

From metaphor machine to being-with apparatus

Da metáfora máquina ao ser-com aparelhos

De la máquina de metáforas al ser-con aparato

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ABSTRACT:

This paper takes a look at how we have developed devices to create and transmit meaning. It looks at how these devices have been designed and used to present a view of the world to the viewer. It also looks at what the tendencies within the functioning of media devices are and how that changes the way we perceive information and create world views. Furthermore, it asks how the nature of these devices determine how we communicate through them and what are the tensions they create. Lastly, we ask what this means for present and future use of such technology in an experiential and informative environment.

Keywords: Media Archaeology. Media Practice. Digital Humanities. Installation. New Media Theory.

RESUMO:

Este artigo analisa como desenvolvemos dispositivos para criar e transmitir significado. Ele analisa como esses dispositivos foram projetados e usados para apresentar uma visão do mundo para o espectador. Também observa quais são as tendências dentro do funcionamento dos dispositivos de mídia e como isso muda a forma como percebemos a informação e criamos visões do mundo. Além disso, pergunta como a natureza desses dispositivos determina como nos comunicamos através deles e quais são as tensões que

eles criam. Por fim, perguntamos o que isso significa para o uso presente e futuro de tal tecnologia em um ambiente experiencial e informativo.

Palavras-chave: *Arqueologia da Mídia. Prática da Mídia. Humanidades Digitais. Instalação. Teoria das Novas Mídias.*

RESUMEN:

Este artículo analiza cómo hemos desarrollado dispositivos para crear y transmitir significado. Observa cómo estos dispositivos han sido diseñados y utilizados para presentar una visión del mundo al espectador. También mira cuáles son las tendencias dentro del funcionamiento de los dispositivos de los medios y cómo eso cambia la forma en que percibimos la información y creamos visiones del mundo. Además, se pregunta cómo la naturaleza de estos dispositivos determina la forma en que nos comunicamos a través de ellos y cuáles son las tensiones que crean. Por último, nos preguntamos qué significa esto para el uso presente y futuro de dicha tecnología en un entorno experimental e informativo.

Palabras clave: *Arqueología de los medios de comunicación. Práctica de los medios de comunicación. Humanidades Digitales. Instalación. Teoría de los nuevos medios.*

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1 Introduction

As we look at how we use technology and especially imaging technology in contemporary culture, we need to take a look at the historical forms and ideas that still have a strong influence on what we see, how we see it and how we interact with imagery and technology. We should ask how we have developed imaging technology and to what purpose has it functioned for us? From this perspective, we can see where we are today and ask whether we want to develop image technology and technical images in the future.

First, we need to ask what our relationship to technology is and how it defines the way we see the world. We know that humans have been image-makers for at least 40,000 years and that writing was developed 32,000 years later (about 6,000 BCE). As Bernard Stiegler has pointed out, *homo sapiens* have always existed with technology and not before technology (STIEGLER, 1998). While this helps us understand that imagery and our relationship to technology are fundamental to our existence, in the Western tradition we have assumed an existence before technology, the Golden Age of the Greeks and Romans or the Garden of Eden in the Abrahamic tradition. We have looked toward a time where humans were more in tune with the world. This is reflected in Plato and his cave metaphor as well as later in Descartes' Noble Savage. The tradition is one where the meaning of the world is beyond and hidden from us by the world. While later we would say seeing is believing, here it was more that we have to find meaning from the world despite what we see.

This all sets out a way of seeing the relation of humanity to the world that is based on an ideological/theological understanding of reality as opposed to actuality. This, of course, has set out a dichotomy between the humans and the world. From this relationship, we have developed an idea that we need to see the world as it is to navigate our way through it and also that we need to see beyond it to understand an assumed greater meaning that the physical world is diverting us from seeing. These cultural views are still alive in how we see the world, for instance, this can be seen in films like The Matrix saga. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, it presents a view of the world and technology that is closely aligned to early Christian Gnosticism, which saw the world as a mask or screen created by the devil to prevent us from seeing the true face of God (ŽIŽEK, 2001). Meaning that there is the physical world and the Real-world and that the former is an impediment to experi-

encing the latter. In this formulation, technology is missioned with presenting either the Real or the physical world to us. How we enter into relation with imagery takes a different turn with the introduction of technology as the basis of those images. We will look at two technologies as central to how we experience the world through it, namely the “metaphor machine,” created by Athanasius Kircher and the camera.

2 The Technology of Meaning

In his book, *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Athanasius Kircher proposed a design for his Museum Kircherianum at the Collegio Jesuit Roman. These are new forms of technological interactive installations much in line with what we would not see until the late 20th century. He designed works like the metaphor machine, a precursor to projection-based installation, where the viewer would see their body in a mirror before them and a projected head of an ass, lion or other creatures to replace their head and face (ZIELINSKI, 2006). This was meant to teach the viewer moral messages; it was intended to create a shocking and uncanny experience because it would look real and yet the viewer would know it was not them. It was meant to present us with a higher knowledge by creating a visual image that related to the world beyond the physical world, the Real beyond the actual. The idea of the museum installation is presented in whole form here. As stated by Zielinski et al, “based on the concept of purification of the soul through catharsis, media machines were designed and built in such a way that their functioning mechanisms remained a mystery to the audience” (ZIELINSKI; WAGNERMAIER, 2005, 90). It assumes that there is a set of knowledge that can only be presented to the public through the hand of a trained intermediary, in Kircher’s case, the priesthood in general and the Jesuit order specifically.

The operating method of the *Societas Jesu* in the 17th century can be described from a media-archaeological perspective as governed by two principles, which were also of decisive importance for Kircher’s work. These principles were the international network of a thoroughly hierarchical and centralized structured system of religious faith, knowledge, and politics, combined with the development of advanced strategies for the *mise-en-scène* of their messages, including the invention and construction of the requisite devices and apparatus (ZIELINSKI, 2006).

For Kircher, “[t]he tasks of the scholar, and the artist, is to explain the development of diversity from the One, the Divine, and to integrate it, in all its unwieldy dissonance, in such a way that harmonious unity results once again” (ZIELINSKI, 2006, 120). So that work like the metaphor machine is in a darkened room not simply for ease of projection, but rather because it reinforces the idea of the separation of the human from the physical world and places them concerning the higher Divine world represented by light projected into space. The trope that we are in the dark looking for the light is a longstanding metaphor. It, of course, has resonance back to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Just as Plato’s cave, the metaphor machine exists in a darkened room, taking us away from the world so that we can see beyond the world. As a system, it demands that we step away from the world so that one is able to have the time and space to find meaning in the world. Instead of having us confront the world before us it takes us away into a space that can create meaning because of its detachment from the world. This is very much in line with André Malraux’s later writings on the function of the museum and Maurice Blanchot’s definition of the function of art. Blanchot explains that art is separate from the world and the viewer. He says that it is this separation that allows it to reflect onto the world. This distance of the work to the world and the viewer to the work opens up a space where each element’s own voice comes together to create meaning (BLANCHOT, 1997).

With the metaphor machine in particular and the Museum Kircherianum as a whole, we are taught important moral lessons through the teachings of the Jesuit order by an authorial or artistic voice, designed and controlled by the artist. “[T]he intention was that the effects should take the onlookers by surprise, captivate them, and prevent them from giving free rein to their imagination and reason” (ZIELINSKI *et al.*, 2005, 90). Although the viewer is to derive meaning from the work, it is a programmed meaning created by taking us beyond the corporeal world and into a “more real” metaphysical world. We can still see this model used in contemporary media installation art, which we will discuss later in this paper. As a conceptual structure, it demands a removal from life to allow space for meaning to occur. This is a model of reflection, much like how projected image in a cinema is only a reflection on a surface.

3 The Image Of “That Is”

Similar to the metaphor machine, photography is based on the existence of the darkened room, the camera. William Henry Fox Talbot says that he used a camera lucida for the sketches he was making when he first had the idea of photography (TALBOT, 1969). He was on the Grand Tour with his family at Lake Como in the Alps when he had this revelation.

The Grand Tour was the beginning of a new idea of going to wild nature to have a sublime experience. The sublime as an idea was revived in the 17th century by writers such as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, and Joseph Addison and later developed by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The sublime is supposed to allow us to face the power of nature as a direct experience of the metaphysical, producing both fear and awe. For Kant, this experience presents a moral transcendence to us (the Divine).

Like Kircher’s metaphor machine, the sublime is expected to shock and dislocate to create a sense of awe that reveals what is beyond the physical world. Significant to this experience is that it is a direct experience with the world. The sublime can be found in nature as well as by being before a work of art. This direct experience is unique to the modern idea of the sublime and has to be understood as a result of the Reformation. An important tenant of Protestantism was that the believer has a direct relationship with God, while the Catholic structure was one where a priest class is an intermediary and interpreter of the Divine. Thus, we have the metaphor machine as a work that technologizes how we are explained the Divine (the meaning of the world).

If the reason for creating images is for us to see beyond the surface to the meaning behind it, then photography allowed this function to fall into the hands of the average person. By doing so the function of the image transforms. Because the photograph is a framed slice taken from reality, what we see has a different sense of meaning, it becomes proof, it is always denotational. It presents the “That Is” to us. The image moves past showing meaning in the world to giving proof of the world itself. The surface of the image takes on new significance. We know that, when we look at a photograph, we are looking at things that had to exist in the world. That becomes central to how we approach the mechanically produced image. It assumes that we can turn a slice of reality into an object (BAUDRILLARD; WEIBEL; NUE GALERIE, 1999), which means that reality becomes something

we can observe beyond our own experience and, conversely, through the image we can obtain an experience external to us. The world enters the image in the less mediated fashion that mechanical devices allow. What is in the image becomes more than what we would see in a traditional composed image, where everything we see is planned by the artist. So people may appear in the background of the image who are irrelevant to any intended meaning of that image. Likewise, a person could only appear partially in the image. All of this was impossible in images that were designed purely to present a message. Photographs give us this extra element, an excess, of reality as being beyond us. What we are left with in the photographic image is a sense of “Being-with” what is before us, a “Being-with” that goes beyond meaning.

Thus, the technologically based image has these two elements that are seemingly at odds with each other. Yet at the same time it is the reality found in the mechanically produced image, be it the photograph, film or digital in format, that resonates back into new images of media and installation art. It is the idea that we are seeing something that has a base in the “That Is” which is used to develop works which are trying to tell us “What Is”.

4 Looking at And Being-With

As the technology to create and present media developed, these two directions continued to compete and reinforce each other. Picking up from Vilém Flusser’s definition of the three-stages of images, the textual image, carries conceptual data based on textual knowledge and, the technical image, is one that, while also being formed by formulae and texts. The technical apparatus which creates the image is unique because it is formed around an idea of feedback or interaction (FLUSSER, 2000). The metaphor machine or even early cinema has a textual base, which is centered on presenting to an audience that is spoken to. By contrast, the technical image’s function is tied up in our relationship with its creating apparatus. Thus, we can say that the camera was first conceived as a device to allow us to have direct experience with the sublime, allowing us to try to find the divine in nature without the artist or priest as an intermediary. As the technology became better, our relationship to the world through technology radically changed. In its early days when the exposure time for a single photograph was measured in minutes, we had to remove ourselves from

the world to be in an image. Daguerre's photograph of the Boulevard du Temple, credited with being the first photo of a person, begins to show that, once we turned the camera away from the Romantic ideal of the landscape as sublime, we found ourselves not just looking at each other but using the apparatus as a way of being with each other. The focus became the relationship found in creating the photograph rather than creating an image of metaphor. Whereas traditional images are self-contained and all visual information is consciously put there as part of the semiotic program, the photographic image always makes a reference to what is outside the image as well as what we see. This idea of the inside and outside of the image has been noted by critics of photography throughout the 20th century, from Walter Benjamin to Beaumont Newhall and on to Roland Barthes and Thomas Elkins today (BARTHES, 1981; BENJAMIN, 2015; ELKINS, 2011; NEWHALL; MUSEUM OF MODERN ART NEW YORK, 1949). So, we are conscious of the person taking the picture as well as the person in the photo. We understand that there is a relationship between the two. We know that they had to exist in proximity to each other and that the moment of creating the image was one which tied these people together, be it only for a moment. The image created is always a document of a moment of relatedness. It is a moment in time, it is a moment where these people exist through their dependence on each other. Without each other, there is not that image. They are images of experience, a "That Is". Coming from this being with each other in the image is an interplay that is centered through the apparatus that creates the image, the camera. As much as we act and interact with what is before the camera's lens, we also are involved in an interaction with the camera itself. Flusser calls this play. He states that the camera has a program and that we play with the camera through the program and it is through the images created that we can judge the effects of that play (Flusser, 2000). If we define play as to how we interact with through the photographic process, then it can be equally seen as a process that relates the camera operator and the device and the subject to each other. This sense of playing through the program is as much about how we interact with the apparatus as it is about how we interact with the subject of the image. The give and take of play creates a relationship of interdependence between all involved, be it the players to each other or the players to the device of play. For a game to remain interesting and not play out all its moves, all players have to play in a field of equality, so that the relationships that we find in photography become the models for all interactive media devices developed after it. This is why, as technical images moved on to moving images and computer-based images, this basic relationship remains. This defines how we understand our mediated experience.

5 Media Practice in the Age of Technical Apparatuses

Coming from the late 19th into the 20th century, we start to see the development of current media practice. The development of new forms of media continued along the lines found in photography. Namely, bringing a relationship of “Being-with” to the fore and having that relationship contain a metaphysical bent. The era in which mechanical reproduction of sound and motion was developed was a time of great interest in a Neo-Platonist understanding of the metaphysical. So, we find Edison having a great interest in spiritualism and believing that he could create the “Spirit phone.” Spirit photography existed before that and groups like the Order of the Golden Dawn, the Rosicrucian Order and Theosophy gained a presence in intellectual circles. These groups believed in a relationship between spirituality and experimental science through the idea of personal practice in a way that harkens back to alchemy. Their members were composers, artists, poets and inventors. They influenced media practice. We find their influence in the works of Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, John Cage and even Matthew Barney today.

There are a few significant points that were brought forward from alchemical practice to contemporary media practice. First, the idea that devices can and should be developed to create a “higher consciousness”. This allows all of us to be able to play the role of the alchemist or *magus*. If I have a device such as Bryon Gysin’s Dream Machine, I too can have access to this realm of experience.

Second, that such devices should be developed to create an experience on each individual. Where the experience will be able to create enlightenment in the user. Such devices prioritize the experiential over the factual, meaning that data is secondary to a feeling of empathy. We find this idea of the importance of the feeling of having experienced an event as being defining of media practice in Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulation and Simulacra*. This is precisely what he is talking about in the chapter entitled ‘Holocaust’, where he talks about a television miniseries Holocaust, as an example of how the experiential takes priority over the factual. Viewers perceive experience of watching this show as if they were experiencing what it was like to be a concentration camp survivor, an experi-

ence that they have never had (BAUDRILLARD, 1994). With this example given by Baudrillard we see that, even though the delivery system was a mass medium, in this case television, the effect is still individual.

We also see the development of an ideology of the artist as shaman. First expressed by Joseph Beuys, we can see how this comes from the Romantic concept of the artist as a genius and the alchemist as a magus (FLUSSER, 2011). It has its roots earlier in the 20th century with the birth of conceptualism and the work of Duchamp. Later artists, such as Yves Klein and Nam June Paik, used the idea of media to create metaphorical devices of a greater meaning. This formulation contains the idea of the artist as having a healing function for the greater society and, more importantly, that their individual experience is larger than themselves, which means that we are to assume the impact of the act done by the artist with and through media devices transmitted out to the rest of us. This leaves us with the performance model found in the work of Beuys, which just updates traditional shamanism, the person touched by the divine who speaks for it to us, or a newer model where the devices made by the artist program interaction with the sublime for us.

This latter model creates forms of media practice that lead to combine these different elements of guided intermediary and individual revelation. Despite the presence of the pseudo-shamanistic the artist or the spectacle of a projection mapping of my face on a building, the works developed through technology operate through a feedback loop. This feedback loop defines the works as actions. They place us in a relationship between an operator, a technology and a viewer. Work as a product of interaction keeps an element of a dynamic "Being-with" as part of its way of putting itself into the world. The media device is activated through the filter of the "That Is" through the feedback loop, so that the experience is grounded by the real world. The technology tends towards the intimacy of the personal experience whose meaning is defined by its relation back to the physical world. Since experiences as phenomena by definition have to happen in the actual world, the devices that create these phenomena must be focused on a "Being-with" to be.

6 Living in a Media Environment

Media devices today have evolved into a singular device, the digital computer. The Turing Machine is one which separates the form from the content. If anything, that can be described through an algorithm which can be run by a Turing Machine, then there is a flattening out of all functions into being algorithmic formulae, code. Since code operates as a set of instructions to be acted on, this means its function falls within Flusser's idea of play. For it to operate, the Turing Machine must create a feedback loop that brings forward acts of "Being-with". Yet, programs are still metaphors created to describe the world to us. They are used to describe the world, how and why it functions, but, because it is a metaphor, all it can do is be an approximation, a *simulacrum* of the world. We interact with it as if it is the world, but we are getting lost in the metaphor. We forget that the algorithm is created by us and assume that it is the law of nature. Even more so, we forget that the algorithm is created as a form of prescriptive language. It is based on commands that must be executed. They are written based on past behavior and try to predict future behavior from the past. This means that the device tries to limit how we see the world to a simple reflexive operation (CHUN, 2011). It wants everything done within it to be a mathematical operation. This still makes the Turing Machine a Metaphor Machine, it is just that its metaphor brings us back to a Pythagorean ideal of mathematical harmony with the universe. Yet, as a device of interaction, it still operates through a feedback loop and as such opens up space to a "Being-with". It cannot escape this even as an apparatus of communication.

We use a singular device as an apparatus of infinite possibility, a combinatory machine where meaning is not tied to content. Whereas analog devices were limited to specific tasks, the digital device has taken over the analog's function through the transformation of action into metaphor. As this relationship of device to meaning is broken, we are left with to decide on which the emphasis of our work must reside. Is it in the meaning or the form? Are these two considerations incompatible or can they be reconciled? If so, how? Again, what we find is that interaction requires a reaching out to another, be it human or mechanical. This means that such devices create a relationship with otherness, "Being-with", which creates experiences for the user that are outside the control of the program or device, while the program is designed to focus and limit the interaction to fit the ideology inherent in the program. The devices function as a relational apparatus although, inherent to the object, it is of excess value. But it is this excess which defines the reason for the

device and how it is used. It is because it has excess value that it keeps our interest in interacting with the device and allows it to have an ability to communicate to us intimately. As we develop new devices and applications for interaction and to present meaning to us, it is this tension between the “Being-with” and talking at that determines how we see the world we live in.

For media practitioners, this tends to put us in the place of wanting to create work that is deeply programmed in form expecting the content to be an excess to the form. We want to create works that prioritize relational experience over the merely informational. Technology pushes us to create conceptual works, because of the relationship of concepts to text and the grounding of media devices in conceptual texts (FLUSSER, 2000). While the nature of the feedback loop places us in a position which valorizes the ethical interdependency of a relationship of “Being-with” (FLUSSER 2011), we are pushed in two different directions and are expected to find a compromise.

7 Conclusion

A guiding compulsion of media is the desire to experience a presence beyond the self. This experience, grounded in a desire to encounter the sublime, is one that is centered on a “Being-with” which defines us through our interactions with others. While the devices developed may be programmed to push us to predetermined actions or conclusions, it is this relationship to being with another that still grounds it. Media practice in art, science and humanities museums, and even advertising, all utilize this fact. As new forms of technical display are developed, we need to understand how this idea defines what makes our works successful or just a tiresome exercise in programming.

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