

Alexander R.Galloway: The Interface Effect

chapter: If the Cinema Is an Ontology, the Computer Is an Ethic

T. J. Clark observed once, with the calm voice of experience, that in Courbet the entire world is one of proximity; the paintable is that thing, that space, that can be transformed into a Second Empire drawing room. This is Stanley Cavell's assessment too when, in *The World Viewed*, following Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," he likens painting to a certain desire for presentness. Painting assembles a space. But it is always a proximal space, a bounded space of textures and things brought around, not too close exactly, but certainly unconcealed and arrayed for handling. Painting is not Cavell's primary concern in *The World Viewed*, it is cinema after all, but painting offers a road down which one might travel to ascertain a certain quality shared by painting, photography, film, and a number of other art forms. It is the desire that the world be brought near to us.

Having a desire to be brought near - such a desire is most certainly at the very base of human life. Indeed the relative nearness and farness of things may account for all manner of action, from love to hate, from the joy of communion to the perils of exile. But that is not all, for in art it concerns a specific, not a general, iteration of this desire for nearness. The phenomenon is most acute in photography, and thereby, for Cavell, in cinema (for him, a photography derivative); as he puts it: the world of the image is present to us, but we were never present to it. So it is nearness with a catch. The viewer does not attend the filming of the "profilmic event," to use the parlance of cinema studies. Thus it is a desire to be brought near, but one already afflicted with a specific neurosis, that of the rejection of the self. With each attempt to array the world in proximal relation to us, we must at the same time make ourselves disappear. With each step forward in Cavell's world, one becomes that much more inert. Every step done is a step undone.

Evoking questions of ethics and responsibility, Plato writes of a magical ring, *the Ring of Gyges*, that grants invisibility to the wearer and thus potential immunity from moral consequence. In effect, the cinema forces us to don the *Ring of Gyges*, making the self an invisible half-participant in the world(10). The self becomes a viewing self, and the world becomes a world viewed. This is, in a nutshell, the cinematic condition for Cavell, and I guess I agree with him. The penalties and rewards are clear: to be "cinematically" present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the movies, one must be a masochist. That is to say, to be in a relation of presence with the world cinematically, one must subject the self to the ultimate in pain and humiliation, which is nothing short of complete erasure. It has been said that the cinema is the most phenomenological of media. But whether this is a phenomenology or the absolute impossibility of one is not entirely clear.

Cavell wrote : "A painting is a world; a photograph is of a world." "What can one say then of the cinema? Or the computer? Paraphrasing Cavell's definition of cinema, one might say, with considerably less panache than he, that the cinema automatically projects worlds (in series). So might it be for a world? The computer, then, is simply on a world, as it tends to rise in separation from some referent, modeling and supplementing it. But enough phrase making, the crucial thing is to determine the nature of the machine. Objects are never humans to a computer, nor are they faces or bodies. In this sense the computer breaks with those arts (painting, photography, cinema) that fixate upon the embodied human form - the face, but not always, the hand, but not always - and its proximal relation to a world, if not as their immediate subject matter then at least as the absolute horizon of their various aesthetic investments. The computer has not this same obsession. It aims not for man as an object. The reason is simple: because the computer is this object in and of itself.

Maybe this is why we do not cry at websites like we cry at the movies . Maybe it is why there is no "faciality" with the computer, why there is no concept of a celebrity star system (except ourselves), no characters or story (except our own), no notion of recognition and reversal, as

Aristotle said of poetry. If the movie screen always directs toward, the computer screen always directs away. If at the movies you tilt your head back, with a computer you tilt in. Profiles, not personas, drive the computer. Even as a certain kind of modern affect is in recession (following Jameson's famous argument about "the waning of affect" under postmodernity), there seems to be more affect today than ever before. Books are written on the subject. Conferences are devoted to it. The net is nothing if not the grand parade of personality profiles, wants and needs, projected egos, "second" selves and "second" lives. This is all true. So the triumph of affect is also its undoing. The waning of an older affective mode comes at the moment of its absolute rationalization into software. At the moment when something is perfected, it is dead. This is the condition of affect today online, and it is why the object of the computer is not a man: because its data is one.

Ultimately an additional step is necessary to explain the current reversal: *the computer is an anti-Ring of Gyges*. The scenario is inverted. The wearer of the ring is free to roam around in plain sight, while the world, invisible, retreats in absolute alterity. The world no longer indicates to us what it is. We indicate ourselves to it, and in doing so the world materializes in our image.

To be "informatically" present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the computer, one must be a sadist.⁽¹²⁾ The penalties and rewards are clear. In contrast to the cinema, in order to be in a relation with the world informatically, one must erase the world, subjecting it to various forms of manipulation, preemption, modeling, and synthetic transformation. The computer takes our own superlative power over worlds as the condition of possibility for the creation of worlds. Our intense investment in worlds - our acute fact finding, our scanning and data mining, our spidering and extracting – is the precondition for how worlds are revealed. The promise is not one of revealing something as it is, but in simulating a thing so effectively that "what it is" becomes less and less necessary to speak about, not because it is gone for good, but because we have perfected a language for it. Every object has its relations. As Alain Badiou writes, there are only bodies and languages.⁽¹³⁾ It is necessary then to distinguish two grand domains which are, like fighting siblings, so much more different from one another strictly by virtue of being so intimately conjoined. *Media* and *mediation*, one might speak casually about one or the other without realizing the fundamental difference dividing them. It would not be necessary to accentuate the difference if others had not already mixed them up so awkwardly, or as is often the case failed to understand the subtlety in the first place. In reality these two systems are violently unconnected.

Recall the famous pronouncement from Friedrich Kittler that all technical media either store things, transmit things, or process things. At the risk of sounding too juvenile, I will observe that this definition of media is particularly mediocentric! By which is meant that Kittler first posits the existence of specific media technologies, say the camera obscura or the magic lantern, and then shows how they may or may not be furnished with special characteristics (sending, saving, or calculating). Technical media exist in various forms, and they do x, y or z. His is a revelatory story of objects and the qualities they carry. His is, in short, a hermeneutics of media devices as they appear after being pulled from the plot of history. It leads to some delightful places, in particular the central thesis of the first section of his Optical Media lectures, in which he places the *camera obscura* and the *magic lantern* at the center of the history of all optical media. The *camera obscura* has a special relationship to linear perspective, the so-called "self-depiction of nature," and hence to Renaissance figures like Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti. Because of this, it typifies for Kittler what Heidegger later would call "the age of the world picture." "[B]eing first constituted itself in the form of a representation (*Vorstellung*) in European modernity. Representational thinking delivered being as an object for a subject . . . [I]t can be said, following Heidegger's line of thought, that linear perspective and the camera obscura were precisely the media of this representation."⁽¹⁴⁾

As a device for automatically recording images, the camera obscura functioned as a first-order simulation. It allowed reality to appear on a wall. By contrast, as a device for automatically reproducing or transmitting images, the magic lantern functioned as a second-order simulation. It allowed smaller images to appear larger on a wall. (The progression from first order to second order is appealing, and it sets Kittler up for a nice denouement: the film projector adopts the second-order

quality of the magic lantern while adding a new digital simulation along the axis of time; television departs from the image entirely and instead goes for the symbolic space of language in which things are arranged in pixels and grids; and the computer annihilates the imaginary entirely, reverting back to that oldest of age-old media, writing.).

Putting small, portable images upon a wall as large images, the essential task of the magic lantern, Kittler associates with Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, wherein "the representation of the subject is re-presented to the subject once again as such." Descartes' insistence in the *Meditations* that the philosopher must blot out the sun and sky and ball up his ears with wax illustrates for Kittler a particular model of mediation. Only the Cartesian self does what the magic lantern had already demonstrated: projects a representation, the thinking mind, back inward toward a previous representation, the self, and therefore (for Descartes at least) shores up the metaphysical relation. So what Heidegger saw as a vital spark in early-modern European man, his ability to cognize the world as a reflection, Descartes bent back into the folds of a baroque philosophy in which man reflects not on the primary data of nature but on the image of man him self. Copernicus, it seems, was wrong.

Still, Kittler's fixation on the media-centric nature of media puts him temporarily on some dangerous ground. For instance, this foolishness that "philosophy . . . has been necessarily unable to conceive of media as media," owing chiefly to the lack of imagination in a certain Aristotle, whose "ontology deals only with things, their matter and form, but not with relations between things in time and space. The very concept of a (physical) medium (*to metaxu*) is relegated to his theory of sensorial perception (*aisthesis*)."¹⁷ The insinuation here is bright and clear, why not state it unequivocally: Western philosophy since the Greeks has had no theory of mediation.¹⁸ Doubtless certain Greek philosophers had negative views regarding hypomnesis. Yet Kittler is reckless to suggest that the Greeks had no theory of mediation. The Greeks indubitably had an intimate understanding of the physicality of transmission and message sending (*Hermes*). They differentiated between mediation as immanence and mediation as expression (*Iris* versus *Hermes*). They understood the mediation of poetry via the Muses and their *techne*. They understood the mediation of bodies through the "middle loving" Aphrodite. They even understood swarming and networked presence (in the incontinent mediating forms of the Eumenides who pursued Orestes in order to "process" him at the process of Athena). Thus we need only look a little bit further to shed this rather vulgar, consumer-electronics view of media, and instead graduate into the deep history of media as modes of mediation, a task that with a bit of luck will be accomplished presently *vespere et mane*.

Realizing the danger, Kittler retreats slightly from the more extreme argument. He explains that, while Aristotle might exclude media from his theory of matter and form, he doesn't act likewise in his discussion of human perception. "Aristotle, however, speaks of two elements, namely air and water, as of two 'between's.' In other words, he is the first to turn a common Greek preposition - *metaxu*, between - into a philosophical noun or concept: *to metaxu*, the medium. 'In the middle' of absence and presence, farness and nearness, being and soul, there exists no nothing any more, but a mediatic relation. Es gibt Medien, we could say."

Hence even if Aristotle does not discuss mediation when he talks about hylomorphism and ontology, he nevertheless inaugurates philosophy's centurieslong relationship to media via a discussion of the human senses. The missing interlocutor here is Bernard Stiegler, who has perhaps more clearly than anyone since Heidegger framed the intimate co-construction of technology and being. All of this now in the light of day, I am in a position to identify more clearly the conservatism of Kittler, who on this point finds a confrere in Marshall McLuhan. By conservative I mean the claim that *techne* is substrate and only substrate. For Kittler and McLuhan alike, media mean *hypomnesis*. They define media via the externalization of man into objects. Hence a fundamentally conservative dichotomy is inaugurated - which to be clear was in Plato before it was in Aristotle - between the good and balanced human specimen and the dead junk of the *hypomnemata*. Contrast this with an alternate philosophical tradition that views *techne* as technique, art, habitus, ethos, or lived practice. Such an alternate tradition is what was alluded to previously,

through the contrast between media (as objects or substrates) and practices of mediation (as middles or interfaces). Indeed it is ironic that Kittler hews so closely to Heidegger, as Heidegger was one of the philosophers who best understood both aspects of techne. We are not finished yet however. For Kittler also harbors a deep-seated interest in another ancient yearning of philosophy, one which is as old as it is powerful. It is the desire to reduce the many to the one. In *Optical Media*, during his discussion of film Kittler stresses the way in which Etienne-Jules Marey was committed to a single camera, thereby reducing many devices to a single apparatus: "By holding tight to the unifying, linearizing power of writing paper, Marey always only needed one single piece of equipment, while Muybridge had to position 12 different cameras. The task, therefore, was to dispose of n cameras and still be able to supply serial photographs. In the process, Colt's good old revolver was once again honored, as it had also reduced the need for six pistols down to one."(20)

Later, in his discussion of television he says something similar: "In contrast to film, therefore, the problem of television from the very beginning was how to make a single channel dimension from two image dimensions, and how to make a single time variable from convertible surfaces." And again later in the albeit short discussion of computers: " [C]omputers represent the successful reduction of all dimensions to zero . " (22) (Given what I intend to argue in a future essay addressed to the fundamental "parallelity" of the image, it will be possible to demonstrate that the computer is never the product of a reduction from two to one, or from the multiple to the zero, but in fact the reverse, for the computer belongs to that long aesthetic tradition that derives all of its energy from a fission of the one dividing into the multiple!)

The reduction of the many to the one is symptomatic, not only of a latent politics lurking within the Kittlerian corpus, but also, more simply, of the aforementioned prioritization of the object over the middle. A philosophy of mediation will tend to proliferate multiplicity; a philosophy of media will tend to agglomerate difference into reified objects. Perhaps this is why Kittler, although notable among his peers for an intrepid willingness to write on computers, never fully theorized digital media as much as other media technologies and platforms, for where is the object of distributed networks located, where is a rhizome, where is software ? For Kittler, alas, "there is no software. (24).

I applaud Kittler, though, for his understanding of the relation between computers and the optical. Many scholars today continue to classify the computer as another installment in the long march of visual culture. As Kittler makes clear, such a position is totally wrong. Subsequent to television, which began a retreat away from optical media and a return to the symbolic in the form of signal codification, the computer consummates the retreat from the realm of the imaginary to the purely symbolic realm of writing. "In contrast to film, television was already no longer optics," he writes. "Digital image processing thus ultimately represents the liquidation of this last remainder of the imaginary. The reason is simple: computers, as they have existed since the World War II , are not designed for image-processing at all." (25) Nevertheless the archive extends its influence over Kittler's thinking. For he thinks of technical media primarily in terms of artifacts , artifacts for storage , transmission, or processing. But what if we were to take the ultimate step and pose the question of media in reverse? What if we refuse to embark from the premise of "technical media" and instead begin from the perspective of their supposed predicates: storing, transmitting, and processing ? With the verbal nouns at the helm, a new set of possibilities appears. These are modes of mediation, not media per se. The shift is slight but crucial. The mode of storage appears instantly within its own illumination; the mode of transmitting returns from a far-off place; the mode of processing wells up like a flood of pure energy. Gilles Deleuze has suggested as much in his work. In the essay "What Is a Dispositif?"

Deleuze writes that one should not focus so much on devices or apparatuses as such and more on the physical systems of power they mobilize, that is, more on curves of visibility and lines of force. "These apparatuses, then, are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which crisscross and mingle together, some lines reproducing or giving rise to others, by means of

variations or even changes in the way they are grouped". When Kittler elevates substrates and apparatuses over modes of mediation, he forfeits an interest in techniques in favor of an interest in objects. A middle – a compromise, a translation, a corruption, a revelation, a certainty, an infuriation, a touch, a flux - is not a medium, by virtue of it not being a technical media device.

What is the computer, then, as a mode of mediation? Cavell, and he is not the only one simply the most convenient, speaks of the possibility of a medium. The possibility of a medium stands in intimate relation to what a medium is , that is to say, the definition of whatever medium is in question. Thus when one asks "What is the possibility of video? " one is in the same breath asking "What is the definition of video? "

Yet the computer occupies an uneasy position in relation to both definition and possibility, for in many cases the very words that people use to address the question o f the computer are those selfsame words "definition" and "possibility. " One hears stories about computers being "definitional" machines: not only doe s computer code operate through the definitions of states and state changes, but computers themselves are tho se special machine s that nominalize the world, that define and model its behavior using variable s and functions.

Likewise one hears stories about computers being "possibility" machines: they operate not through vague estimations of practice, but through hard, machinic possibilite s of truth or falsehood, openness or closed ness, on or off. So I suggest that these terms "definition" and "possibility" might do more harm than good if our aim is to understand the machine and how it works. How can we determine the possibility of new media, if new media are nothing but possibility machines? How can we define them if they are already cast from the mold of definition ?

To adopt a shorthand, one might summarize this state of affairs by asserting that the computer has hitherto been understood in terms of metaphysics . That is to say, when people speak about the computer as an "essencing machine " what they really mean is that computers simulate ontologies, they define horizons of possibility. This is the terrain of metaphysics. These sorts of definitions can be found in Lev Manovich, Janet Murray, and all across the discourse on new media today. The notion is that one must define the medium with reference to a specific "language" or set of essential formal qualities, which then, following the metaphysical logic, manifest in the world a number of instances or effects. (One of the shortcomings of this approach, which I will not delve into very deeply here, is the problem of essentialism, that is to say, the notion that new media objects are apriori a certain way, and it is merely the job of the critic to examine them, and extract the universal laws or languages that constitute their proper functioning in the world; my elders in the anti-essentialist critical tradition - from Homi Bhabha to Donna Haraway and beyond - have rightfully pointed out how this leads eventually to a number of political and theoretical problems, least of which being that it forecloses on contingency and historicity, two things that turn out to be quite desirable indeed.) (27)

In offensive thus far, however the story becomes more complicated once we acknowledge that the computer is dramatically unlike other media. Instead of facilitating the metaphysical arrangement, the computer does something quite different: it simulates the metaphysical arrangement. In short, the computer does not remediate other physical media, it remediates metaphysics itself (and hence should be more correctly labeled a metaphysical medium) . I shall refrain from saying it remediates mediation itself, but the temptation exists. The metaphysical "medium " of essences and instances is fundamentally dead today. And because it is dead, the medium of essences and instances reemerges in a new mediatic form, the computer. In formative machines do not participate in the worldly logic of essences and instances, they simulate it. For example, principles like disposability and planned obsolescence, on the one hand, seem to occlude age-old metaphysical problems about the persistence of essential identity in the form of universals or transcendentals. Quite frankly, the metaphysical questions are simply not the interesting ones to ask in the face of all this junk. But on the other hand, within the logic of the machine one sees little more than an effigy for, and an undead persistence of, these same metaphysical principles. As was said previously regarding affect, things always reach their perfection in death.

The remediation argument (handed down from McLuhan and his followers including Kittler) is so full of holes that it is probably best to toss it wholesale. So what to do with the notion of remediating metaphysics itself? If any hope may be found for the remediation theory, it is in the "itself." Television does not simply remediate film, it remediates film itself. The important issue is not that this or that film is scanned and broadcast as the "content" of television (this being one version of Mc Luhan's remediation argument). The important issue is that television incorporate s film itself, that is, it incorporate s the entire, essential cinematic condition.

Hypotheses governing remediation are quickly put to the test. Kittler's amazing discussion of time axis manipulation in recorded sound is instructive on this point. Recorded sound may remediate performed music, but what is being remediated when a musician plays magnetic tape backward and hears for the fi rst time a true sonic reversal (not simply the reversal of phonemes) ?

Or consider the computer. A computer might remediate text and image. But what about a computer crash? What is being remediated at that moment? It can 't be text or image anymore, for they are not subject to crashes of this variety. So is a computer crash an example of non-media? In short, the remediation hypothesis leads very quickly to a feedback loop in which much of what we consider to be media are in fact reclassified as non-media, thereby putting into question the suitability of the original hypothesis. A brief reference to object-oriented programming will help illustrate the problems surrounding the remediation of metaphysics itself. The metaphysico-Platonic logic of object oriented systems is awe inspiring, particularly the way in which classes (forms) define objects (instantiated things): classes are programmer-defined templates, they are (usually) static and state in abstract term s how objects define data types and process data; objects are instances of classe s, they are created in the image of a class, they persist for finite amounts of time and eventually are destroyed. On the one hand an idea, on the other a body. On the one hand an essence, on the other an instance. On the one hand the ontological, on the other the ontical.

Cinema so captured the twentieth-century imagination that it is common to assume that other media are also at root cinematic. And since the cinema is, in general, an ontology (in particular it is a phenome nology) it seems logical to assume that other m edia are ontological in the same way. The computer however, is not of an ontological condition, it is on that condition. It does not facilitate or make reference to an arrangement of being, it re mediates the very conditions of being itself. If I may be so crude: the medium of the computer is being. But one must take this in an entirely unglamorous way. It is not to say that the computer is the ontological actor par excellence, that it marks the way for some cyborg *Dasein* of the future. No, the point is that the computer has so degraded the ontological plane, that it may reduce and simulate it using the simple principles of logical relation. Being is its object, not its experience. And if being is merely its object, we ought to look elsewhere to try to understand its experience.

The computer instantiates a practice not a presence, an effect not an object. I n other words, if cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic. Perhaps a useful way to understand the distinction is to differe ntiate between a language and a calculus. A language operates at the level of description and reference. To encode the world, this is the primary goal of language. (Of course one might also speak about the autonomous space of language, in for example textuality, as a space of interconnection and deferral of meaning, and so on.) A *calculus*, on the other hand, operates at the level of computation and process. To do something to the world – or if you like to simulate doing something to the world - this is the primary goal of a *calculus*. With a calculus, one speaks of a system of reasoning, an executable machine that can work through a problem, step by step. The difference between the two, in one aspect, is that a calculus implies a method, whereas a language does not.

I make a distinction between an ethic, which describes general principles for practice, and the realm of the ethical, which defines such general principles for practice within the context of a specifically human relationship to moral conceptions of the good. So to say that the computer is in general unethical is not to say that computers are "ethical." Note therefore that mine is not a personification of the machine, but rather an anti-anthropocentrism of the realm of practice. And I will always defend the unpopular notion that, in the end, machines really have no need for humans at all (just in the same way that the Real has no need for us, but we have a horrifying need for it). Yet in actual fact the machine does have an anthropocentric relation, and this is where one might speak to the question of a computer ethic. As an ethic, the computer takes our action in the world as such as the condition of the world's expression. So in saying practice, I am really indicating a relationship of command. The machine is an ethic because it is premised on the notion that objects are subject to definition and manipulation according to a set of principles for action.

The matter at hand is not that of coming to know a world, but rather that of how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world. Ontology often receives too little billing in questions philosophical, even in cases when its hegemony is not warranted. So let me restate the argument: the computer has hitherto been defined ontologically; but this approach (using the ontological concepts of possibility and definition) is dubious because the computer itself is already a matter of possibility and definition; thus if the computer might better be understood in terms of a practice or a set of executions or actions in relation to a world, the proper branch of philosophy that one should turn to is ethics or pragmatics, not ontology or metaphysics; as an ethics, the computer takes our execution of the world as the condition of the world's expression. And this is the interface effect again, only in different language: the computer is not an object, or a creator of objects, it is a process or active threshold mediating between two states.

Neither an object nor a creator of objects - but where does this get us? First, beyond the response to Kittler, we can now rekindle the response to Manovich begun at the outset. The main difficulty with a book like *The Language of New Media*, for all its strength, is not simply that it participates in the various squabbles over this or that formal detail. Are games fundamentally about play or about narrative? What has greater semiotic priority, code or interface? In the end these territorial skirmishes do not interest me much. The main difficulty is the simple premise of the book, that new media may be defined via reference to a foundational set of formal qualities, and that these qualities form a coherent language that may be identified across all sorts of new media objects, and above all that the qualities may be read, and may be interpreted. This is what was called, many years ago, structuralism. Let me be clear, it is not so much that these sorts of books are misguided (and not so much to pick on Manovich, for there are scores of other texts that do similar work; his simply is one of the earliest and most accomplished examples), but that their conclusions are unappetizing. This is the crux of the matter: they contain no injunction. They talk more about objects and operations than practices and effects. The problem is not formal definition for after all I am willing to participate in such a project, suggesting for example that with informatic machines we must fundamentally come to terms with the problem of action.

The sticking point is that, in this instance, the use of formalism as a method does not ultimately conform most faithfully to the subject at hand. That is, if the computer were a formal medium, then perhaps our analysis of it could be too. But my position is that it is not exclusively or even predominantly formal. So in a certain sense, Manovich is, shall we say, slightly more avant-garde, performing an "intervention," while my call is much more conservative. If the language (of new media) is really an executable language and not simply a natural one, then would it not make sense for one's critical appraisal to be in step with that same notion of executability?

So when I say that these other authors' conclusions are unappetizing it should be taken in the most mundane sense: that the current discourse on "excitable" machines - to put it bluntly - is not

that exciting. In other words, if computers must be understood in terms of an ethics (those who wish instead to call it a politics should do so), then the discourse produced about them must also fulfill various ethical and political expectations. Else what is the good?