1997: ART AND APPARATUS (A FLUSSERIAN THEME). PLEA FOR THE DRAMATIZATION OF THE INTERFACE

By Siegfried Zielinski

Exposé for a lecture given at the 6th international Vilém Flusser symposium in Budapest on "Intersubjectivity: Media Metaphors, Play and Provocation", (March 15-19, 1997) that was first published in the booklet of the DVD *"We shall survive in the memory of others" – Vilém Flusser*, ed. by Miklós Peternak for C³, Budapest and Siegfried Zielinski for the Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin (Cologne: Walther König, 2010)

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"[…] in the age of Baroque the crystal chandeliers with their myriads of light refractions that hung from the ceilings of palaces functioned as an interface through which the cosmos became imaginable from out of the straits of the private and personal sphere."

In 1997, Siegfried Zielinski held a lecture on "Arts and Apparatus," based on the manuscript published here, during the 6th international Vilém Flusser symposium in Budapest. In remembrance of the Czech philosopher Flusser, who had passed away six earlier, the symposium on "Intersubjectivity: Media Metaphors, Play and Provocation" aimed at developing further Flusser's thoughts on the role of the human subjectivity in a "codified" society. In his lecture, the media-archaeologist Zielinski, or "media-thinker," as he today would describe his occupation in a more open gesture, made a "plea for the dramatization of the interface": Indeed following a "Flusserian theme", he plead for resisting the deterministic programme of the technical apparatuses, which Flusser described as "black boxes" with tempting surfaces providing playful interaction. Due to critical techno-artistic theory and practice, the deterministic "techno-cultural character of the artefacts" shall be uncovered under the tempting, smooth surface of the interface. The interface paradigm of affordance is here replaced by an attitude of resistance. Zielinski's plea shows various parallels to critical thinking and practice in media art, media theory and media activism, which became even more relevant in recent years while our "codified" societies are increasingly governed by opaque data networks.
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Daniel Irrgang

The common boundary of (media) people and (media) apparatus is one example of what we call an *interface*. At one and the same time it divides and connects two very different worlds: the world of creatively acting subjects – whether they be primarily perceiving or directly aesthetically productive – and the world of machines and programmes.

Both present technological advance as well as dominant media concepts are moving in the direction of rendering this interface imperceptible. Or at least the differences between humans and machines should become insignificant.

You are to use a computer without being aware that you are dealing with an algorithmically constructed computation and simulation machine. You are to immerse yourself in so-called *virtual reality* without being aware, indeed without even knowing, that you are dealing with a precise, pre-structured, computed construction of time and space.

Computers are being engineered for their users to resemble a *camera obscura*, as a black box.

This is the point which the arts face enormous challenges that affect, at the very least, their future identity vis à vis design. The outstanding task of the arts in aesthetic and ethical respects is to enable sensitization for the Other, the strange, the inexplicable (in the case of advanced media, also with regard to machines). It follows that this includes the obligation to render this Other, insofar as we are able to formulate it, accessible to sensorial experience, as a fiction, as constructed reality.

The conflicts that emerge here are not new. They run through the entire history of the technical media. They were last brought to the fore for discussion in a major way with regard to cinema, that great machinery of illusions and fantasies of the last hundred years. The *apparatus debate* attempted to simulate the ciné-avant-garde into making films that dared to walk a tightrope: to put the audience in a state of suspenseful, passionate involvement, and excitement while not allowing it to forget that the reality on the screen is a synthetic reality.

Along with Vilém Flusser, I assume that a combination of magical and rational thought is not only possible but necessary. Here I attempt to fathom this fundamental problem of the avant-garde and to sketch one direction a possible solution might take.

23 Items:

1. The interface is something that separates [one thing from another]. Otherwise the term would make no sense.

2. The interface is something that connects [one thing to another]. Otherwise the term would make no sense.

3. The interface denotes a difference and connection.

4. The phenomenon of the interface appeared when the concept of a unified world gradually developed into the concept of a world that was at least a duality. [The English noun "interface" dates from 1882; the verb "to interface" from 1962; the adjective "interfacial" (crystallography) from 1837].

5. That which an interface both separates and connects is, in the most general sense, the One from the Other.

6. How we handle the interface and its shaping is therefore pre-eminently both an aesthetic concern and an ethical one. Ethics binds the arts and the sciences (and is binding for both).

7. Over the interface, the Ones define their relationship to the Others, those different to themselves, that is, essentially unknown, and vice versa: over the interface the One manifests itself to the Other, but in those aspects that are understandable.

8. For example, in the age of Baroque the crystal chandeliers with their myriads of light refractions that hung from the ceilings of palaces functioned as an interface

through which the cosmos became imaginable from out of the straits of the private and personal sphere.

9. In telematics, the interface separates and connects the world of active people on the one hand, and the worlds of working machines and programmes on the other. The interface separates and connects media-people and media-machines. It is the boundary at which the medium formulates itself, at which the aesthetic praxis takes place.

10. The pragmatic task of the telematic interface is to provide media-people with a particular access to the Other by means of machines and programmes. At the end of the twentieth century, telematic machines and programmes are themselves a prominent part of this Other.

11. Current efforts in telematics aim at making the differences between media-people, media-machines, and media-programmes imperceptible. This represents a special case in the trend toward eradication of the boundaries between production and reproduction, between work and remainder-time, in a common system of communication-based consumer and service relations. We are now just at the beginning of this process. With regard to the interface, this process will really take off when the still existing symbolic hindrances to perception and usage (particularly the alphanumeric keyboard) are no longer prerequisites for using a computer, and the interface between media-people, media-machines, and media-programmes assumes the character of an environment, in which media-people will act as they would in non-machine-based relationships.

12. The most important, all-embracing means in this hegemonic strategy is illusionisation, not in the sense that anything specific is at stake but rather in the sense of a no-risk identification with the world of icons, symbols, and relations just as it appears on the monitor. At present, the praxis of this illusionisation takes two directions: either with concepts of a primary spatial orientation in the tradition of the *ars memoriae* or with concepts of a primary temporal orientation as in classical Aristotelian dramaturgy. In adventure games we find both concepts combined, in the best examples, as multilinear concepts of a dramaturgy of memory and empathy.

13. The Ones (the media-people) are to be under the illusion that they can be totally in the Other (media-machines, for example) – this is called virtual reality or telepresence. Via illusionisation, the Other turns into the One, takes on its identity. This is above all the world of metaphors.

14. In this world of metaphors, the allusion to life is central; the discipline of biology maintains its leading function.

15. There is a long tradition of taxing this interrelationship of life and machine. Viewed from the perspective of the body, it has passed through various phases of excorporation and incorporation. Many of the first automatons were copies of living things. Ernst Kapp called this "organ projection" in his philosophy of technology, which was published in 1877. He criticised vehemently that the "idea of the organic as a model, involuntarily and unremarked, tinges the mechanical copy and vice versa when the mechanical is used to explain organic processes; in the excitement of experimentation the mechanical swings over into the organism unremarked, so that apart from these metaphoric explanations of the how, why, and wherefore, also obvious confusions that are inadmissible under usual circumstances, are inevitable." (Ernst Kapp, *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik*, Braunschweig: Georg Westermann, 1877, p. 99)

16. In these founding years of the computer-centred telemedia, life is being externalised in the machines and the programmes. These are constructed and computed after the naive model of the organic and its evolutionary dimensions. The underlying idea of this allusion is that life is something which is continuous, flowing, growing, in constant motion (also harmonious). With regard to the concept of evolution, we are dealing here with Darwinian, or Neo-Darwinian models, that is, with an extension of the Darwinian principle of the (information-wise) fittest that takes into account recent research in genetics, according to which selection operates at the cellular level and not first at the level of individual organisms and their relationships with one another.

17. From the perspective of being concerned about the aesthetics and ethics of the interface deriving from the autonomy of the Other, both metaphors must be confronted critically – to instruct and inform – and with alternative models: this applies both to life as a leading metaphor and to a concept of biology and evolution which is reduced and of shallow dimensions.

Excursus: attempt at a conceptual definition (with the aid of Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, vol. I): Metaphors are comparisons. However, not all comparisons are metaphors. To the phylum of comparisons also belong the symbol, the enigma, the allegory, the image (das Bild). In their function for expression and its possible meaning, metaphors hover between image, symbol, and enigma. Metaphors originate from the needs and the power of thought and feeling "not to be satisfied with the simple, familiar, and unsophisticated but rather to place oneself above it in order to depart for the Other, to linger awhile with the Various, and to put the Twofold together into one." (Hegel, *Vorlesung über Ästhetik. Berlin 1820/21. Eine Nachschrift*, ed. H. Schneider, Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1995, p. 520f.) Metaphors are constructed with the intention of augmenting, deepening, increasing something; or they simply wallow in the fantasy of their constructor. This "something" is either mental or physical. Metaphors are constructed in order to ennoble the physical with the help of the mind or through the comparison with the physical to convert the mental into experience, to make it profane, to reify it.

18. The telematics networks are link-ups of technical artefacts and complex material systems with political, cultural, and aesthetic structures; that is, they are already connections of the "Twofold." The Net itself is a comparison, a trivial image. Not only in the ongoing Net discourse is this connection of complex physical and immaterial units and structures once again being compared to living organisms or aspects thereof. This comprises not only the intention of raising the profane (the technical, the political…) but also the objectivity of that which is non-transparent, or opaque, and structural (that is, essentially of the mind).

19. On the other hand, the world of machines and programmes is a systematically constructed world. Everything in it has been generated by numbers and the logical and systematic relations between numbers. In this sense, it is a coherent and

consistent world, in spite of all the complexity that playing with numbers enables. The world of living organisms does not possess a system of such reliability. The decisive factor: this world is irreversible. Due to external disturbances and inherent variations, the many different physiological rhythms that are linked in a living organism never lead back to the same starting point. Organic systems fluctuate around stasis. Digital machines and programmes cannot have a state (Otto Rössler). It is precisely their inherent variations that are to be got rid of through digitization and precision in computation.

20. Technological, social, and cultural systems alike are discontinuous to an extreme degree, both in their genesis and in their present extent. All metaphors that promise the free flow of information, that invoke the ocean as a navigation field, that want to make us experience communication structures like trees or roots, are doomed to failure because of this. The archetypal basic structure of technoid and civilization development is the rigid gradation of the staircase. The archetypal basic structure of life is the spiral. The visual proof, that the genetic code (of DNA) is formed like a double helix, like a twofold spiral staircase, was presented by biology at the same time as cybernetics arrived as a new discipline. The image of the double helix succeeds in uniting both discontinuity and continuity, bending out and turning in, *repetition and difference*…

21. If we admit life science/Lebenswissenschaft as the leading discipline of the outgoing twentieth century (although it was invented already around 1800 by Johann W. Ritter), the very least we should demand with regard to the interface is that the many and varied constructions of evolution(ary theory) which that century witnessed should be taken into account. (Evolution is a theory of the history of life and not life itself). Darwinism and Neo-Darwinism have been supplemented and modified by theories of mutation, synthetic theories, saltation, and punctuated equilibrium, amongst others. For example, the two latter, although with different emphases, propose that the pace of evolutionary change in species is episodic rather than smoothly gradual.

22. *Conclusion*: I would like to make a plea for an experimental interface

- which is based on contingencies rather than virtual reality, on feasible individual events rather than on a homogenous, calculated, continuous, illusory world,
- which is nevertheless recognisable as a constructed world …
- which at least enables a relationship of experimenting toward itself,
- which is less of a cleansing by catharsis and more of a provocation by epic means,
- which nonetheless remembers that the world of communications is a world of sensations and that without these, nobody would bother to enter into relationships with the Other.

What we need is a language (of text, images, sounds), which does not cover up the techno-cultural character of the artefacts and structures of expanded telecommunications but instead displays this character, in its usage refers to it, and reminds one of it(s existence). Discontinuity, dynamics, circuits, contacts, controls,/impulses, interruptions, cut-offs, power, distribution – the possibility of allusions is as rich as the technical and political/cultural spheres themselves. The recent history of the media alone suffices as an example of a rich tradition and Brecht's *Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948) would do well as an exercise for today's interface specialists; or, for example, the *materialist film* – the staging of the material as something that possesses an autonomous power of expression.

23. This plea openly insists on the dualism of media-people and media-machines, media-programmes. Dualism is necessary in order to reach any kind of clarification. It represents a transitional stage, but I am convinced that the dramatization of the interface as a boundary between the One and the Other is the only possibility to achieve qualities of the connection that will differ from a simple decision for the One or for the Other.

No to monopolisation of technology by narcissistic subjects – and yes to a dramatics of the difference!