

3.4 Jacques Servin, BEAST (1997)

Jacques Servin's BEAST is a transitional phenomenon. It makes use of hypermedia technology in such a way as to exploit different semiotic systems semantically, in different combinations, transitional stages, and competitive situations, and it does even more than that. As a matter of fact, the system renders users almost powerless, as the cybertext exposes them to continuously transforming, interacting semiotic systems. It is never possible to finish reading a lexia, as the cybertext programme determines the speed at which lexias will be superimposed by others, regardless of what kind of pictorial or textual material they contain. It is thus hardly possible for the reader to work out any coherent sense. The prevailing sensation is that of confusion, bemusement, amusement, and challenge. The reader is indeed requested by the 'beastly' programme to compete with it, to take control by closing down and restarting it, only to lose themselves again in the entangling array of dynamic text, image, and sound.

In a psychoanalytical reading, the 'beast in man' (cf. Zola's novel of 1898), which is represented by the text, alludes to human instinct-driven behaviour, to the Freudian 'id', which is only controllable by the 'ego' provided it confronts it with the 'super-ego' (as expounded in Freud's 1923 publication *The Ego and the Id*). In Servin's cybertext, the 'successful' in the sense of 'socially acceptable' interplay between those three elements is taken ad absurdum, by giving full control to the machine, which assumes ultimate power over human will-power. Alternatively, a structuralist, or rather anti-structuralist, reading pinpoints the inherent absurdity of the 'message-for-the-message's-sake' idea as maintained by Jakobson (1960), which dominates a large proportion of contemporary web art that denies extratextual and extramedial denotation. Understood in this way, one may detect an allusion to the

Greek Laocoon myth, in which a sea monster is sent out by Apollo to kill the prophet Laocoon (and his sons), who has warned the Trojans (the name is now used to designate a powerful computer virus) against the enigmatic wooden horse. In a radical mythopoetic reading of BEAST, the receiver of web art in general, or hypertext in particular, may hence be viewed as the victim of Servin's monstrous cybertext, which is sent as a double warning, yet whose destructive symbolic power is dramatically misunderstood by the unsuspecting target readership.

Upon entering BEAST, the reader is presented, or rather bombarded, with a series of small windows containing quotations from fictional, philosophical, and expository texts. Purely pictorial windows complement the text lexias, although it is highly questionable whether or not their symbolic content reveals any relevant extra information. The picture lexias are accompanied by distinct sound sequences, which are reminiscent of Wagner's leitmotif idea. In addition to the information overload, the reader is confronted with repeating system messages requesting them to take immediate action in order to prevent the machine from crashing.

The crucial message behind Servin's seemingly random arrangements is a critique of the web, its treatment or, for that matter, lack of content and aesthetics, as well as technology's takeover. The author primarily criticizes the web's 'utter transience of attention' and its support of commercialism. By allowing the reader to feel in control and, subsequently, subjecting them to the system's caprices, Servin draws attention to human indifference to processes of human commodification and growing inertia in the face of a decrease in the need for concrete human action.

BEAST has generally been met with great critical acclaim. Mark Amerika, for instance, reviews it 'The Book and the Beast' (1998),

emphasizing its transsemiotic intertextuality, as Servin uses quotes ‘from Benjamin to Benn’, mixing them with

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images taken from various popular magazines and snippets of programming language ‘hacked’ from a variety of Windows systems. Literally, the title refers to a ‘monster java applet’ which arranges the components of the cybertext into a capricious performance of programming text that unfolds before the reader’s eyes, who is thus made into a puppet, another element of this on-screen vaudeville show. Amerika includes a short statement by Servin himself, who explains his programme as follows:

While [BEAST(TM)] [sic] highlights the ugliness of computer technology, it also leads the user to see the harmony in it, since the profusion of images, warnings, sounds and tyrannical acts on the part of the system have an ultimately pleasing rhythm. [...] The user is inducted into understanding his or her own complicity in this state of affairs. (Amerika, 1998)

With respect to BEAST’s distinctive cybertextuality, Christiane Heibach calls it ‘one of the most elaborate projects of its category, where image, text and sound interact hypermedially’ (2001: 34; my translation).