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2001-09-28

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17471>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Auer, Johannes: Screaming Screen and Binary Idealism. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 19, Jg. 3 (2001-09-28), Nr. 5, S. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17471>.

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Screaming Screen and Binary Idealism

By Johannes Auer

No. 19 – 28.09.2001

Abstract

A text about surfaces and screens, flat mice and done in cats, the longing for death in Internet and the "binary idealism", a little Plato, even Flusser. Does netart really lay in the code? Are hackers the real net artists? Is the visualisation of the machine-code on the screen just as useless and inferior as the dull, boring piece of art in Plato's ideal state?

1.

On 13 January 1997 the following news was propagated in the internet:

"If you want me to clean your screen, scroll up and down"

Below this sentence an internet address was given and the name of the artist: Olia Lialina. If you call up the given address an opened hand appears on the screen and when the scroll-bars are moved up and down it actually seems as if a hand was cleaning the screen from the inside.

Of course in this work of the Russian net-artist Olia Lialina it is important that she announces herself by e-mail, of course it is important that the click on the given address, the click that calls up the work, is made before the visual sensation and remains the only click-possibility.

However, I do not wish to discuss this in detail now; nor do I want to stress that in net-art apart from the visual effect, that is the effect which we see on the screen and which I will speak about during my talk, that in net-art still two further levels, a technical (the programming) and a social level (the interaction of the user) are added. This important idea comes from Reinhold Grether, the literary scholar and net-anthropologist from Konstanz. He distinguishes the three levels in Desk, Tech and Soz.¹

But what I do want to stress, first of all is that when we look at computer-art, strictly speaking pc[personal computer]-art, 2 levels operate together and Olia Lialina's

hand makes this particularly clear: Firstly there is the visual surface on the screen and secondly there is the surface on which I move the mouse in order to interact with the visual level. Let me give you another example: Mouchette's Kill the Cat

Here, you must hit an fast-moving button with the mouse. The button is placed in front of the wide open jaws of a cat which fill the whole screen. This is a fairly tricky task of hand-eye co-ordination. If you succeed with the click you are "rewarded" by the question "why did you kill my cat?" And with a further click you must promise never to do this again ("Never do it again.").

2.

Normally, the link is regarded as the most important interaction possibility between mouse-level and screen and it is very interesting that Olia Lialina places this link before her work of art.

A link or a hyper-link is a word or a picture in the so-called hypertext which gives me a new information when I click on the screen with the mouse. The hypertext is the basis of the www, is the method to surfing in the www per hyperlink. And it was the hyperlink that in the first place inspired art and literature in the www and perhaps even more the theoretical reflections on it.

In fact it seemed as if the hypertext would at last enable the reader or the person looking at a work of art to become a co-author or a co-creator.

Michael Böhler goes a step further in his reading of the necessary working together of mouse and screen: he sees it as a transfer of the creating imagination onto the mouse-action-level, in other words, as an externalisation of the imaginary. Böhler says:

"If regarded aesthetically hyperfiction is not so much a new literary textform as a new way of reading and a new text-reader-relationship. Here the place of the literary "theatre" is moved from the inner brains of mental processes into the outer room of interaction, where sensorial perception and haptic acts of selection take place."²

Lately the euphoria of "the-link-is-everything" has, however, dwindled and its meaning is critically queried. Let me list a few causes:

Bernd Wingert notes a possible shift of attention in the reading of hypertext from the text to the actual click, which he quite correctly characterizes as the "centrifugal force".³ That is the reader is much more interested in where the links take him than

in what he actually sees on the screen. And so it is quite right to speak about a hypertextual zap-mentality.

Even more important, however, is Uwe Wirth's argument. He says that the degree to which hypertexts dispense with a structure that is an internal coherence which was thought out by the author in order to be open for the reader's fondness for clicking, I repeat, that without such a deliberate structure the text in the end becomes optional, without content and sense.⁴ This means that in a fictional text the possibility to decide will always have to be restricted by producer or author. And so we have an interesting discussion at the moment: Digital literature is increasingly discussed in the relationship of text and picture.

"The next generation of hypertexts will have to be visually pleasurable, and hypertext will be a work of design and orchestration as much as a work of writing"⁵, Marie-Laure Ryan says.

[At this point a digression on the death-wish in net-art was actually planned since everything started lethally with the "death of the author" caused by the hypertext. Now the hypertext as a means of aesthetics will have to cop it (why actually, I would like to ask) and with it the whole of www- and net-work art. Here you may choose if the decline of net-commerce will lead to the end of net.art (Tilman Baumgärtel) or the lack of a chance to make money with net.art will eventually lead to its end (Mark Amerika). That is, if net.art hasn't already been swallowed up by business and entertainment as shown by Ars Electronica. But what can you expect from a medium which was originally invented thanks to war and is based on the 1 and the 0, that is, on to be or not to be...As I already said at this stage I wanted to tell you something about all this but at the mention of "to be or not to be", literature came back on the scene like a phoenix from the ashes...]⁶

3.

But of course there is still the other camp which sees net.art exclusively embedded in the code and brushes the optical result on the screen aside as only secondary. Let us call this "binary idealism" for the time being.

As an example of this let me mention the latest Jodi-project, called Wrong Browser. Here again, it's all about deconstruction and, yet again, about making people aware of the fact that behind the computer-picture you actually see is something completely different, namely the programming, the code. As one of the representatives of this "theory" let me mention Tilman Baumgärtel who says (with Kittler) that the hackers are the real artists; and there is also Florian Cramer who categorically demands that authors of net-literature should write poems with the

programming language. I do not say that this is uninteresting or even wrong; however, I feel slightly irritated by the almost messianic rigour with which the "essential", namely the programming code is drawn up against the supposedly mere surrogate and by-product, the screen event. I have a déjà-vu feeling: Let's go and grab good old Plato from our analogue book-shelf and open the 10th book (please note: ten is 1 and 0!) of "Civitas".

Here we learn with the bed as an illustration that the artist produces only a copy of the copy. The carpenter at least produces a useful copy of the pure "sleeping-place-idea" whereas the artist just paints the reproduction already made by the carpenter, that is the artist produces only a useless copy of the copy, he just daubs a 3rd grade reality. The binary idealists argue quite similarly when talking about the computer:

Given is the pure idea, the 0 and the 1, the binary code. The craftsmen(-women) of the age of computers, namely the programmers take up this absolute of the machine-code. Everything else, that is what we ultimately get to see on the screen, is only a visualisation of the programming of the machine-code carried out and therefore just as useless and inferior as the dull, boring piece of art in Plato's ideal state.

And yet, the binary idealists have already lost their case, if we listen to Flusser who praises the surface: If we are able to write a poem in the programming language it must be true that this language is not merely "formal" and so a pure means of the "arithmetical awareness" but at least as a language is quite strongly contaminated by elements of lineary writing. This would mean that programm-"texts" are the expression of a process-orientated, logical consciousness, and therefore conventional. Flusser calls it a fact that pictures are existentially stronger than this conventional text.⁷ In other words: everything that appears on the screen is much more impressive than the actual causal code. Or just to sum up the whole discussion in simple "flusser-free" words quite radically: I quote Dirk Paesmans from Jodi: "Media-art is always on the surface. One must grap people as quickly as possible."⁸

But looked at like this, isn't there the danger that the "tyranny of pictures"⁹ as Virilio calls it or even "Image surfing"¹⁰ as Robert Coover says will reduce the "essence of a work" to the mere surface, to a mere "show"? Do we, like Virilio, have to call for the script as a last hope which will take up position against the TV-screen; should we therefore, preferably with a sharpened quill-pen, write as an act of resistance against the "power of the pictures"¹¹ on the screen?

I like these apocalyptic moods - they are so powerful and clear and...not very helpful. I say this, even if I, too, declare myself in favour of the script, the text and the concept as necessary correctives against the mere picture which only too easily degenerates into design.

Let me remind you of Marcel Duchamp.¹² Duchamp always rejected the exclusively "retinal" work of art as he called it, that is the work of art that commits itself only to the visual. He demanded instead that a picture must refer to a concept, an idea. A significant means of breaking up the idea of the pure picture is for him the literary title of a picture. Even before the ready-mades, Marcel Duchamp saw in the picture title an important co-creating purpose and wrote his titles directly on the canvas. Thus: for Duchamp word and picture form a unity which, however, must point beyond itself to an artistic concept.

If we then believe in a fertile screen-symbiosis of picture and word, the concept which goes beyond it offers the possibility for a general reconciliation. The "concept" has a big heart and includes all forms of unmasking - even basic lessons such as: Behind everything that happens on the screen there is always a programming code, or isn't it...?

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to be continued...

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