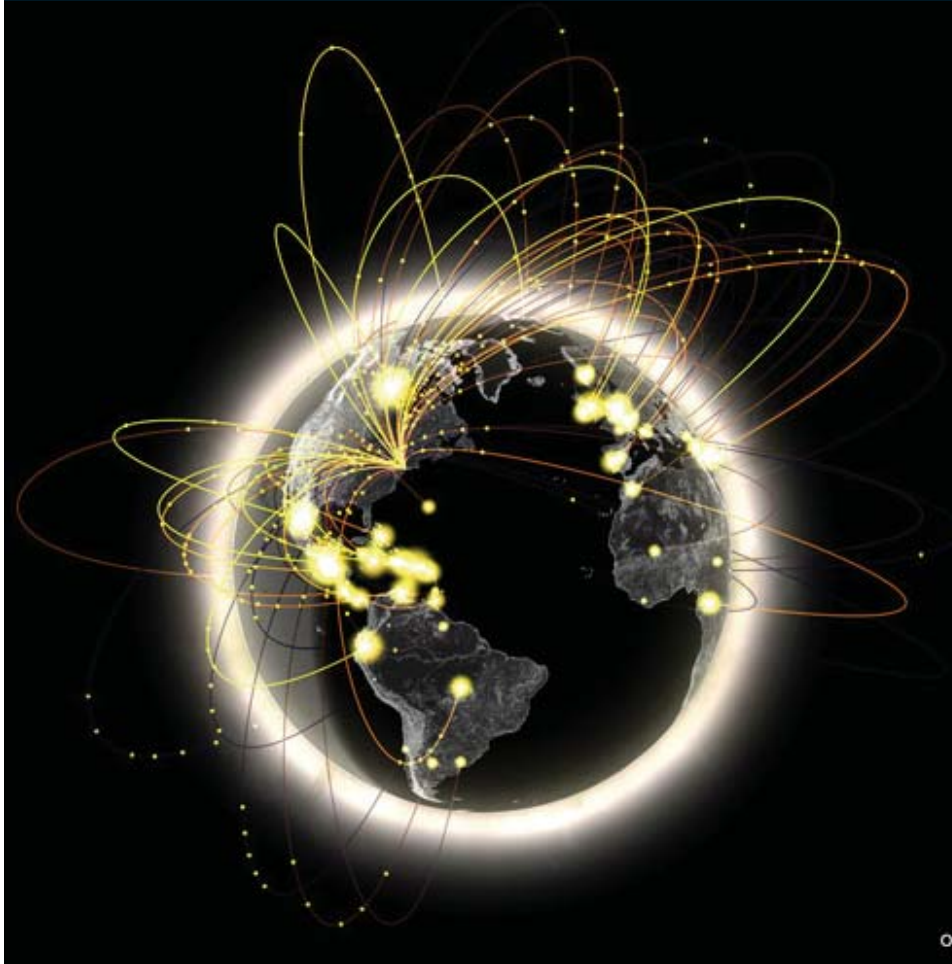
But a departure from previous norms need not be a total severance with the past.

Shouldn't the dizzying push of innovation be paced to serve the best interests of humanity? Instead it follows the inevitable evolution of electronic tools as we continually improve their design. Thus, **they** appear to be unilaterally dictating the terms and the scope of change in human communication.

We cannot and must not turn back, but then, how do we move forward intelligently in the wake of these great technological surges? These are some of the questions that we wish to explore in our film.

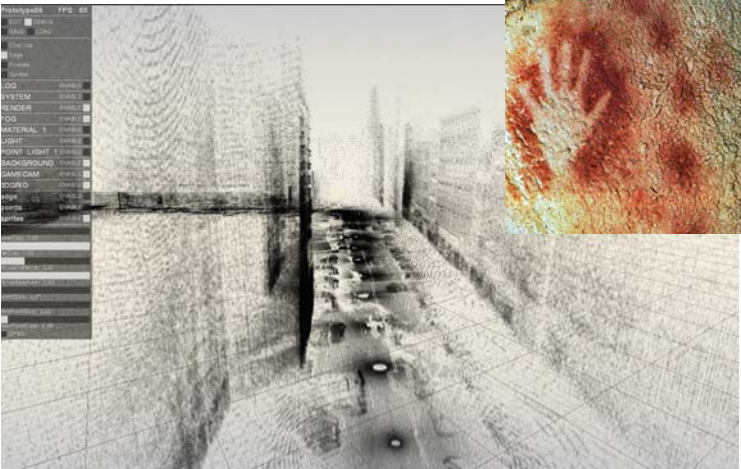


Furthermore, how is it that the unlimited reach of digital data appears to effortlessly leapfrog over the real and very tangible boundaries of our physical environment, the geographic constraints of territory? One wonders... are the thousands of miles that separate one continent from another effectively bridged by the mere actions of our fingers?



The planet has become digital. Today, each street, each road built by humans is scanned, ready to be interpreted by self-driving cars, herds of robots and a range of delivery drones.

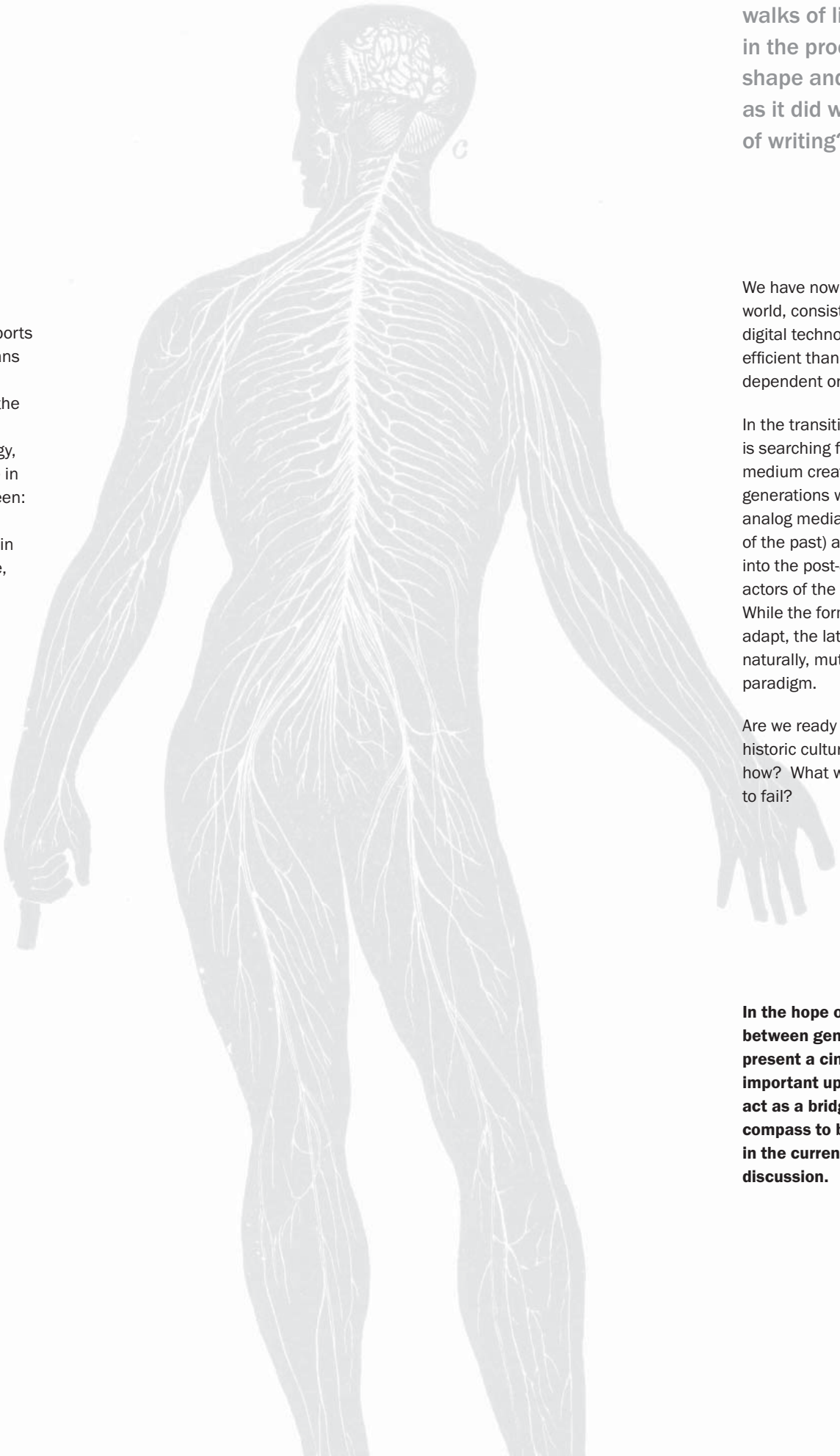
A visualization of the work of hacker artists who use 3D LIDAR data which is hidden in each image of Google Earth.



Towards a digital ecology

The thesis we want to develop here supports the idea of a digital ecology where humans do not simply undergo rapid change, but also manage to harmonize change with the invariables of the human condition. In parallel to the impact of digital technology, the human body and the territory we live in remain the same as they have always been: in one case, physiology inherited from thousands of previous generations, and in the other, a planet, the only one we have, with its limited resources and fixed dimensions.

The reality of biology, the foundations of the past, the boundaries of each personal living space, the geographical characteristics of cities, villages and countries in which humans live - all of these factors that make up our lives form the **cultural DNA** of a diversified humanity. Having evolved for thousands of generations, passed on by parents and friends, this culture underlies all our human relationships. Stemming from a primarily organic and physical world, this code must now adjust to a new digital reality. In what way does it adapt?



As the medium grows and spreads and enters all walks of life, a question arises – is the human brain in the process of reformatting itself, of changing shape and structure to adapt to digital technology as it did with the arrival of speech and the advent of writing?

We have now switched to a binary, virtual world, consisting of 0s and 1s. The advent of digital technology makes the machine more efficient than ever and humans ever more dependent on their new tools.

In the transition period where everyone is searching for their bearings, the digital medium creates a gap between the pre-84, generations who grew up in the world of analog media (our current leaders and heirs of the past) and those who arrived directly into the post-84 digital world (the young actors of the digital age and future leaders). While the former are doing their very best to adapt, the later are absorbing change quite naturally, mutating in stride with the new paradigm.

Are we ready to successfully carry out this historic cultural transfer? Do we even know how? What would be the fallout if we were to fail?

In the hope of encouraging a dialogue between generations, we intend to present a cinematic survey of this important upheaval. Our film might well act as a bridge between generations, as a compass to better analyze where we stand in the current reality. We hope it will foster discussion.

HOW DO WE TELL THIS STORY?

... AND WITH WHOM?

With René Barsalo as a companion, we will meet those who, like himself, think about the social impact of this media mutation. Sociologists, philosophers, neuroscientists and artists will be invited to clarify the issues that feed the current revolution. Here are some potential participants:

Derrick De Kerkhov, Ph. D.
Author, professor
Assistant and co-author of McLuhan

David McConville
Artist, researcher, founding president Buckminster Fuller Institute | Planetary System

Michel Cartier
Author, Professor
Our McLuhan thinker from Quebec

Sherry Turkle
Author, researcher, Professor / MIT
Anthropologist networks and technologies

Jaron Lanier
Researcher, author
New forms of networked economies

Michel Serres
Philosopher and researcher,
Outsourcing of bodily functions through the invention of technical objects

Stefana Broadbent,
Head of Collective Intelligence, NESTA
Anthropologist digital life

Jon Husband
Organizational consultant
Initiator of the «Wirearchy» concept in HR

Monique Savoie
Founding president of the SAT
Research-creation Art & Science as a driver of innovation

And many more ... willing to work with us according to the scenario retained.



Of course, there are thousands of people across the planet who are thinking about these issues. Last fall, I met René Barsalo whose perspective and quality of thinking made a deep impact on me.

Father, grandfather, and professional communicator, Rene has been one of the builders of the digital industry in Montreal since its inception. He co-founded the very first digital associations in Quebec, as well as several innovative pioneering enterprises in the multimedia and e-commerce sectors. He was the research director of the Society for Arts and Technology in Montreal [SAT] from 2004 to 2011 and has since been elected a life member of its College of artist-researchers. As an active designer, Barsalo has been passionate about technological change from the very start.

It was around 1984 that things really shifted for him. Working as a graphic designer with his own office and several employees, he remembers the day a strange object appeared on the floor at his shop. It was a personal computer, one of the first graphics PCs on the island of Montreal.

The impact of this new tool in the workplace was immediate. Within a few years, the descendants of Gutenberg, printers and other craftsmen like René were forced to reinvent their profession.

René did not resist. In the presence of such far-ranging change, he could well imagine the magnitude of the impending revolution. He began to observe, to take notes and sought to understand these changes and the impact on his own work and life. He initiated a personal chronicle in the form of a visual reflection on the changes he was witnessing. He has continued to chart those changes ever since.

Thirty years down the road René's insights are expressed visually, their scope is universal. He has become the chronicler of a revolution, proposing, in clear and brilliant diagrams, a vision worthy of his mentors Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan.

A recognized speaker, Rene has shared his analysis around the world, from Latin America to China via Europe and the Middle East.



Everywhere, he realizes that with respect to the tidal wave of change digital has brought to us, and regardless of whenever and whatever culture it finds, the issue of communication between generations is paramount both for older and younger generations. These universal concerns confirm his personal intuitions.

Topographic Data Visualization

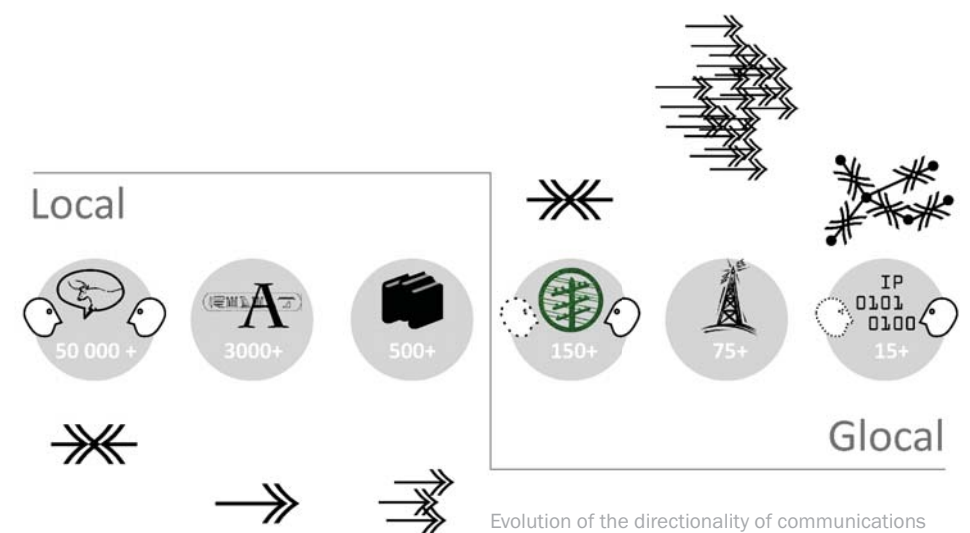
The shape, an exploration of the new digital territory

The map allows us to step back and grasp the representation of a territory. We establish a vantage point over a given field, then read its topography, judge distances and connect the dots.

We expect to do the same with our film.

We will survey the digital realm, as if it was in itself a territory, a brand new continent to explore.

As a trained designer, Barsalo's perspective and analysis have yielded figures he produces simply and clearly for his lectures on media mutations. These diagrams sum up his arguments and constitute the anchors of an original visual universe that is evocative, sophisticated and accessible.

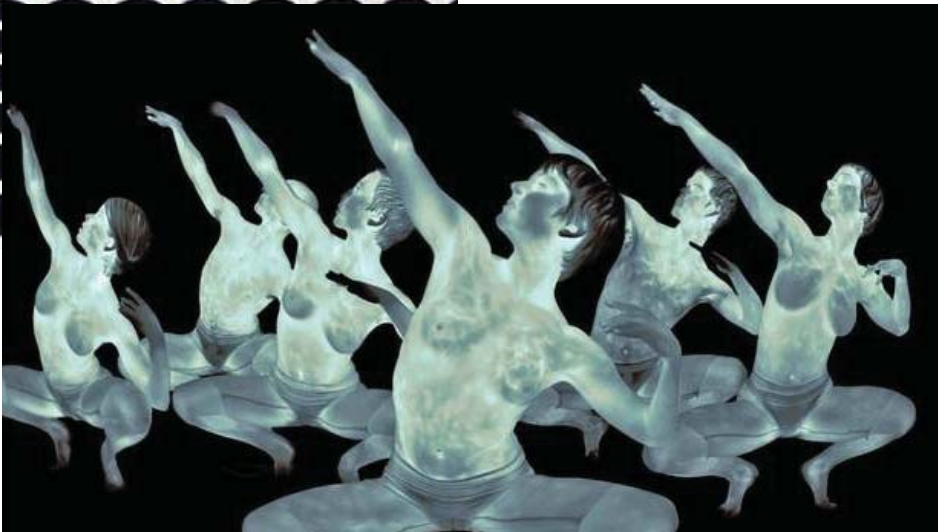
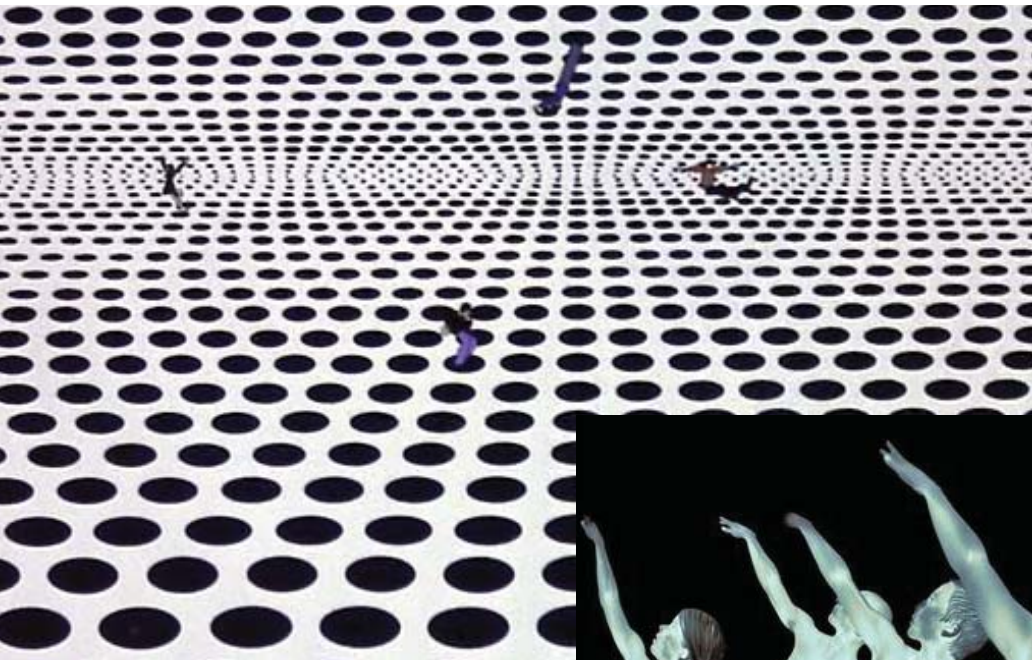


Evolution of the directionality of communications
Barsalo, 2011

Director's notes



Yellow Submarine, 1968



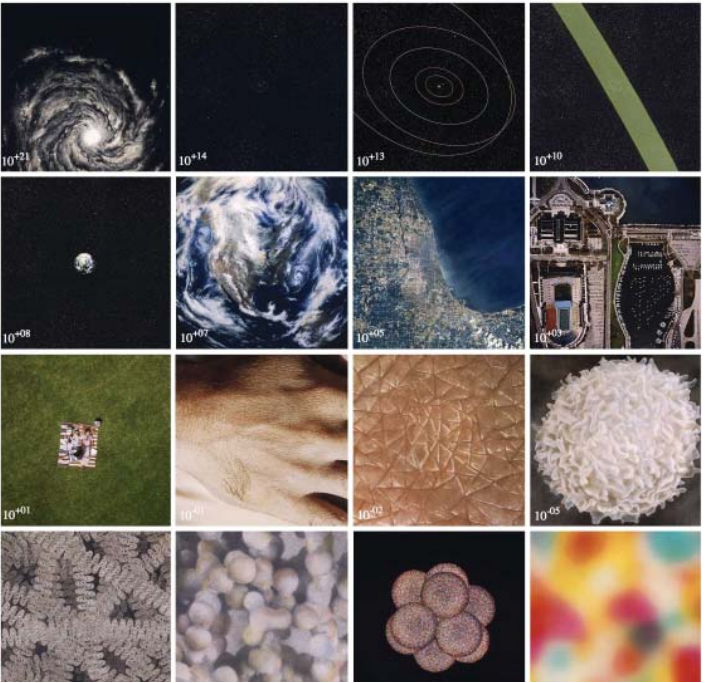
Ora, 2011

The viewer should be able grasp his ideas in their simplest illustrated form. We are counting of the fact that the diagrams will act as protagonists in a kinetically rich cinematic space where the arguments follow and unfold visually. Within this integrated narrative, these graphic elements will transform, combine, indicate, inspire.

The visual range of the film will include computer generated imagery, 3D animation, processed archives, interviews and live action. One imagines a hybrid narrative where, stylistically, the substance and the likes of such investigative docs as An Inconvenient Truth, The Corporation, The Inside Job, The Price We Pay) merge with the formal audacity of films such Powers of Ten, Yellow Submarine, Ryan, I Met the Walrus, Ora.

Perspective: local and international

As it stands, humans, planet wide, are all affected by the advent of the digital age. We believe that our project has the potential to reach a broad, international audience. In a context where the local is fast becoming universal, we are confident that the issues described and analyzed will be relevant to everyone, wherever they happen to be on the globe.



Power of ten, 1968

I was about twelve when I first saw, Powers of Ten by Charles and Ray Eames. It was a striking cinema experience for a young boy! A nine minute gem that explains and illustrates Humanity's place perched as it is between boundless space and the infinitely small worlds of sub-atomic nano-dimensions.

A man lies on the beach basking in the sun. In multiple increments of ten, we back up faster and faster as we pull further and further away from our human subject until we reach the limits of the observable universe. Then we return back home to Earth with one great cosmic zoom reaching and then pausing on the surface of the man's skin. We then dive into the dimensions of the smallest biological and molecular particles known at the time the film was made. We then conclude by returning to the beach on the edge of Lake Michigan, thus perfectly locating the place of humanity in the universe, on the surface of home, Planet Earth. It is clear, evocative and deceptively simple. This, for me, was a truly seminal moment....

When I look back, I realize that despite prodigious scientific advances in the observation of the cosmos and the analysis, by particle accelerators, of the infinitely small, the 50 year old film remains totally relevant today. Powerful thanks to its economy of form, the

aesthetics of the demonstration, its vision and even humour. A designer's film if ever there was one ...

It offers the viewer a clear picture, rooted in real facts, carried and magnified by the magic of cinema. It is a hybrid film that straddles documentary, fiction and animation. It provides a perspective that focuses the mind into a prism that concentrates many rays of meaning. Summing up in a few minutes the universal state of things it presents a Ground Zero of the human condition with a scientific explanation that is at once poetic and transcendent.

We aim for this type of clarity in our film Mutant Despite Myself. We seek to develop ways of exploring the digital phenomenon that will be incisive and help reveal the workings of the new world we have entered. People have been made giddy by the speed of it all and are often paralyzed by the sheer scope of what is now out there. They seek benchmarks and need a broader perspective on all this rapid development. The digital world is indeed breathtaking, but it shouldn't be overwhelming...

What then is the ideal cinematic form that will provide an engaging and illuminating perspective on the digital phenomenon as did Powers of Ten, in own its time? This is what we expect our research will help us determine.

Next steps

Research and development of a script based on the ideas, notes and sketches (briefly presented in this document) gleaned from René Barsalo's Mutations note book. We need to configure the narrative, imagine and choose a voice, write an initial storyline.

By refining the lead argument and sharpening our lines of thought, we will identify our ideal collaborators and invite them to participate in the project (pre-interviews).

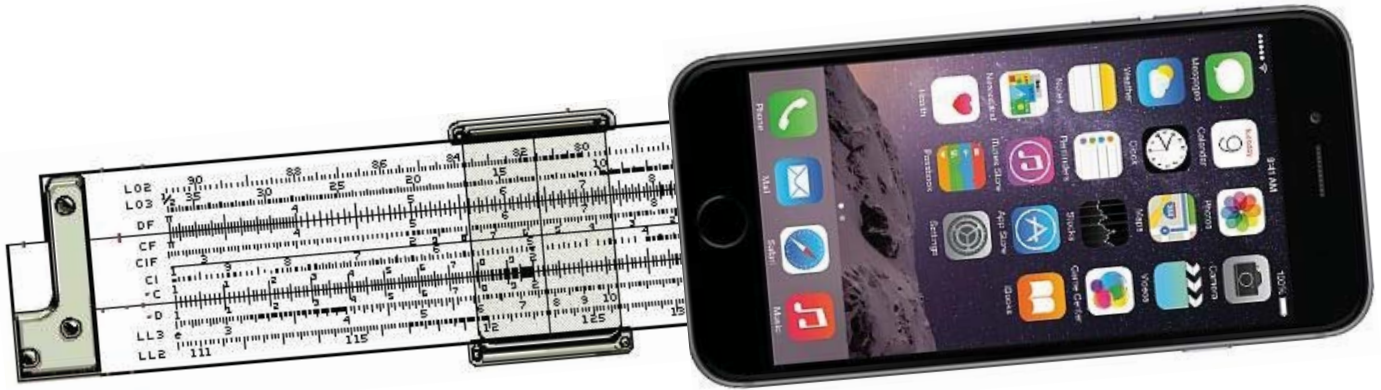
We need to develop our visual framework and will evaluate our needs in terms of archive footage. We will develop a more detailed approach using innovative tools and new image processing modes. We intend to make this a Montreal based project by highlighting the cities local high tech talent and it's international reputation as a visionary and innovative digital city.

Director's notes

PHILIPPE BAYLAUCQ



MUTANT DESPITE MYSELF



A film with which to observe, explain
and attempt to understand the mutation of our humanity,
from analog to digital.

A conversation between
generations that have grown up in a world without computers
and those that were born since.

To discuss this project, the ideas that inform it,
funding and the partnerships needed to make it happen,
please contact:

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