

Liberty Icons: Linguistic and Multimodal Notes on the Cultural Roots of Digital Technologies

Ilaria Moschini

Università degli Studi di Firenze (<ilaria.moschini@unifi.it>)

Abstract:

Since the famous *1984 Apple Television Ad*, personal computers and the Internet have become icons of popular culture that embody libertarian values. Indeed, they have been described as the necessary tools for the empowerment of the individual and the realization of a peer-to-peer decentralized democracy. This libertarian representation has become a frame, perceived as universal and celebrated all over the world, on a daily basis, through the creation of user-generated contents. I believe that both personal computers and the Internet are American cultural products not only because of the very peculiar historical blending out of which they originate – a mixture of Cold War industrial research culture, US counterculture and DIY ethos (Turner 2006) – but, mainly, because of the founding concept that they are associated with, i.e. freedom. Adopting a functional linguistic/multimodal perspective, my article will explore the conceptual/semantic mapping of digital discourse through the analysis of a *corpus* of texts that goes from *1984 Apple Ad* to Hillary Clinton's *Internet Freedom Speech* in order to show how the current mainframe global discourse on digital technologies is permeated with a concept of freedom that combines the US founding rhetoric of liberty together with cybernetics, gnosticism and psychedelic narrations.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Functional Linguistics, Gnosticism, Multimodality, US Rhetoric of Liberty.

1. *The Research*

The present study is part of a broader research I started in 2008, the purpose of which is to map the process I define “Webridization”: the hybridization of many discourse areas – in particular, the language of politics and the language of television – with digital discourse (Moschini 2010; 2011; 2012; forthcoming).

Over the course of the years, I have realized that the contextual configuration of contemporary American political language (e.g. presidential speeches and campaign messages) is highly influenced by digital media in terms of tenor construction and lexical selection. More in detail, political and institutional texts seem to be affected by the libertarian and “egalitarian” connotation of digital technologies (Moschini 2010; 2012). Indeed, digital technologies are commonly described as tools enabling enfranchisement, participation, democracy and social change: it is a representation that has become a frame, perceived as universal and celebrated by people all over the world, on a daily basis, through the creation and mass diffusion of user-generated contents.

I believe that such libertarian connotation is an American cultural product not only because of the very peculiar historical blending out of which personal computers and the Internet originate – a mixture of Cold War military and industrial research culture, US counterculture and DIY ethos (Turner 2006) – but, mainly, because of the set of values they are associated with. Therefore, since both personal computers and the Internet are culturally connoted mediational means and since, according to a socio-semiotic perspective of language, “acts of communication are forms of social discourse and a metaphor for the social actions and belief systems of a given culture” (Threagold 1986, 44), the exploration of the ideological load of the context of use (which is never neutral) is crucial to fully “unpack” the realization of meaning in “webridized” discourses.

In this paper, I will explore the founding concept of this ideational component of digital discourse – freedom – through the semiotic-linguistic analysis of a *corpus* of texts that goes from 1984 *Apple Ad* to 2010 Hillary Clinton’s *Internet Freedom Speech*. In particular, I will examine the meaning-making processes used in different texts to show how the current mainframe global discourse on digital technologies is permeated with a concept of freedom that combines the US founding rhetoric of liberty¹ together with cybernetics, gnosticism and psychedelic narrations. All the items selected for the *corpus* participate – to various extents – in the creation and development of the libertarian “aura of meaning” (Louw 1993, 157) of digital technologies.

The scientific paradigm I will adopt is a combination of systemic functional linguistics and multimodal analysis. As we know, functional linguistics (Michael Halliday 1978, 2004 [1985]) considers language as a socio-semiotic resource for meaning-making and is “concerned with the relationship between language and other elements and aspects of social life, and its approach to the linguistic analysis of texts is always oriented to the social character of them” (Fairclough 2003, 5). On the other hand, multimodal analysis – which is “a very exciting area of work in functional linguistics” (Martin and White 2005, 29) – originally stems out of Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s seminal work *The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), where they adapted Halliday’s framework to the analysis of images, in order to decode new forms of textualities emerging from the spreading of the technological revolution and combining (written) language

with other modes. As a consequence, multimodal studies have been conducted to understand how semiotic resources like, for instance, images, colour, gesture, voice, music and videos are used to articulate discourses across a variety of media and contexts (Jewitt 2009)².

2. *“Rebellion to tyrants...*

My analysis shall start from the famous *1984 Apple Ad*, a landmark television advertising that launched the Macintosh and explained the philosophy of the company that had invented personal computers. Apple’s commercial was aired on January 22, 1984 during the Super Bowl and, since then, it has not only profoundly influenced the world of advertising and television, but it has introduced the frame for the interpretation of the supreme ideational battle of the Information Age: the struggle for freedom.

“Apple is the only force that can ensure freedom” announced Steve Jobs showing the ad for the first time in his *Keynote Speech* at the company’s annual sales conference (1983). According to Jobs, people – not just governments and big corporations – should have the control of technology, in order not to be enslaved and de-humanized. And it is his vision of the power and the potential of personal computers that has eventually triumphed, becoming the ideological underpinning of the so-called “Digital Revolution”.

The ad was a one-minute movie directed by Ridley Scott that never showed the product (which was quite a novelty in 1983) and created the image of Apple’s personal computer as a liberating technology featuring an epic battle between freedom and tyranny set in a dystopic Orwellian scenario. The video opens with a line of people wearing a uniform that march in unison through a long tunnel. The crowd ends up in a hall dominated by a gigantic screen where a Big Brother-like figure is giving a speech for the celebration of the first anniversary of the “Information Purification Directives”. In this industrial-like setting of grey and blue tones, there emerges a woman dressed with a bright coloured “athletic uniform” carrying a huge hammer. She races towards the large screen, chased by the police and, once near it, with a liberating howl she launches her sledgehammer that destroys the screen while the “Big Brother” affirms “We shall prevail!”. The crowd of mute drones starts to regain consciousness in a whirlwind of light and smoke. The commercial ends with a voice-over, accompanied by a scrolling black text that recites: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984’”. When the voice-over ends, the rainbow Apple logo appears on the now black screen.

Apple’s Ad is an example of “inter-generic textuality” because it contains “the voice of a different genre” (Cook 2001 [1992], 194) when it evokes George Orwell’s novel: a quite a common feature in advertising discourse. As Cook puts it, “ads exist through other genres and culturally significant artefacts either by attaching themselves to them (sometimes quite literally),

by co-occurring with them, or by imitation” (2001 [1992], 39). Advertising can be defined as a “parasite discourse”, “an extreme example of a tendency apparent in all discourse”: many modernist literary texts “achieve similar effects through bricolage, that is the borrowing and inter-weaving of material from other genres” as in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, while in postmodernist texts “all ‘new’ discourse is regarded as to some degree the reworking of existing discourse, and finds virtue in the complexity of writing which can tolerate many voices and influences at once” (Cook 2001 [1992], 39). Obviously, “parasite discourse” requires a wide culture and a complex reading procedure on the side of the receivers who wish to decode the many layers of meaning of the text.

In our case, *1984 Apple Ad* is a postmodern metatextual video which entails a knowledge that goes from Orwell’s *1984* to the visual canons of sci-fi movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott himself. The text is structured on contrastive pairs (man vs woman/crowd vs individual/darkness vs light) the aim of which is to oppose Apple’s liberating message to the one of its main competitor – IBM – represented as the embodiment of the oppressive Cold War military-industrial complex (Edwards 1996). As we shall see, all the semiotic modes concur to create a Problem-Solution textual pattern (Hoey 2001), the aim of which is to reinforce Apple’s message.

At visual level, monochromatic blue-grey tones metatextually recall the nickname “the Big Blue” given to IBM (Simmons 1988, 137), but also provide an overall cohesive background (van Leeuwen 2011, 97) that conveys the “representation” (Iedema 2001, 191) of a dystopic industrial setting while the red colour of the woman’s dress draws the viewers’ attention and gives “salience” to her (van Leeuwen 2011, 93). In addition to that, following the parametric approach to colour analysis adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2002), the ad is structured along the “scale of value” that goes from “maximally light to maximally dark” (van Leeuwen 2011, 60) and along the “scale of saturation” that goes from “the most intense, pure manifestation of a colour to ‘chromatic grey’” (61). The highly saturated red is “positive, exuberant and adventurous” and here symbolizes vital energy, while the “low saturated” blue-grey setting “expresses cold and repressed” emotions. As concerns the “scale of value”, in the video there are two contrasting sources of light: the big electronic screen that sheds an artificial one and the woman that appears to be glowing from within. According to van Leeuwen (62–63) and following the tradition of medieval painters, “the quality of radiating from within suggests the meaning potential of luminosity –... the supernatural and the divine” and the woman, who embodies Apple’s Macintosh – “the only force that can ensure future freedom” (Jobs 1983) – is represented as the Carrier of a sort of “divine” power able to re-awake the crowd.

As regards the sound structure of the text, the military marching of the drones reproduces the monotone rhythm of industrial machines and is a metaphor for social control. Indeed, since clocks were pioneered in Benedictine monasteries, they have provided human enterprise with the regular collective

beat of the machine (van Leeuwen 1999, 36-37): an activity of timing that has become “a major tool for social control, first of labour, then also of other human activities” (37). Moreover, the two-time tempo of the marching symbolizes nationalistic values and is associated to the public and to work and opposed to the “private side of the industrial age” (the one of leisure) and to the “ethos of individualization and self-expression” (49).

The “semiotic system of aural perspective” of the video features the drones marching in a “ground” position, that of the sounds which are “part of the listener’s social world, but only in a minor and less involved way” (23), while the liberating howl of the woman is put in a “figure position” that is “the most important sound”. Both her “figure position” and “visual salience” contribute to the semiotic cohesion of the text. At the same time, the voice of the Big-Brother shifts from “ground” to “figure” following the visual perspective of the ad that opposes the two sources of luminosity in a frontal battle, finally won by the woman when she destroys the screen and frees the drones.

In the last shots, a change in luminosity (from darkness to light), a change in sound (from silence to sound) and a change in the portrayal of the drones themselves (reacquiring their human expression) mark a “transition” between the Problem “phase” and its Solution (Baldry and Thibault 2005, 47), thanks to the power of freedom, here represented as a light that awakens the crowd of drones. On that liberating visual manifesto a postmodern ironic message appears affirming that 1984 “won’t be like ‘1984’”, the Orwellian’s dystopia of a controlling central de-humanizing power but, on the contrary, it will see the dawn of the utopia of a liberating technology.

The verbal message is composed by two sentences which are very different in terms of the “experiential line of organization” (Halliday 2004 [1985], 168): the first one instantiates a “transitive creative material clause” with Apple Computer as the “Actor” of change, while the second one is a “mental clause”, a sentence that “[is] concerned with our experience of the world of our own consciousness” rather than “with our experience of the material world” (197). The verb here used, “see”, reveals both a perceptive action and a cognitive/desiderative one, as anticipated by Jobs in his *Keynote Address* (1983). The time markers (“January 20th” / “1984” / “1984”) constitute a lexical-semantic chain that enhances text cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976, 274 ff.) and provides the key to the decodification of the message: it is exactly on the pun-like repetition of the date 1984 that the irony is played. The tenor of the text shifts from an impersonal third person perspective, which introduces the action Apple Computer will perform, to a colloquial second person message that directly engages the addressee, involving him/her as a sort of “eyewitness” of the epic battle.

The voice-over is a sound event that functions as a “transitional” element (Baldry and Thibault 2005) connecting, as it does, the fading shots of the awakening drones and the appearance of Apple’s logo: a stylized version of a coloured bitten apple emerging from a total black setting. The image presents a

high degree of modality since in “abstract coding orientations... modality is higher the more the image reduces the individual to the general and the concrete to its essential qualities” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 170). According to Jean Louis Gassée (executive at Apple Computer from 1981 to 1990), the famous logo is “the symbol of lust and knowledge, bitten into, all crossed with the colours of the rainbow in the wrong order. You couldn’t dream of a more appropriate logo: lust, knowledge, hope, and anarchy” (Sculley and Byrne 1987, 280). Indeed, the logo seems to offer a conceptual representation of the basic Gnostic concept according to which salvation is achieved through access to knowledge.

It is a representation, which appears to be profoundly influenced by the Romantic vision of Satan and of the original sin, where the Devil is turned into a sort of Promethean hero that teaches mankind how to rebel against a tyranny that prevents access to the fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Genesis 2*, 16-18) and, consequently, to freedom and happiness (Milner 2000).

Actually, the overall message of the ad is a promise of salvation and, in such context, rebellion to tyrants constitutes the first step towards the liberation of mankind and the Macintosh represents a tool of enfranchisement because it can potentially offer access to knowledge to every human being/customer.

3. ... is obedience to God”

Apple’s liberating vision of technology was profoundly influenced by countercultural movements as Steve Jobs declared in his famous *Commencement Speech* at Stanford (2005), where he stated that he had been inspired by *The Whole Earth Catalog*, “one of the bibles of [his] generation, a sort of Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along... idealistic and overflowing with neat tools and great notions” (Jobs 2005).

The Whole Earth Catalog was a seminal publication of the countercultural era, founded by the entrepreneur Stewart Brand in 1968. It was a *compendium* of products for sale that enlisted all sorts of items for a self-sustainable and useful lifestyle (from clothes to books, from machines to seeds) and represented the convergence of cybernetic theory with the so-called “politics of consciousness”. Indeed, according to Professor Turner, the *Whole Earth Catalog* reflected “the complex intertwining of two legacies: that of the military-industrial research culture, which first appeared during WWII and flourished across the Cold War era, and [a particular wing] of the American counterculture” (2006, 3), the “New Communalists” who “turned away from political action and toward technology and the transformation of consciousness as the primary source of social change” (4).

The New Communalists were college-educated young people that decided to go back to the land to create egalitarian communities and were familiar to Wiener’s cybernetic vision of the world, according to which society can be seen as an interconnected non-hierarchical system seeking self-regulation through the process of exchanging information (Wiener 1950). For this wing of the

counterculture, a cybernetic vision of the world “where material reality could be imagined as an information system was comforting because the notion of the globe as a single, interlinked pattern of information could be seen as a promise of global harmony” (Turner 2006, 5). In this context, society could be changed improving individual conscience and sharing information while small scale technologies – from axes to amplifiers, slide projectors and even LSD – could provide the tools to carry on this revolution.

The cover of the first issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968) is a “multi-modal cluster” (Baldry and Thibault 2005, 11) that well shows this shift from a de-humanized Cold War attitude to a globally interconnected natural *afflatus*. The military-industrial perspective is here completely overturned because the reader’s attention is focused on the earth, not on the moon – the desired object of the Cold War space race. The message that Brand wants to communicate is that the attention of mankind should be turned to the earth because our planet is an interconnected system, for the protection of which all humanity is involved beyond partitions. The cover features a total black setting, which enhances the hyper-real image of our planet, made “salient through its exaggerated size” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 108). The image realizes a symbolic visual act that is an “equivalent of the ‘existential’ processes in language” (Halliday 2004 [1985], 210 ff.), because it “represents the world in terms of... general truths, rather than in terms of actions or mental processes” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 114). The frontal angle and the size of the object offer a god-like perspective to the viewer, while the close intimate distance of the image demands for the viewer’s engagement (131). The visual concept of “globality” is recalled at verbal level by the adjective “whole”, a marker of the cybernetic rhetoric of systems and information here applied to personal empowerment and social enfranchisement and not to central control. The subtitle recites “access to tools”, thus marketing the publication as the “door” to all the technologies that would support the emergence of individual power and the salvation of humanity from the nuclear holocaust.

I believe that it is in this first number of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and, in particular, in the section which expresses the purpose of the publication – as envisioned by Brand himself – that one can find traces of the above-mentioned gnostic message of Apple’s logo and its connection with the New Communalists’ “politics of consciousness”. In the opening page of the *Catalog*, the “purpose” states as follows:

We are as gods and might as well get used to it... a realm of intimate, personal power is developing – power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG.

The first words of the *Catalog* appear to be intertextually quoting the Scriptures, since they reverberate what the serpent said to Eve to convince her to taste the

fruit from the tree of knowledge: “Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”³ (*Genesis* 3, 5-6). The first intensive relational clause identifies the Carrier of the “divine” attribute with the plural personal pronoun “we” thus “democratizing” the biblical message, while the low level of probability of the modal verb “might” used in the paratactic sentence, together with the colloquial expression “get used to”, seem to soften the modality of the first clause. A high degree of “certainty” appears again in the abstract material sentence, which announces the coming of “a realm of intimate, personal power”: a power that is described through an additive series of hypotactic clauses that structure the semantic extension of the concept. Finally, the *Catalog*’s broad definition of tools, which recalls the cover, is unified by a “commitment” to aid the emergence of such a self-conscious process of empowering.

Actually, the first words of the *Catalog* also seem to recall those of a book published in Berkeley in the same year by Timothy Leary (1968), the controversial American psychologist, where he chronicles the experiences on the 16 acid trips he took before LSD was illegal. In this text, one from the earliest days of psychedelia, we read: “Listen! Wake up! You are God! You have the divine plan engraved in cellular script within you. Listen! Take this sacrament! You’ll see! You’ll get the revelations! It will change your life! You’ll be reborn!” (285). Here, in a *crescendo* of deontic verbal forms, psychedelic drugs are described in mystical terms as the instruments that “activate” the divine sparkle in every human being and the access to a god-like understanding of the world. Indeed, all psychedelic discourse has been deeply influenced by mystical rhetoric (Davis 1998) because “according to the hippies, LSD was a sacrament,... a consciousness-expander, a tool that would push us up the evolutionary ladder... a gift from God, given to mankind in order to save the planet from a nuclear finale” (Stevens 1998, 5).

I argue thus that the intertextual chain of the *Catalog*’s purpose might be expanded to comprise psychedelic discourse and, more precisely, the words used by Aldous Huxley to describe his use of psychedelic drugs in *The Doors of Perception* (1954). The essay was very popular in countercultural circles and Brand knew both Huxley himself and his works (Brand 1986, 3). Huxley entitled his book after a quotation of William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where the poet describes the process of gnostic “enlightenment” in Platonic terms: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” (1906 [1793], 26).

It is an item of shared knowledge that both Stewart Brand and Steve Jobs were familiar with the use of LSD: Brand participated in one of the early sixties LSD studies in Palo Alto and then joined Ken Kesey in the production of the famous Acid Trips Festival described in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968); on the other hand, Jobs in 2001 declared that “taking

LSD was one of the two or three most important things he'd done in his life [and that] people who had never taken acid would never fully understand him" (Isaacson 2011, 384). Nevertheless, when reading Steve Jobs' "exclusive biography written with his full cooperation" (Isaacson 2011), I was agreeably surprised to find out that the chapter dedicated to the launch of *1984 Apple's Ad* features a title that echoes Blake's words describing mystic gnosis: "A Dent in the Universe"!

4. *A Moral Act of Nature*

Traces of Apple's liberating vision of technology can be found in one of the most important documents of the Digital Revolution, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, written by John Perry-Barlow in response to the 1996 Telecommunications Act in the United States.

The document was published electronically on the website of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-profit organization committed to the defence of civil rights on digital platforms, of which Barlow was one of the founders. In the *Declaration*, cyberspace is gnostically defined as "the new home of Mind" and opposed to the tyrannical governments of the Industrial world that seek to impose on it "increasingly hostile and colonial measures". But, with an act of separation, the inhabitants of the cyberspace form "their own Social Contract" and give rise to "a new civilization of the Mind" based on the principle of liberty.

The language chosen by Barlow, a former lyricist of the Californian psychedelic group "The Grateful Dead" (the house band of the above-mentioned Acid Tests), intertwines gnostic and cybernetic markers with elements from American political discourse; it is a "user-generated version" of the document that "performed" the creation of the nation (Austin 1962) and built the American myth (Moschini 2007). The following fragment will show how the linguistic features help create such libertarian connotation:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone... I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. [Cyberspace] is an act of nature... We are forming our own social contract... The only law that all our constituent cultures would generally recognize is the Golden Rule... These increasingly hostile and colonial measures place us in the same position as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers. We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty... We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. (My italics)

The aim of the text is to focus on common enemies, the "Governments of the Industrial World", whose importance is underlined by their thematic position.

In order to achieve this purpose, a contrastive rhetorical strategy is chosen, mainly constructed on bipolar options such as new/old, material/immaterial, tyranny/freedom. These polarities are expressed at lexico-grammatical level through the use of personal pronouns (“I/We” vs “You”) and through lexical density with positive connotations vs negative connotations. For instance, in the first sentence, “flesh and steel”/“mind” work as “tokens of judgment” (Martin and White 2005) when referred to the gnostic hierarchical conceptualization of the world that opposes material and spiritual world, while the negative connotation of “governments” is emphasized by the evaluation marker “weary”.

The socio-political utopia of a “new civilization of the Mind” is marked by the lexical chain I underlined in the fragment above, where the “semantic prosody” (Sinclair 1991) is mapped on the social contract theory based on the granting of natural rights, that is the true foundation of the American social knot. Moreover, the explicit reference to the *Declaration of Independence* in the title is an example of a Bakhtinian heteroglossic construction (Bakhtin 1981 [1930]) – the aims of which seem to be the rising of the authority of the message and the expression of the Dialogic Engagement of the author with the founding document (Martin and White 2005, 29).

The tenor structure of the text – that shifts from the first singular pronoun to the first plural pronoun – seems to reinforce such dialogic position, since it engages also the receivers of the message in the common fight against tyranny. As regards the interpersonal meanings expressed in the lexis, the words selected to describe the actions carried on by the speaker are all un-emotional verbal processes (“ask”/“address”/“declare”) that semiotically distance the Actor from the actions. While the cyber community is lexically associated to positively connoted material processes (“create”/“forming”/“building”), the old world governments are accused of being “distant, uniformed powers”, that is far from knowledge, the source of enlightenment: it is the worst charge in a cognitive gnostic frame, which immediately de-authorizes such governments.

In addition to that, the strategies chosen for self-presentation feature the speaker claiming an authority stemming directly from liberty itself, a sort of “supreme natural right” which could be conceived as a divine entitlement received from the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”. Here the communicative context is construed as a single voiced “categorical assertion” that “has no dialogistic alternatives which need to be... engaged with” (Martin and White 2005, 99). It is an axiomatic construction that can be traced back to the cultural preamble of the original *Declaration* itself (Bayley 1993).

The same act of separation, expressed by the sentence “We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty”, faithfully follows the rhetorical style of the founding document, since the modal “must” realizes the inevitability of the action which is the fulfilment of God’s will (*ibidem*). The netizens are thus represented as people who “acquiesce to the necessity” of separating their virtual selves from tyrannical powers in order to follow God’s

rules as “those previous lovers of freedom”. Indeed, the only law they “subjectively proclaim to endorse” (Martin and White 2005, 130ff) is the so-called “Golden Rule”, a moral principle that finds one of its earliest formulations in the biblical precept “... thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy selfe...” (*Leviticus* 19:18), an ethical code which was defined by Hobbes “the sum of the Lawes of Nature” (Singer 1963, 293).

Thus, the people inhabiting cyberspace are represented as linked by the ethical bond of reciprocity and committed to saving this “new home of Mind” from the invasion of un-moral earthly powers. They are also tied by a founding principle – liberty – which intertwines biblical precepts with cybernetics, gnosticism with natural rights and semiotically constructs cyberspace as the digital embodiment of the millennialist visions carried to the American continent by utopianists through centuries.

5. “Engaged Citizens”

It is possible to find a similar committed description of the cyber-community in the first mainstream celebration of the Web 2.0 revolution: the renowned 2006 *Time Person of the Year* cover that depicts the Internet – symbolized by an Apple personal computer with a reflective screen – as an empowering tool. In his editorial, the magazine’s director Richard Stengel affirmed that he decided to honor the community of web users because “[they] control the information age” and that he used an innovative semiotic material resource (the “polyester reflective resin Mylar”) to reproduce a mirror in order to “literally reflect” the idea. Along with explicit textual markers of cybernetics (the computer screen and the word “information”), the cover features an implicit contrastive rhetoric which opposes “You”, the inhabitants of the new digital world to “We, the media creators”, the authorities of the “old world”. The second element of the contrast is not verbally referred to in the cover, but it is “witnessed” by the context of communication itself: the newspaper and its wordly renowned Person of the Year issue.

The opposition is made explicit in the lines of the editorial quoted below, where the web users are rhetorically contrasted to the people who fear them. Such “conflict” is framed in a socio-political perspective and linked to the “great tradition” of the American past, which the encoder of the message overtly endorses. At tenor level, the high modality of the editor’s endorsement shortens the distance between the “citizens of a new digital democracy” and the recipients of the message, that are implicitly asked to take their stance in this ideological battle:

The creators and consumers of user-generated contents are... the *engaged citizens* of a *new digital democracy*... this new global nervous system of the world is changing the way we perceive the world... There are a lot of people... who believe that this phenomenon is dangerous because it undermines the traditional authority of media institutions like TIME. Some have called it an “amateur hour”. And it often is. But

America was founded by amateurs. The framers were... amateur politicians.... The new media age of Web 2.0 is threatening only if you believe that an excess of *democracy* is the road to *anarchy*. I don't. (My italics)

The editorial, like the *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, mixes cybernetics with the American socio-political utopia since the web is at first defined as the “new global nervous system of the world”, a clear token of the “computational metaphor” – a “singular almost mystical understanding of the power of information” (Turner 2006, 15) – according to which “the universe is a computer” (Kelly 1998).

The web is then described as the “new digital democracy” and its model is identified in the American experiment. Worth noticing is the expression “engaged citizens” which underlines a “commitment” on the side of cyber-inhabitants to this new socio-political subject, the roots of which lie in the founding Covenant (Walzer 1985, 52-53), as we shall see in the final paragraph. In addition to that, I believe that the contrastive pair “democracy”/“anarchy” can be decoded as an indirect intertextual reference to the original *Declaration of Independence* where the colonists, profoundly influenced by the English *Bill of Rights* and by the work of John Locke, describe their action “a revolution, not a rebellion, the subversion of tyrants, not the subversion of laws” (Bayley 1993, 28), thus representing themselves as morally committed to defend God-given natural rights against tyrannical usurpations (Bonazzi 1999).

The connection between the “new digital democracy” and the American experiment is made explicit in the final document I will take into consideration: the speech given in January 2010 by the then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on “Internet Freedom”. The address – “an important speech on a very important subject” as she defined it – marked a fundamental step in claiming the Americanness of the web because of its constituent libertarian promise.

Indeed, Clinton affirms that the new technologies are the “tools that enable citizens to exercise their rights of free expression by circumventing politically motivated censorship” and she adds that the United States, “the birthplace for so many of these technologies, has a responsibility to see them used for good” and to defend “the right to freely access to... the new nervous system for our planet” from potential unwarrantable intrusions by authoritarian systems all over the world.

The US Secretary's statement is a “representative speech act” (Searle 1976, 10), the illocutionary force of which is achieved through the use of different discursive strategies. First of all, Clinton opens her speech by mentioning the place where the communicative action is taking place, the Newseum – a museum of news and journalism located in Washington DC – defined by her “a monument to some of our precious freedoms”. Such reference intertextually connects the speech to the *First Amendment* to the *US Constitution* where the so-called “five basic (American) freedoms” are engraved: freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of movement. In addition to that, Clinton uses the museum to introduce the

topic of her speech (“how those freedoms apply to the challenges of the 21st century”), while she starts a dialogical interaction with President Obama, by quoting the expression (“21st century challenge”) he frequently exploits⁴.

The citation of the *US Bill of Rights* is the first of a long chain of inter-textual references to a *corpus* of pre-texts that comprises the *Declaration of Independence*, Franklin Roosevelt’s *Four Freedoms Speech* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the aim of which is to ethically inscribe the new technological tools into the tradition of the above-mentioned social contract theory. At the same time, it helps broadening the libertarian promise, turning the discourse from an internal *afflatus* (“American”) to an external one (“universal”): a shift which is made possible by the intrinsic ambiguity of the original American promise (Moschini 2012). But such heteroglossic construction is also functional to testify the American people’s “moral commitment to the cause”, which is recalled by a lexical-semantic chain that pervades all the text (“responsibility”/ “commitment”/ “cause”/ “belief”/ “stand”).

To further underline the Americanness of the Internet, Hillary Clinton frames her argumentation in a new Cold War paradigm fully embodied by the expression “new information curtain” which, according to her, is “descending across much of the world”. She then metaphorically defines “viral videos and blog posts” as “the *samizdat* of our day” – it is a statement that expresses her highest degree of certainty. As regards our ideational mapping of digital discourse, we may say that Clinton’s Cold War Frame and her reference to Soviet clandestine literature give a strong ethical and political connotation to user-generated contents, since she describes the creation and diffusion of messages through the global network as an action of social participation and, more precisely, as an endorsement of American liberal values.

6. *An Ancient Idea of Liberty*

I would like to conclude my essay with a cultural note that traces the origins of the idea of freedom lying at the heart of the currently widespread expression “Internet Freedom” and, to do so, I will go back to Thomas Jefferson and his *Declaration of Independence* (1776), the beginning of which is quoted below:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is *the Right of the People* to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles... when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, *it is their right, it is their duty*, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. (My italics)

It is interesting to notice that the concept of liberty here described is modeled on the classical foundational myth of the ancient Hebrew Commonwealth according to which the communal right as citizens to be free to follow God's rules stems from an act of liberation from tyranny. Indeed, the liberation from the Egyptian bondage placed the Jews in an archetypal contractualist situation: they regained their natural rights and were free to obey God's laws according to the Covenant (Campos Boralevi 2009). The process of enfranchisement thus appears to be made up of "two-steps": the first one is the *liberation from* a despotic government, while the second step is the *freedom of* creating a new government based on God's laws and of enjoying the regained natural rights.

Actually, the Book of Exodus was "an important source of both argument and symbolism during the American Revolution and the establishment on the American shores of 'God's new Israel'" (Walzer 1985, 6). A marker of that is the Great Seal of the United States proposed by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson the same year of the signing of the *Declaration*⁵, that featured the *Exodus* dramatic historical scene, where people confronted a tyrant in order to gain their freedom (*ibidem*). Particularly interesting was the motto proposed for this Great Seal: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God", a motto Jefferson liked so much that he used it on one of his personal seals⁶.

I believe this motto perfectly describes the message of *1984 Apple's Ad* (the "founding document" of the libertarian "aura of meaning" of digital technologies) and the moral duty that engaged citizens of the so-called new digital democracy have to (intentionally or unintentionally) secure their freedom of creating and sharing multimodal user-generated *samizdat!*

Note

¹ The study of the American founding rhetoric of liberty is out of the scope of my paper, even if it constitutes an indispensable item of shared knowledge to fully decode all the layers of meaning of the texts here examined. For a brief account of it, see Moschini 2007.

² For a more detailed account of the main theoretical strands of multimodal studies and of some of the most recent works in this field of study, see my "Itinerari nei *Multimodal Studies*. A proposito del volume di Maria Grazia Sindoni (2013), *Spoken and Written Discourse in Online Interactions. A Multimodal Approach* (London-New York, Routledge)" in this volume, *infra* 647-655.

³ I am here quoting King James' translation of the Bible, the version the American revolutionaries were familiar with.

⁴ See for instance Barack Obama's *Acceptance Speech* at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ato7BtisXzE>> (09/2013).

⁵ The drawing of the Great Seal proposed by Franklin and Jefferson was made only in 1856 by the historian Benson John Lossing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.

⁶ See the Thomas Jefferson Foundation website, <<http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/personal-seal>> (08/2013).

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