

The Cultural Archive and the New Media Literature

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The new media object: interface and database

In his book *The Language of New Media* (2001) Lev Manovich presents a very influential definition of new media object in order to provide scholars with a functional concept that refers to electronic, interactive, digital, virtual, multimedia etc. art and literature. The term while choosing the neutral word »object« points beyond the domain of artistic creativity into the practices of everyday communication.

*The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material. If only one interface is constructed, the result will be similar to a traditional art object, but this is an exception rather than the norm. (Manovich, *The Language of New Media* 227)*

The databases that Manovich has in mind are digitized archives of cultural objects and practices. The notion of »cultural interface« transfers the technical terms of art onto cultural signs beyond the limits of computational manipulation of information (Manovich, *The Language of New Media* 70). A cultural interface is a human-computer-culture interface: it combines interfaces as cultural objects, the regular practices of communication between humans, with interfaces as applications that provide access to information stored on (networked) computers. By associating his approach with the theory of discourse of Michel Foucault Manovich argues for a theoretical approach focusing on cultural transcoding.

However, Manovich doesn't assume that transcoding can be successfully understood in isolation from the study of hardware and software, the material conditions for new media objects. In his last book *Software Takes Command* (2008) he argues for a new discipline: the »software studies« that focus on interaction between the operations that software provides for the user, their uses and the effects of the computational objects within the

context of social communication. Manovich considers: »software as a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies« (Manovich, *Software Takes Command*).

The problems of a computational production of language

Hans Magnus Enzensberger in his examination of theoretical possibilities of a poetry automaton (Poesie-Automat) arrives to a conflictual relationship between two planes of simulation that he attempts to resolve with a compromise: the primary linguistic structure, which gravitates towards normal language use, and the poetic secondary structure that demands the breaking of rules. However, the result should not compromise the poem's integrity, with which it enters the dialogue of utterances in speech communication (Enzensberger).

In the monograph *Poesiemaschinen/Maschinenpoesie* (2007) a German new media artist and theorist David Link, whose work focuses on computational generation of language and texts, points to the fact that computers as e.g. conceived by Alan Turing in his theory of Turing-Machine are fundamentally alien to language. Espen J. Aarseth notes that information processing and human semiosis clash, however they nevertheless somehow coexist (Aarseth 29, 31).

David Link notes the fact that humans construe computers as anthropomorphous. However, since the body and senses from the human metaphor have been successfully implemented in machines - computers can recognize patterns or move around by following sets of rules - the human spirit hasn't been simulated yet. Link suggests that there are theoretical dilemmas that need to be considered. A general mistake of the artificial intelligence research is the attempt to simulate the human spirit in general, not a particular person, as exists in society. The dialogic nature of existence, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, is beyond the possible scope of a computer. The reason for that lies in its

design.¹

Anstatt Mengen zu bestimmen, bezeichnen Zahlen in seiner [Turing's] Konstruktion Zustände und halten Gleiches künstlich auseinander. Null und Eins setzen sich in einer Identität von Identität und Differenz ebenso entgegen wie sie in eins fallen, im Gegensatz zur herkömmlichen Mathematik, in der Null von Eins geschieden werden muß. Wer die Maschine im numerischen Feld verortet, verfehlt eine Pointe der Turing'schen Erfindung. (Link, *Poesiemaschinen/Maschinenpoesie* 45)

Link emphasizes the level of the computational information processing, which lies semiologically before the separation of symbols between letters and numbers (Link, "while(true): On the Fluidity of Signs in Hegel, Gödel, and Turing"). What the machine does is that it transforms symbols, however this happens only on the level of the material storage medium. It can never react to a situation on a pragmatic level.

Next, David Link examines the history of early applications that produced an illusion of consciousness in language. Programmed in 1966 *Eliza* by Joseph Weizenbaum simulates a psychoanalyst who invites the user to talk about herself. However the *Eliza* application doesn't contain a story, it merely turns all the questions around to invite the user to go on talking about herself. In 1971 Kenneth Mark Colby programmed *Parry*, a simulation of paranoid disorder, which by intentionally ignoring the context of conversation is in fact also an excuse for the system's nonresponsiveness. Parry just goes on about himself and gets more or less aggressive. In both cases, what is simulated, is the condition of language separated from its contextual use. Another instance, the textual adventure games, such as *Adventure* (1976) by William Crowther and Don Woods, require from the user a temporal suspension of the capacity for language for the textual machine to function, i.e. for the story to progress according to the user's textual commands (Link, *Poesiemaschinen/Maschinenpoesie* 85).

In his own artistic project *Poetry Machine* (2001) Link attempts to open the textual generator to the internet in order to bridge

¹ The numbers in [Turing's] construct describe states and hold the same artificially apart, instead of determining quantities. The zero and one are in opposition to each other in an identity of identity and difference and at the same time establish a unity – which contradicts the usual mathematics where zero and one need to be kept apart. If one locates the machine in the domain of numbers then the some points of Turing's discovery are missed. (Trans. A. V.)

the gap between closed system of a computer and the human language use on the Web. However, the results are not promising, since the machine could not establish sense through generative language stream. The construction of a meaningful sentence out of a lexicon of words and through the use of grammar remains outside the machine's reach.

Divided authorship

Mikhail Bakhtin defines the boundaries of an utterance, the fundamental element of his theories, with the »*change of speaking subjects*« (Bakhtin 71). In this way also Vilém Flusser's theory of techno-imagination can be construed as an approach that analytically divides the authorship into a programmer and a user of the apparatus (Flusser 75). The algorithms that guide the functioning of a machine and its concrete use in a socio-historical context are both the result of someone's conscious effort.

It seems to be inappropriate to speak of »emergent properties«, even in the »weak«, epistemological meaning of the term in order to describe the unpredictable behaviour of algorithmic cultural objects. The emergentist approach entails a continuous progression of layers of reality, however the break that the artistic use of signs constitutively entails is, as noted by Enzensberger, incompatible with (nonreductive) physicalist image of the world (O'Connor & Wong).

Google Web search engine

An example of technologically encoded cultural object, Flusser's techno-image, is *Google* search engine. Flusser wrote his theories assuming that the general audience is unable to decode techno-images appropriately. It is the same today, when people »google« without reflecting on how the information is obtained. It was emphasized that the computer cannot develop a capacity for language or a consciousness nor can meaningful behaviour »emerge«

out of the mechanical processes. However, what the machine can do, is perform operations on data extremely fast. As a consequence, new phenomena come to life.

Google was the response to the unordered state of the web. The earlier Web search engines used the model of correspondence between the search quarry and the text on the page, however with the increasing amount of »spam« on-line these systems had great difficulties to distinguish »worthless« webpages from the ones that merited human interest. Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page found the solution to the problem by using the structural power imbalance inherent in the design of the World Wide Web (by Tim Berners-Lee) to obtain the information on the »values« of webpages. The condition of the Web is that the links point to other pages, however the page pointed to doesn't contain the information that it was »cited«. In order to analyse the reversed hyperlinks Brin and Page had to analyse the whole Web. In the famous article *The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine* they explain their approach.

Academic citation literature has been applied to the web, largely by counting citations or backlinks to a given page. This gives some approximation of a page's importance or quality. PageRank extends this idea by not counting links from all pages equally, and by normalizing by the number of links on a page. (Brin & Page)

Google therefore ranks pages according to the existence of links. A static hyperlink is a product of a person and it is the only relational information within the system of the Web. When a link is programmed into a web page the space on the page is used, therefore only a strict selection of links can be put on a page, without making it unreadable². To summarize, since the computer can not decide, whether a page is interesting or not, the human actions as interpage quotations are used. They are counted - which the machine can do on the semiological level before any reference to real world - whereby providing the objective hierarchy of the webpages within the current World Wide Web.

2 The normalizing of the value of links by the number of links on the page is an algorithmic expression of this limitation.

The digital communities

In 2004 the Ars Electronica festival introduced a new category called Digital Communities. In 2007 the parallel Net Vision category (i.e. internet art) was abolished and the new Hybrid Art introduced instead. The Interactive Art as a constant of the festival is less telling, whereas it is important to note that the dividing of the field into not-internet and internet based projects has shifted towards a divide between building of societies and hybridizing of media. The former has in fact included all the works that used the internet as a key ingredient (hybrid art in turn began to compete with the obsolete interactive art). Slogan of this programmatic change was: »the reclaiming of the internet as a social space« (Leopoldseder & Schopf 196; Leopoldseder & Stocker 192).

If *Google* used the information that was implicitly encoded into the total structure of the Web to present its contents by means of innovative use of technology the »digital communities« as limited projects strive to organize a community by any means possible. The authorship of a multiuser discourse (Aarseth 142ff.) is thus determined by its effect, the digital community as a new form of society: the initial supportive communication systems have to be developed and maintained, however, on the other hand, the critical number of users have to be persuaded to participate and the relationships between them have to be designed in a way that enables the multiuser discourse to sustain itself. The results, such as *Wikipedia*, additionally point to new epistemological challenges, since the new expression of a »collective intelligence« (Leopoldseder & Schopf 205) doesn't correspond to the subjective assumptions inherent in the »common sense«.

The archive as a medium: Mouseion Serapeion

The collection of different theoretical approaches in the book *The Archive* edited by Charles Merewether in 2006 points to a new interest in the archival structures in contemporary arts and in

theory. A quote from a contribution by Hal Foster: »If archival art differs from database art, it is also distinct from art focused on museum,« (Merewether 144) should illustrate, on the level of terminology, the burgeoning interest in the way multifaceted relationships between archival units are reconfigured (Vaupotič & Bovcon). Moreover, the affinity between the archive and a computer is by no means taken for granted.

An example of artistic archive that was conceptualized by Narvika Bovcon and Aleš Vaupotič is *Mouseion Serapeion* (2004)³. Methodologically it is an »artistic research« into the possibilities of new media discursive practices by means of constructing a model. On the one hand the scientific objectivity is necessarily compromised, however on the other a deeper understanding emerges from the scholar's hands-on experience. Also David Link's understanding of textual generators is founded on the profound understanding available to somebody that had created a classical work in a still new medium.

Mouseion Serapeion is an archive that presents and critically reviews the first ten years of the artistic production of the Video Seminar at Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts (1987–1997). *Mouseion Serapeion* is at the same time an artistically coded smart application for Windows operating system that generates the context for individual elements of the archive according to the user's requirements. The main search result in the centre of the "Territory" view of the application is derived by means of browsing through the metadata of particular elements of the archive; the secondary six hits are additionally defined by the user's horizon of understanding, which was recorded for a generic group of participants in the art institution as the history of browsing through this particular archive. The view "List" on the other hand assures the access to all the elements of the archive and so eases the user's dialogue with the language of the Academy's video production.

3 <http://black.fri.uni-lj.si/mouseionserapeion/> (1 Sept 2009)

Mouseion Serapeion is a construction. First, it models the notion of social and historic identities as they are developed on the level of the atoms of Power-Knowledge in the theory of discourse by Michel Foucault. Second, it models the techno version of the visage as conceptualized by Emmanuel Lévinas, which confronts the user of the application by means of dialogue; the visage is therefore unknowable in the mystically transcendental sense of the word. What the user sees is a visage, not because she animistically projects it, but because the archive elements are presented through a specific communicative metaphor.

Conclusion

Mouseion Serapeion solves the dilemmas of a contemporary new media archive and, at the same time, the computational production of meaning with careful planing of which procedures to choose to manipulate the initial set of data. As opposed to *Google*, its scope is limited to a community that corresponds to an existing social group. The input data is used to align the archive configuration with the existing expectations of what it consists of. The result is a sort of »mirror« image of the group of users, which is potentially questioned in its aggressive reconfiguration of the archival units through the history of browsing.

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Abstract

The new media technologies have changed the way cultural memory is preserved in archives. The shift can be grasped by a particular theoretical model for understanding new media objects. Such objects are according to theoretical views of Lev Manovich comprehended as databases that can be accessed only as mediated through interfaces, which determine the way information is presented spatially. The paradigmatic shift doesn't concern only digital media. The digitization is, in fact, penetrating almost all segments of global culture, but excluding several parts on political and cultural grounds, not due to some technical obstacles only. Further, the theoretical ideas of the computer interface and the cultural interface are intertwining, i.e. the shift occurs from human-computer interfacing to human-culture interfacing by focusing cultural forms. The artistic archive as a specific medium will be discussed in views of the literary new media objects (hypertexts, textual computer installations, blog-type texts). The new media objects appear interactively before the user. The factor that authorises which letters, words, verses, images or archival materials will be concatenated is, of course, not just the author, but the reading act, and in fact, the text itself in the case of the algorithmic "poetry machines". As regards the human factor in writing and reading the new media literature (also multimedia materials), a relevant issue to consider is the recently diagnosed reality of digital communities, which employ various information technologies to read, comment, contribute to and to modify collaboratively the contents of archives, which thereby become their real substance.



AIDS: Emil Nolde (Painters and sculptors) AIDS in the form of a symbolic sensual and voracious mouth is gradually deleting individual portraits and details from

AIDS (Painters and sculptors) An aestheticised image, which merely repeats the prejudices in connection to the social role of this illness instead of considering the

You Dont Know Me (Natasa Prosenec) This video thematises the revolt against the socially obtruded role and image or the projection of a certain close person

AIDS (Tanja Faletic) People form complex networks in a society by means of interpersonal relations. These social risomatic networks are based on certain regularities, they dwell on superficial relations and

A Child Is Your Child (Alja Susnik) Macula in the image is, according to the Lacan theory, the place of inscription of a wish and the key to understanding and

The Death of a Cake (Andrej Hirci) Handy camcorders are suitable for recording of home movies, especially for documenting the big family events like birthdays of

Step (Ursa Toman) This videotape starts with a recording of a bicyclist and reminds us with the typical granulated and contrasty burned picture (almost black and

MOUSEION SERAPEION

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add project

project	authors	year	genre	
Dreams	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1992	videotape	 
Eros	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1992	videotape	 
Requiem	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1994	videotape	 
Shadowland	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1995	videotape	 
Being and Nothingness	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1995	videotape	 
The Water Man	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	1995	videotape	 
Ground Zero: Exhumation Reminiscence	Krizan Dominik Olmiah	2002	videotape	 
Chicken	Kracina Damijan	1995	videotape	 
Finite Space	Kracina Damijan	1995	videotape	 
Self-portrait	Pipp Tomaz	1995	videotape	 
All Different, All Equal	Intihar Alma, Kariz Ziga, Mocnik Lucija	1995	videotape	 
Untitled	Mihelic Jaka	1995	videotape	 
Untitled	Zorovic Marko	1995	videotape	 
Proximity	Kreuh Darij	1995	videotape	 
Untitled	Svara Damjan	1995	videotape	 
The Trash-Eater / 100% recycled	Jurancic Natasa	1995	videotape	 
Water	Keselj Maja	1995	videotape	 
A Child Is Your Child	Susnik Alja	1995	videotape	 
AIDS	Faletic Tanja	1995	videotape	 
Ecology /100% recycled	Vastl Jasna	1995	videotape	 
Untitled	Bukovec Jure	1995	videotape	 
Rochus	Pongrac Josip	1995	videotape	 
Untitled: Presence	Ciuha Peter	1995	videotape	 
The Straw Basket Full of Dried Pears	Masnak Gregor	1994	videotape	 
AIDS: Emil Nolde	Group work of painters and sculptors	1994	videotape	 

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