

# THE CONCEPTUAL DEBTS AND ASSETS OF THE INTERFACE

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*“There is a growing need to rethink the notion of interface within a broader conceptual perspective, but it is important to be wary of calling for an interface philosophy based on technological enthusiasm and, more particularly, on a variety of metaphors derived from technical terms or marketing jargon—one that often tries to impose itself on discussions about technically mediated communication.”*

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The notion of interface is more of a conceptual challenge than it is any kind of self-explanatory keyword adequate for opening the door to an understanding of the contemporary techno reality. It is used and misused to describe virtually everything. This inquiry is a mere attempt at clarifying the philosophical debt owed by the notion as well as identifying its potential, in order to make sense of it and restrict its meaning within philosophical positions on the artificial and on mediation. To be reflected upon, thereby, is the extent to which historical ideas might be able to replace, philosophically, the term interface. In other words, we shall examine whether using the notion of interface entails a new conceptual quality or simply constitutes a rebranding of an older concept. Furthermore, we shall establish whether there is any possibility of reinforcing an interpretation of interface that is of conceptual consequence, equipped for being taken seriously as a theoretical concept, and not just a technical term or metaphor. This observation will be followed by an attempt at identifying a tendency in the most recent development of the meaning of interface, possibly imbuing it with a more specific profile.

The concept of interface has been gradually introduced and accompanied by various fashionable appeals for the new philosophy: software philosophy, digital philosophy, the philosophy of communication, to name only a few of them. Certainly, there is something about this phenomenon that reflects the contemporary reality—something not fully compatible with the reality of everyday practices

just a couple of decades ago, not to mention distant centuries. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mandate any conceptual revolution and might not provide sufficient grounds for celebrating interface as a key philosophical concept. The technical or, more precisely, scientific origin of the term as a reaction surface does not shed much light upon its meaning, although it may suggest interaction as a determining factor. Still, the notion of interface provokes more questions than answers as a conceptual challenge. Can we measure the limits and conceptual efficiency of interface, comparing it with terms like tool, access, mediation, translation, prosthesis, controller, or terminal? No concept appears from nowhere, and none can work without depending upon established conceptual networks. The discourse on models of technically determined interaction with machines and humans, however, takes the term for granted, or even claims to have invented it from scratch. Though there are a number of exceptions that have attempted methodical examination of the meaning of interface, these nonetheless remain unsatisfactory. What is interface then, if not merely descriptive of the shared environment of objects, tools and people. The tendency to extend the meaning of media would be sufficient to signify the idea of environment. To put it more bluntly, the contemporary habitat is a *media environment*, wherein objects are potential media. Social relations are being confined, determined and maintained by media in the sense of interfaces. Therefore, *interface* is not

just an operable surface of media, because it exceeds a purely technical meaning.

It would seem that this perspective reduces the notion of interface to that of a *human-machine-interface*, whereas, in fact, all interfaces, including machine-machine-interfaces,<sup>1</sup> have to be designed in advance to be possible at all. This means that, behind each of these constellations, there is an intention or an understanding that somebody is designing them, and, as soon as machines cooperate without error, they become not only invisible, but also integrate devices to create the appearance of a single entity. As soon as a given constellation is disrupted, design appears again in the form of a broken piece that requires either replacement or reworking. From this philosophical perspective, the interface is an element of a kind of interaction that always implies human participation. That is why machine-machine-interfaces cannot involve the same theoretical level as human-machine-interfaces and should remain a description of the technical complexity of a particular device. In the most abstract way, it is possible, then, to say that interface is something, which enables interaction between a subject with an intention (for example a human) and a responsive tool. It is something that combines the sensible, in the sense of accessible to experience, and the ideal in the sense of

the imaginable. Of course, being in interaction with an interface does not necessarily mean that the user understands it, but they can discover its means of functioning and make use of those.

Structurally, this theoretical figure mirrors a Kantian understanding of imagination. Cognition in Kant's philosophy is a construction of reality that implies a creative perception of the world, which appears in consciousness as an artificial product of individual faculties, among which is imagination. The human activity of perception constructs and structures the experienced world through representations. These are possible thanks to the power of imagination [Einbildungskraft], which provides the general conditions for apperception, a synthetic order of the sensible experience and the possibility of understanding.

Synthesis in general is, as we shall subsequently see, the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious. Yet to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Machine-machine-interface is used as a generic term for all kinds of interfaces that do not need to engage human activity in order to continue functioning, so it also refers to

softwarehardwareinterface, software-software-interface and so on.

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211.

However, cognition proceeds in three logical steps: those “of the *apprehension* of the representations, as modifications of the mind in intuition; of the *reproduction* of them in the imagination; and of their recognition in the concept.”<sup>3</sup> There is an immanent tension to Kant’s attribution of the role of imagination to cognition. In fact, it is not just requisite for any one of these stages but is rather fundamental to combining sensibility with understanding.<sup>4</sup> Both “the synthesis of apprehension” and “the synthesis of reproduction” of representations or sequences of representations are inseparable,<sup>5</sup> as Kant clearly emphasises in the following passage:

Through the relation of the manifold to the unity of apperception, however, concepts that belong to the understanding can come about, but only by means of the imagination in relation to the sensible intuition. We therefore have a pure imagination, as a fundamental faculty of the human soul, that grounds all cognition a priori. By its means we bring into combination the manifold of intuition on the one side and the condition of the necessary unity of apperception on the other. Both extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must necessarily be con-

nected by means of this transcendental function of the imagination, since otherwise the former would, to be sure, yield appearances but no objects of an empirical cognition, hence there would be no experience.<sup>6</sup>

The unity of sensibility and understanding is, for the subject, a conceptual bridge that leads to the space in which it can take action. Though it cannot, as long as it resides in the centre of its powers, be treated as interface in the strict sense, yet, should the Kantian structure of imagination be borrowed and transposed to the surface of the subject, it would become an efficient explanatory model of how, philosophically, interface could be explained. This operation of cutting out the concept of imagination from the core of Kant’s philosophy and re-appropriating it, inserting it into the new context is legitimate, because the original intention of this concept is to define the mechanism creating a space of interaction between the individual and the reactive object, or more directly the tool. In this sense, the *imagination* fulfils the role of an interactive contact surface between the two and makes manipulation of the object possible, while allowing for learning about its usage and presenting the possibility of discovering more.

A look at the remaining issue in the *Critique of the Power of Judg-*

3 Ibid., 228.

4 Heidegger points out that the double role of imagination in Kant’s philosophy as sensibility and understanding might have its antecedent already in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, book G3, where φαντασία stands αἰσθησις between νόησις, see Martin

Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 91.

5 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 230.

6 Ibid., 240–241.

*ment* can further reinforce this argument. Therein, Kant uses the expression “the technique of nature”<sup>7</sup> when considering the functioning of machines, particularly those that perform a particular change in conformity with the natural force and principles. The fact that they work is based on nature, or a natural design of their construction, but the way they are understood and operated by humans requires their faculty of imagination. The user should have not only intention, but also a capacity to understand and learn, so as to make the tool carry out a particular task. In other words, the user projects his representation of causality onto an object, thereby transforming it into a tool of action. More precisely the subject puts representations into an order that is based on his or her idea of time (causality) and space within the synthetic power of imagination.

This interaction, therefore, involves not simply control over a tool or adjustment of a single mechanism to comply with another, but rather imagining a possibility of control based on the representation of cause and effect. This brief interpretation is also about the difference between the notion of *tool* and that of *interface*. A psychological dimension is thus implicit to the use of the word *interface*, as is often apparent in discourses on user-friendly interface design, for example.

The interaction with tools, as described here, provides a basis for

further consideration on how the interface, as an element connecting the subject and the tool, enables not only an action, but also the discovery of access to something otherwise impossible, or at least difficult. Some light can be shed on this by another philosophical figure contained in Heidegger’s concept of the work of art.<sup>8</sup> There is a particular difference between the utensil and the work of art. Humans discover the world through the use of tools. The objects they use serve to achieve a particular goal; they are instruments of human action and such an object maintains its character of a thing that is “in itself”, so that, as utensils, they have no being on their own but consist of their degree of serviceability. Though the case with a work of art would at first seem similar, the character of a thing or thing-likeness is not necessarily a condition for a work of art. In fact, the thing-like aspect of a work of art can even obscure any real understanding of the work and lose much of its sense if isolated and objectified. The materiality of a work of art cannot be its condition. Hence, there are temporal forms of artwork and the artistic quality does not relate directly to the material existence. Neither can the form of any particular work of art be its condition, because it expresses a historically determined unique culture, which inspires its own artistic production.

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7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), among other passages: Introduction VII, § 74, § 78.

8 Main text of reference is Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art (1935–36),” in *Off the Beaten Track*, eds. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56.

This proposal of Heidegger seems interesting because it formulates the idea of the unfolding of a world through a work of art. It entails the ability to connect with a reality just as if it were a node point through which to access various networks or disclose a collection of contents, potentially reactive or interactive contents or networks. The work of art seems to be a structural prototype for what is intended by the notion of interface. Of course, this does not mean that interfaces are works of art, although many artists have claimed that computer programs and interface design could be (especially with early "Net Art"—most of which now has increasing difficulty finding recognition as art). Instead, it simply means that they are not utensils in the simple sense. They give direction to experience and offer, in each particular case, some limited and determined possibilities of access. They are still prisoners of their serviceability, but, structurally, are more than simple utensils. Indeed, the capacities of interface often exceed those of a simple tool, and, while perhaps failing to open a whole new world to a user, these capacities impart complex ideas of the culture and society that produced and uses them. This is well exemplified by the infrastructure of so-called *social media* or GUI in different operating systems.

Opening or determining something in this case is often connected with an exclusion of something else, or at least with difficulties in achieving the desired performance of the operated device. In addition to this, there is also the aspect of steering attention. The viewer (or user) is

subjected to a particular experience and pushed toward a possibility. However, it is not exactly right to call it a possibility, when it, in fact, is a constraint. On the one hand, interface opens up a certain space, but it does that on its own conditions. It is not bad as such, but if we imagine an interface designer who wants not only to provide a possibility for access, but also program the user to access a particular content in a particular way, then the neutrality of the concept becomes doubtful, just as it does when art is forced into the framework of propaganda (making something friendly that does not necessarily mean what it means).

There is a growing need to rethink the notion of interface within a broader conceptual perspective, but it is important to be wary of calling for an interface philosophy based on technological enthusiasm and, more particularly, on a variety of metaphors derived from technical terms or marketing jargon—one that often tries to impose itself on discussions about technically mediated communication. Expressions like "interface between power and society" do not seem to do justice to what interface is and turn the notion, instead, into a synonym for connection of any kind, obfuscating its political character through a meticulously designed filter. There are many ways to connect society and power and it is possible to name these more precisely, as has been done in a wide range of other essays. It is not only the technical design of an access that is involved but also the design of rules that shape the

technology-based interaction—a concern which considerably exceeds a basic understanding of the term.

Though *Interface*, along with other long-popular terms like user, can recall the hidden structure, the something in between, that operates the interactions, the dominant imperative toward designing interfaces so as to make them more and more discrete, or even invisible, reinforces the illusion of immediacy. The trend toward creating an impression of easy or “friendly” interfaces casts, to the extent that people rely on these, a growing shadow over the freedom of choice, giving rise to the suspicion that the user is being used. Within the context of the Internet, this carries particularly weighty consequences.

In the lifeworld the Internet takes on meanings and connotations having to do with intimacy, human contact, self-presentation, creativity, and so on. The Internet is not merely instrumental to these lifeworldly ends; it belongs to the lifeworld itself as a richly signified artefact. This is more than a matter of subjective associations since it affects the evolution and design of the network and the interface, which cannot be understood in terms of an abstract idea of efficiency. This has become clear with the struggle over network neutrality. The intertwining of function and meaning exemplified by the Internet

is general in modern societies.<sup>9</sup>

It is certainly not possible to talk about interface while omitting the issue of the strategic dimensions of media. Interface design could easily stand for its symbol. That is why, in light of the many texts using the term interface, a precise analysis would be helpful. Interface is not neutral. Interface is designed, and every design is political.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience. Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 60.

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