



SKETCHNOTE BY ELVIA VASCONCELOS OF JOHANNA DRUCKER'S PRESENTATION WITHIN THE WORKSHOP "WHAT IS THE DIGITAL DOING? A WORKSHOP IN THE INTERFACE", NOVEMBER 2020.



# WHAT DO WE DISCUSS WHEN WE DISCUSS THE INTERFACE? A CONVERSATION

"What does aesthetics as a kind of critical perceptual approach bring to our understanding of interface?"

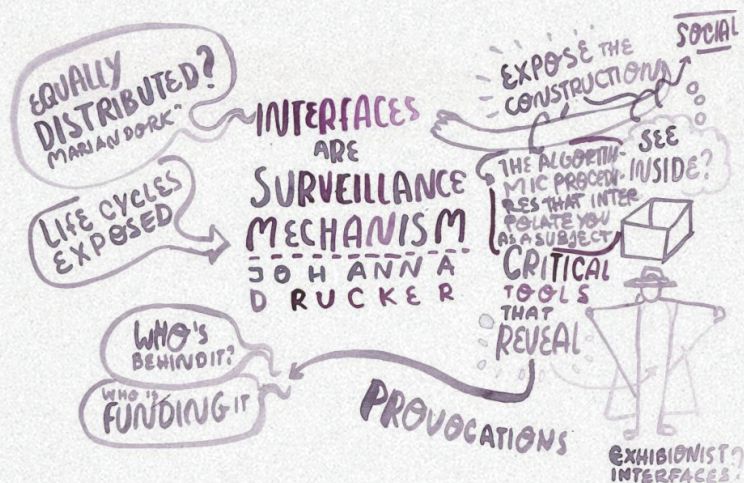
Johanna Drucker and Roberto Simanowski, What Do We Discuss When We Discuss the Interface? A Conversation. *Interface Critique* 5 (2025): 20–48.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/ic.2025.1.113532>

*This article is released under a Creative Commons license (CC BY 4.0).*







Sketchnote by Elvia Vasconcelos from the workshop "What is the Digital Doing? A Workshop in the Interface", November 2020.

In November 2021, Johanna Drucker and Roberto Simanowski met online to have a conversation about their interestingly different and enlightening diverse accounts of the meaning of "interface". The editors, who were silently present, suggested some topics of conversation, and recorded the video call.

#### ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI

The question is: What is the "interface"? Do we understand the interface as a means of connection between a and b, and how does it affect how a and b are connected? Now those are basic concerns in media theory, but what is interesting for us here is what a and b actually are in the case of the interface in digital communication. The question is, are they just sender and recipient, which we may call the horizontal connection, or are they the front-end and the back-end, which we may call the vertical connection?

In the latter case, a third player, a human actant, would step in between a and b, namely the person that is responsible for this



interface on the vertical connection. So, if the programmer programs how a and b are to be connected on the horizontal level, then the “interface” represents the interest or maybe the “message” of the programmer. As we know, in the case of Facebook, the algorithm that connects a and b, sender and recipient, is programmed according to the interests of Facebook’s business model and the interface exploits, through persuasive design, the vulnerability of users, i.e. their leaning towards certain kinds of messages. It is obvious that we have to address this constellation and its implications for human communication.

However, I think we should not limit our attention to the social level of the power structure, we should also look for the “message” of the medium itself, its “power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary” to employ McLuhan’s famous words. I wonder whether we shouldn’t consider coding itself as the medium capable of imposing its power on us through the unanticipated results of programming.

Take the Like button as an example. You may remember the discussion about this in 2017, when the managers and programmers of the button at Facebook attempted to distance themselves from their own product after they realized that it functioned as a dopamine feedback loop with serious psychological consequences. While they produced it in good faith and actually expected it would have a positive impact on conversations, they later saw that the Like button may “break humans” and even democracy, depending on how far one is willing to go. This illustrates that not every harmful aspect of Facebook can be boiled down to its business model.

Well maybe I should leave it here, these are some notions to get the conversation going. Johanna, I invite you to share your thoughts.



**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

That was great, Roberto, and much to think about. Let me go back for a minute and perhaps reformulate my own concept of interface in relation to what you've put forth just as a kind of contrast. Because one of the paradoxes that I see with interface is that it is the thing that we see but the thing that is designed to disappear. And so it's the fundamental paradox, right? When the interface functions well, we don't notice it. You know, my car dashboard is an interface to many aspects of my automobiles activities and while driving, I don't want to have a kind of post-modern theoretical deconstructive engagement with my car dashboard. I just want it to give me the information that I want.

So much of interface is designed that way and as we've become habituated in the last 25 years to the graphical user interface, and earlier than that in terms of platforms and programs, we've been well trained by those interfaces to use their 'affordances', to use the mechanistic engineering term effectively. We do what the interface allows us to do, as if we have agency. But in fact our agency is completely circumscribed by the way the interface design allows certain things to happen and certain other things not to happen. So my interest in interface is really as a site of constitutive experience, of structuring, of mediation.

The interface itself is of fundamental interest to me in thinking about this model of what the interface is, more than what the interface isn't. This simply emphasizes that an interface is not a delivery system for exchange between point a and point b, but it's actually constitutive of an experience. And the example I always use with the students, and it makes them a little bit like "what?", is: So if you're on the phone and you're talking to somebody, that's what you think is happening.



But you're not talking to somebody, you are hearing a signal that has been remediated through an electronic device to give a simulation of a voice that is carried through a whole series of mediations that are electric, electronic, acoustic.

What you are doing, talking to somebody else and hearing their voice, is an illusion that the interface of the telephone has gotten us to believe. It suggests that there is a real-time relationship between the production of speaker on one end that becomes translated through an acoustic signal that arrives through this mediating apparatus such that I can perceive it on my end. But of course, I'm not hearing the voice of a speaker, I'm hearing all of that mediation.

So that's all by way of saying that one of the things I'd like to just throw in here for us to think about is the nature of aesthetics as an epistemological dimension of critical understanding, because we had talked about that, I think, in the workshop. And for me aesthetics at its foundation is the aspect of philosophy that deals with perception, so the question really is what does aesthetics as a kind of critical perceptual approach bring to our understanding of interface? How can we use it to think about what an interface is and how we can engage with it? So I hope that seems like an augmentation of what you were saying, Roberto, to take the conversation slightly obliquely into some other related topics.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Well, I very much like what you've proposed. Your words prompt me to bring up a few topics which have been on my mind lately. The interface is designed to disappear, you're completely right. I think the technical term for this is "calm technology,"<sup>1</sup> a term which I like and actually apply in one of my books, claiming that real media



literacy must not end with the frictionless use of technology (like your students forgetting all the transformations used in a phone), but include a broader understanding of said technology, i.e. what it does to us when we use it.<sup>2</sup> If it doesn't make any noise, it disappears, and we don't see it, and the risk is we might overlook the fact that it is there and that it always affects us. The idea behind this distinction is the opposition between content and medium that McLuhan points out so wittingly when he affirms: "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind".<sup>3</sup> We deal with the content – referring to who talks about what on Facebook and all the rest – but what we actually have to address is the framework that a social network such as Facebook gives to communication. In other words, we should explore how this framework (trans)forms communication. Zuckerberg and his managers may be right in that hate speech and fake news are by no means phenomena specific to Facebook. However, the interface that Facebook offers for communication, the way it codes its algorithm does foster the poisoning of communication. But again, as I said before, we cannot say that it was the deliberate intention of the programmers to create such a communication environment.

Nonetheless, when Facebook neglected to assign content managers to Myanmar, a country which just had been released from a long term dictatorship and whose people were naturally unused to evaluating the reliability of information "published", i.e. shared on

---

1. Mark Weiser and John Seely Brown, *Designing Calm Technology* (1995), <https://people.csail.mit.edu/rudolph/Teaching/weiser.pdf>, access: August 14, 2024, 3:40pm

2. Roberto Simanowski, *Stumme Medien. Vom Verschwinden der Computer in Bildung und Gesellschaft / Mute Media. On the Disappearance of Computers in Education and Society* (Berlin 2018).

3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley 2003), p. 31.



Facebook, then we have a problem and Facebook is responsible for it. If Facebook doesn't assign the appropriate managers (appropriate in terms of numbers and of understanding of Myanmar politics and context) to oversee its users from Myanmar, then Facebook is accountable for the pogroms that were incited on its platform. Either Facebook's management is to blame for its unwillingness to invest money in the supervision of Myanmar Facebook, or it is to blame for what I would call a borderline criminal lack of media literacy, media negligence really, which prevented it from taking into account a predictable lack of media literacy from its Myanmar users to distinguish between facts and rumours.

We have to address and reveal these multiple levels of media and data literacy, we have to make visible the hidden, calm, mute, frictionless constellations. In my book, I propose that it is art that best accomplishes the job. For it is the nature of art, to experiment with language or with the material, with whatever the language of a material is, and to make it visible and to make us conscious about all those matters which remain otherwise invisible.

#### **JOHANNA DRUCKER**

I agree with you about art, Roberto, and in spite of all my cynicism in almost every area of my existence, I still believe in art and in its capacity to call things to attention. I really think it's essential to produce a generative attention, not just a directed attention. In other words, it's not about didacticism, it's about generating critical insight and thought.

But I want to go back to this notion of interface, and again, I think you're quite eloquent on the topic of social media, but the interface issues are not limited to social media. I'm thinking back to the early



days of designing screen spaces. At that point in time there was a lot of discussion about the contrast between the windows metaphor and the desktop metaphor.<sup>4</sup> But that contrast, I think, is really interesting to think about, because exactly what we're sort of kicking around here – an interface that disappears – that's the windows notion. It's to be transparent, you're to look through it. Whereas the desktop notion was "Oh no you're looking at something and what you're looking at has a whole set of icons and metaphors". These structured ways of working and I remember when I was first working on a desktop and thinking "Do I really want to throw things in a trash can?". That would seem kind of gross and crude, why was that the way to organize one's work activity.

So when I think about interfaces, not all of the topic falls within the social media frameworks. A lot of it is also within the workspace framework, the research framework, the interface to the library, to an archive. The way that the materiality of that layout design and structure works is an expression of a cosmology, a world view. Just this week in my class on visualization, I had the students do a diagram of classification of a domain they knew well. It had to be some area or discipline they were familiar with as a way for them to be thinking about how they would organize a web interface to that particular area of knowledge. How do you conceptualize that and then how do you encode that. As you were saying, I think, Roberto, about the materialization of code as part of the way the interface appears to us, interface materializes the code in a graphical format, because it's a GUI, and so for the students it's not easy to go from thinking about knowledge structures to thinking about how to put

---

4. See for example Matthew Fuller, *Behind the Blip. Essays on the Culture of Software*. *Autonomedia* 24 (2003), pp. 19–25.



them into an interface, so that they can be offered for effective use. So that's just by way of reiterating that I think interface goes beyond social media and has other dimensions to it.

And I'll just throw out one last thing here, the Electronic Literature Organization has a wonderful archive, as you probably know,<sup>5</sup> and the archive contains materials that were designed in digital formats before the web was really functional. These have been remediated so you can experience the original designs. This means you can see the imaginative range of ways in which 'interface' was understood and designed and offered. So you open up a CD and you're looking at something on your screen and you're thinking "Well I know I'm supposed to do something now. What am I supposed to do? Do I click here? Do I roll over it? Do I wait for it to happen?"

So again, I love that digital incunabula period because, as you were saying, Roberto, about art making us aware, it's like here's all of these early, pre-convention expressions that make you go "wow", there was no interface. It was not actually given to us in the first six days of creation. It actually had to come into being. I'm sure you have thoughts in response.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

I completely agree, Johanna. The interface and the experiments with it were more interesting back then, before everything got standardized according to usability. I also remember a book, *Windows and Mirrors* by Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, which considers digital art as the corrective to the assumption that the computer should disappear in HCI-settings and demands that

---

5. <https://eliterature.org/>, access: August 14, 2024, 3:43pm.



designers think of design as a mirror which reflects back to the user, as opposed to a window through which he/she looks.<sup>6</sup> Despite this claim, today we don't seem to look much at the medium. We tend to look through, perhaps since the web 2.0 appeared. I also remember "browser art" of the 1990s, like Mark Napier's art browser Shredder 1.0, which showed text, images, and source code scattered across the screen as a non-representational collage, in order to make us aware of what we don't see and of the fact that the way the browser shows us something is not necessarily the only way it could be done.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

I think those things are great. Remember jodi.org by Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans and all the things that jodi.org did. There were a lot of very interesting experiments in breaking the browser's smooth delivery.<sup>7</sup> But I think that's also part of what I keep trying to encourage people to think about as innovation ahead. This is where I come to the humanistic engagement with the digital which is to say what aspects of our own subject position within our cultural conditions, our historical conditions, our political identities, and so forth, and our own subject positionality can be made apparent in relation to these apparently neutral systems. What's the mode of address of an interface? To whom is it speaking and how is it speaking and how, in doing so, is it assuming who its subject is, who the subject of that enunciation is, who's being enunciated in that process? And that feels to me like a political agenda as well as a humanistic one which is to undo that assumed universality and assumed neutrality.

---

6. Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors. Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, MA and London 2003).

7. <http://www.jodi.org/>, access: August 14, 2024, 3:45pm.



**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Well that opens a new can of worms. It's about the Humanities, about the subject position and all those aspects of knowledge production we reflect upon in our methodology and our theories and what, if I recall correctly, you were writing about in your co-authored book *Digital\_Humanities* (2012) and in the interview we conducted later for my book *Digital Humanities and Digital Media* (2016). Your point was that we as humanists should bring this knowledge about deconstruction and post-structuralism, which we dealt with in the 1980s and 1990s, into the other fields such as computer design and computer science. We should inform them about the lessons we learned about the subjectivity, relativity, ambiguity, and multiplicity of perspectives. I remember your hope for the future of the Digital Humanities that "it will be the humanistic dimensions that gain more traction in the field – not just as content, but as methods of knowledge, analysis, and argument." However, I also remember that you were not very optimistic, and worried that the "uncritical engagement with methods from other fields" would be "the price of entry,"<sup>8</sup> as you elegantly put it, the humanists would have to pay here.

I don't know how you see this today, but from what I gather the digital is used in digital humanities mostly as a tool to find new data. While on the theoretical level it is mostly undisputed that "Raw Data is an Oxymoron," to employ the title of a famous collection Lisa Gitelman edited in 2013, on the practical level there is that lingering aspiration to turn the Humanities into a hard science through digital means.

---

8. Interview with Johanna Drucker, At the intersection of computational methods and the traditional humanities, *Digital Humanities and Digital Media. Conversations on Politics, Culture, Aesthetics and Literacy*, ed. Roberto Simanowski (London 2016), pp. 43-68.



In addition, I see that the digital is used more as a practical tool for research questions rather than as a research subject in itself. DH has hardly moved in the direction of what we're doing now, talking about interface, algorithms, artificial intelligence, and their effect on the way we perceive ourselves, the world around us, and so on.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

I continue to not be optimistic even though I continue to advocate for critical engagement. The Digital Humanities have become so normative that, frankly, it isn't very interesting, because the exact questions we were asking 20 years ago, about how to transform the tools and make them have to incorporate certain kinds of humanistic principles, have not really been answered. Instead, Digital Humanists are using off the shelf tools, even if it's stuff made within a humanities community, like *Voyant*, for which I have great respect. Geoffrey Rockwell and (the late) Stéfán Sinclair's project is a useful tool, but it is a black box tool.<sup>9</sup> People don't understand how the results are produced, the algorithms that run it are not able to be intervened and customized very readily. In other words, the kind of conversation that occurs in an interpretation of a text is very difficult to have with the text of the code. To put it differently, where is the conversation taking place? Always after the code has operated, not in the creation or modification of the code. And it's not a question of who should be a coder and who shouldn't be a coder. It's a question of what are the kinds of tools that are being produced? And what are the ways to have a conversation with code once it is in place and working? Where is the two-way screen?

---

9. <https://voyant-tools.org/>, access: August 14, 2024, 3:40pm



One of the things, for instance, that I was talking about with some colleagues yesterday was, what are some of the ways in which critical insight could be built into certain kinds of platforms? And one thing would be to give greater access, I think, to how data are modelled in a particular environment and allow people to work with speculative projection and predictive modelling, the “what if?” aspect of working with data and its outcomes. So that instead of a kind of process that arrives at a declarative statement, you are aware of the variables. So what if, instead of saying “Okay, here I have an excel spreadsheet, let me make a bar chart”, then you get your bar chart, and say “Oh look at that, it’s a representation of how many people had traffic accidents on this block this week,” which seems like a straightforward statement of fact. But what if instead of that kind of mechanistic through line, you had a set of variables that you could customize to say, “what if this is going on,” “what if the drivers are only between this age and this age,” “what if the weather conditions...,” “what if lighting changes?” In other words, and maybe that’s just upping the mechanistic language, but it at least serves the purpose of showing that the apparent declarative statement is itself made, it’s an object of made-ness. It’s the outcome of certain kinds of parameters that produced a particular statement and then that statement becomes subject to some kind of critical engagement.

So it feels to me that there’s still room for speculative modelling, predictive variability, interventions of various kinds in these tools and platforms. So that would be my hope, that we could begin to build some of those features into the environments in which we work. And of course I want to build parallax into the interface. You know my favourite creature of the last several decades is Hubble, the cross-eyed telescope. It couldn’t get the image to come into focus. Thank you, Hubble. This is the guru, this is our hope for the future,



the cross-eyed telescope! Of course they fixed it. All right, I'm being provocative, but I'm serious as well.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Well, we have to be provocative, and it is a serious task, and we have to resist notions of secure truth, and be unafraid to foster speculation, as you just said. In fact, this is precisely the mission of the Humanities according to a German philosopher I often quote. In his famous essay of "On the Unavoidability of the Human Sciences",<sup>10</sup> Odo Marquard points out that it is the job of the Humanities to irritate the business of understanding and to counterbalance the notion of reliable and objective knowledge. The political importance of such a deconstructive endeavour becomes clear with respect to the Thirty Years' War – according to Marquard, a "hermeneutic civil war," in which people killed one another over the right interpretation of a book.

What may sound surprising and foreign today was well-known in the 1980s as the "ethical turn" in narrative theory and moral philosophy. One year after Marquard's essay, J. Hillis Miller published his programmatic book *The Ethics of Reading*, which praised deconstruction for undermining the desire for totality and closure and for exposing the rigidity and partiality of any moral perspective. To throw in another name and text, in his 1994 *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* the Italian Philosopher Gianni Vattimo discusses the "nihilistic vocation" of the humanities to reveal the world as a conflict of interpretations.

This sounds very provocative but is important in multicultural societies. I don't know what will transpire for ourselves and for future

---

10. Odo Marquard, *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies* (Oxford 1991).



generations if the opposite perspective or paradigm prevails, though this is the direction in which we seem to be heading. Many people are already unable to accept opposing perspectives as equally plausible and instead immediately see countering opinions as “the enemy” rather than simply the alternative.

There’s only black and white, us and them, which to me doesn’t necessarily represent the failure of the Humanities, but of humans, a backlash to what postmodernism meant and demanded of us.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

Absolutely, I think that hermeneutics are always shot through with political values and there’s an ideology to hermeneutics, to be sure, and I totally agree. Part of the reason that I was being, sort of playful a few minutes ago is that I actually believe that irreverence is a crucial, critical instrument and the concept of play, which is the notion that there is room for things to move in a mechanistic sense, that’s what play means, it’s like the play of a joint, the play of a fitting or a fixture. In this sense, play is really important as an intellectual concept that allows motion and movement. So I’m completely in agreement with you and I think the fundamental ideology of fascism is alignment, singularity, it’s a kind of orthodoxy and you agree to it. To me, the space of conversation and exchange shows that there is no singularity, and by singularity I don’t mean the AI thing but the final resolution of a text or phenomenon. But we should always be having a kind of conversation with it. That to me is crucial as a kind of way of thinking about how one lives a life. How do you have experience, how do you have knowledge? It has to be through a kind of continual re-engagement, otherwise you just become a formula, you just become a habit. And so I think it’s also beholden on us to think about the pedagogy involved in this work: What are the forms of pedagogy that



allow this, that sustain the values that you're articulating? How do we do that? What is the way to do that?

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

It's an important question which I can't answer. I can only say for sure that it is vital to somehow attempt to answer this question, and I can talk about some of the answers I see that, when brought forward, will not solve the problem. Of course, we have to filter out hate speech, fake news and all the rest, but this kind of solutionistic approach will not solve the problem. We have to start with the subject, with the personality. What you just said is important because it asks us to bring playfulness into our interactions with each other. We need to approach interaction with the understanding that the other person may be right and I may not be right, we need to always take into account that our self-assurance rests on a fundamental blindness: we remain within our own framework of thoughts, within our own presumptions and prejudices. Further, the other person, coming from a different position with a different framework, has a right as well to feel that she is right, even in the case that I don't accept her position.

Take the arguments about vaccination. I'm all in favour of vaccination but I am not blind to the arguments that may speak against it, and that turn people into anti-vaxxers, even among my friends: arguments about the safety of a vaccine that has not yet had time to produce much data, arguments about the obligation of the individual to ensure the safety of other individual within society, arguments about alternative ways to deal with the pandemic. I understand some of these arguments even though I don't share them and the position they represent and hope they don't prevail... This is something we generally need to understand and admit when interacting with each other, that those people who take an opposite stand are not to be



disqualified outright but have a right to hold a different view.

But now I'm no longer talking about interface or media, but about how we argue, how we generate and evaluate arguments, and how we deal with the arguments of others. Coming back to your question about the pedagogical approach, the answer is certainly not to be found in the field of Informatics but in that of the Humanities, which is where we try to increase sensibility and tolerance for ambiguity. As I like to say, that's something that you can practice by talking about poetry or talking about art, which plays with this exact kind of ambiguity in language or in aesthetic experience. Your classmate might see something completely different in the same work and may entertain an equally valid rationalization for her interpretation. This kind of sensitivity needs to be trained within the Humanities, not only in art lessons or lessons about literature, but also in sociology, for example, when we talk about moral and ethical frameworks, or in history when we string together episodes into a meaningful narrative. The challenges of digitization are not met only or even mainly in the field of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) it may be the Humanities that have the most to contribute here.

#### JOHANNA DRUCKER

Totally agree, Roberto, and we circle back to some of the ways in which the question of what constitutes hermeneutics might be understood as well. Gerald L. Bruns, a retired colleague of mine, has a wonderful book, *Hermeneutics. Ancient and Modern*,<sup>11</sup> and I often give it to the students to read, especially the grad students, because what Bruns does in that book is to demonstrate the multiple understandings of what hermeneutics is and the different methods

---

11. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics. Ancient & Modern* (New Haven 2009).



within hermeneutics that one can talk about. Doing interpretation in order to find the truth, that's one form of hermeneutics but you can practice hermeneutics also as a way of sustaining an engagement. So there's a kind of Talmudic process, and in that the community has to be constituted as a living community of dialogue and exchange around a text. So, again, it's not a matter of a two-termed relationship of individual and text and closing it down, but there's a third term there which is the other. So there's a self, and the other, and a text and so the relationship there is triangulated in a way that can't close down. The point is not to arrive at a single meaning or understanding, but to see *how* a text sustains engagement, what *kind* of texts sustain engagement.

And again, this is something that in a secular realm Adorno talked about. I'm not a huge Adorno fan and I'm not an adherent to all aspects of Adorno's thinking. But one of the things that he makes very clear is that there's a distinction to be made between those works of art that become reducible to a single message and those where the relationship of instantiation and conception doesn't finish. You keep going back to it and working with it and it's the sort of duck-rabbit, you know the image.

I agree that this is one of the crucial features of pedagogy, to get people to feel comfortable living with ambiguity and living with contradiction and to understand that there's not going to be a resolution. You're going to have to live with it. That this is one of the things that human beings are actually capable of doing, that we can live with ambiguity and contradiction. I think it's crucial, and the other feature of this in a social sense is reciprocity of respect.



**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

I couldn't agree more. We need self deprecation, self mockery even, we should mistrust ourselves at least two minutes per day. To bring in Gianni Vattimo again, we need "weak thinking" towards ourselves, so we don't take ourselves too seriously.<sup>12</sup> I remember, I was very struck by a book that came out in 2018 by Martin Seel, the German philosopher who deals a lot with aesthetics, *Nichtrechthabenwollen*. That's a very long German word which means he doesn't want to be right. He says that the stimulating is more important than the "Stimmige" (coherence). And this brings me back to Adorno, who, in his essay "The Essay as Form," praises the essay as a form of thinking and writing because the essay is exactly where you accomplish this "Nichtrechthabenwollen." You don't fixate things, you don't close off any idea, you sustain an engagement with all perspectives, and you undermine every claim that has been made including the one you started with. This kind of thinking is, in the end, not about the truth, but about being engaged with the text, as you said, or with other people who have their own thoughts about it. In an essay you actually try to do all at once as one person, you try to include different perspectives as one person. So it's being engaged with the different alter egos in yourself. I think this is something we have to reinvent or reactivate in our teaching.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

Well I agree, but I would invoke Fernando Pessoa rather than Adorno. All of his homonyms and heteronyms or whatever. Actually, I do want to mention Pessoa in a specific sense and then come back to a couple points. But the work of Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

---

12. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Weak Thought*, transl. and with an introduction by Peter Carravetta (Albany 2012).



(1935) is truly a great modern work, partly because it's not a fixed work. It is a work that has mobility within it. It is fragmentary and the sense of what constitutes the narrative, the pathway through it, is not clear, because it was left as a trunk full of papers at the time of his death. My colleague Manuel Portela has worked for a long time on a digital edition of Pessoa, because *The Book of Disquiet* was edited several times in print form and in each case it was given a fixed form. What Manuel wanted to do was to create a digital environment where each reader could find their way through the text in a particular way. That's an example of using digital media to do something that you actually can't do in print very readily, that supports the kind of investigative generative activity that we've been talking about and is in the spirit, of course, of Pessoa himself.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Indeed this project is a very intriguing one and absolutely apt to the nature of Pessoa's text. Manuel showed me the project in July 2019 in the context of a conference on "Teaching Digital Literature" at his university in Coimbra. It is a sort of grandson of the "Victorian Web" that my colleague George P. Landow at Brown University created in 1994.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

Because we're coming to the end of this conversation at some point, I wonder what you think, Roberto, about the question of scale. When we acknowledge and I acknowledge with you that the questions of the relationship between abuse of power and media have been in place long before the digital, we saw it very much in public spectacle in the Middle Ages, then in the Renaissance, in the courts, then in newspaper, and then you see it in radio. Once radio



appears, it's not by accident that people like Fritz Lang as well as the critical theorists of sociology and media like Siegfried Kracauer and Max Weber really saw that radio was a force that had impact beyond any prior media. One of the issues that's so terrifying in the present moment is the rate of communicative exchange and the scale at which that kind of dissemination brings alignment into being, across the fracture lines of society. That does seem to be a substantive difference in the way digital media are operating, social media in particular.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Certainly, it's a question of scale and the lack of any control. Of course, you also didn't have control before, if it's abuse then it is abuse of power. You could say, at every media institution, like a network or newspaper, there are people involved in the generation of content and they are able to abuse their position and generate poisoning content. However, in those cases at least you still have people there with certain journalistic standards and ethical principles. Of course, if the political system abandons those ethical principles, representatives of media institutions may be inclined to do the same.

What we have now, however, with the Internet is the situation where everybody who has access to it can communicate in the public sphere. When we got rid of the gatekeepers, we also got rid of the people who intervene, control the quality of utterances or at least its accuracy. Such control and intervention are not possible anymore, you don't want to do this because you don't want to appear as a censor or, as Zuckerberg likes to say, as an arbiter of truth. Hence, you just let things go and you do so in the name of the democratization of communication. It is understandable, after all let us not forget how that democratization of communication was praised in the early days



of the internet – it was one of the big promises. Well, we learned to see the constellation differently, we see it even as problematic today, though I guess it's still unpopular to openly say it.

I think we have reached a point that urges us to see many “victories” in the past more sceptically. Take the “death of the experts” as I call our situation in a small essay in 2016.<sup>13</sup> We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we can all be experts, now that communication is free and knowledge is freely accessible. But we know better. You need a certain expertise and a certain time of dealing with something, like you and I studied literature for years so we may be more equipped to talk about literature than any random reviewer on Amazon. But this remark could already get me into trouble. Doesn't it sound arrogant? And what about all the framing of my and your way of looking at literature by the “discourse police” as Foucault describes in *The Order of Discourse*? Maybe the Amazon reviewer sees more in a text. There are always good arguments on both sides. Actually, I do think we would write the better review about a book than any random reader. At least we wouldn't dare to offer the finding (Befund) or rather feeling (Befindlichkeit) “I couldn't identify with the hero” as an argument. So we have to consider what is actually a positive result of digital media and what turns out to be at least two-sided, if not problematic.

Just one more thing, I remember when in the zero years there was a lot of talk about “Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit 2.0” with reference to Habermas' 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* which had been just translated into English in 1989 when the Web arrived. This allusion always made me think of

---

13. Roberto Simanowski, The Death of the Experts, in: *Waste. A New Media Primer*, ed. Roberto Simanowski (Cambridge MA and London 2018), pp. 67-76.



how the theory design determines our approach to new phenomena; think of the praise of the hypertext as the praxis of poststructural theory, as “The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology” as the subtitle of Landow’s 1992 book *Hypertext* reads. Interestingly, Habermas himself, in an essay of 2007<sup>14</sup> was very critical towards the communication on the internet, this democratic opening of communication. Even though it is asymmetric, he held, the communication in the traditional mass media is still more to the point and is more inclusive at the end than the discussion we have now on the internet where attention is fragmented and scattered into various filter bubbles. While in mass media different perspectives are brought together, if not in one newspaper than at least in the sum of newspapers that are taken into account by readers, that is not the case with the internet. Habermas was very critical from the beginning and confirmed his reservation in an article where he basically questions his own optimism concerning the emancipatory power of the public sphere.<sup>15</sup> I think we should sometimes dare to be more conservative when it comes to the innovation of new media.

#### JOHANNA DRUCKER

Totally agree, Roberto, I think the myth of democratization is one of those sort of stealth campaigns to actually promote addiction and corporatization and all sorts of special interests. But I don’t think you can have democracy without accountability and, I think, that is the real difference here. The professional standards of accountability for expertise require a certain level of certification for someone to actually proceed in a professional way. We can talk about everyone

14. Jürgen Habermas, Hat die Demokratie noch eine epistemische Dimension?, in: *Ach, Europa. Kleine politische Schriften XI*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Berlin 2008).

15. Jürgen Habermas, Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit. *Leviathan* 37 (2001), pp. 470-500.



having the right to their own opinion, but the point is, if I'm going to go get surgery on my brain to remove a tumour, I don't want somebody to come in and say "Well, I could do that, you know. I've got a corkscrew, I've got a pair of tweezers". Expertise has a place and we rely upon expertise. I don't take my car to a mechanic who's just interested in blowing smoke. It doesn't make any sense.

There's so many areas of our lives where we know what expertise does, but to me the fundamental principle here is accountability. What are the instruments of accountability in a digital media social media environment? They're not there. It's public opinion and people get tried in the court of public opinion, they have their reputations destroyed in the court of public opinion and they're able to disregard laws, literally disregard laws as in the case of my particular country where we're seeing this rampant. It's like "Well, I'm above the law. I don't have to conform".

But I wonder if we want to come around to the question of bodies for a moment in relation to media and interface. There's a funny little anecdote I want to introduce, you may have seen this years ago: If in the future, alien creatures came to earth and human beings had vanished, there were no human beings left, even their skeletons were gone, everything was gone, the aliens would only have our devices. We had computers, we had phones, and the alien anthropologists are trying to reverse engineer what the bodies of these creatures who had all of these devices looked like. And it turned out that the design was somewhere between a mushroom and a cyclops. You're kind of a form of fungus that was rooted to one particular site with a big monocular eye on the top of your head and some kind of device for moving around a keyboard or doing a swipe. I bring this up just because I think it's again the defamiliarization exercise of thinking about who we become in relation to these devices.



How do they discipline us to become something other than what we evolved for? There's a reason why we have opposing thumbs and how that was an advantage evolutionarily and so forth and why we're mobile, we don't just stay rooted in one spot. So, I also wonder if there's any way we can connect some of the things we've been saying to the notion of being disciplined as a physical creature by these devices. Do you ever think about that?

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

What comes to mind right now is that we have to update that famous cartoon by the New Yorker. So it would then read "On the internet nobody knows you are a fungus". I remember hearing an early theory that the internet would induce "feminization" through immobilization. The idea worked with the grossly problematic stereotype of the girl sitting still at home in contrast to her brother who's outside and playing and running around.

However, the point was to assume the internet would discipline us in a bodily way. And of course, at that time, everything had a positive spin, so it was considered positive to demobilize your body while taking off on the data highway. I'm on your side, we shouldn't spend all the time in the future in virtual reality or, to throw this in for obvious reasons, in the metaverse. Let's see what will come. I don't know if this is a good way of ending, but if we end with the metaverse, then at least we can say we are up to date.

**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

I have to say, I've never aspired to be Keanu Reeves and to hang out in the world of the Matrix with all of those silly cliches of Neo. The problem I have with that particular vision of where technology is going to go is that it seems to start from a place of cliches, it seems to start from a place of exhausted tropes, with Morpheus and Neo, and



it comes already pre-packaged. It's as though the future is based on every bad sci-fi film that we've ever seen, or a good sci-fi film.

But here I will invoke another of my favourite philosophers and that is George Orwell who truly saw and understood the potential of thought control that was going to be affected by mass media and how this really gave rise to abuse at a scale and with a force that is difficult to counteract. When I think about the metaverse, I'm like "No, thanks!".

When I go out in the morning on my little geriatric jog, I don't use media, I don't have little earphones, I don't have bluetooth, I'm not listening to packaged content. I just want to hear what's going on. How loud is the freeway? Are there birds? What does the traffic sound like? It's like I'm processing who I am in relation to received information in my world. And I know that's old-fashioned, but I don't want to give that up. I learn who I am in relation to that experience. If I'm listening to programmed content, that's not happening for me. I don't feel that I am an animal creature alive in the world right now.

**ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI**

Right, Johanna, I completely agree. My wife and I also wondered who would go for the metaverse. Yes, the young people, they will go for this and Zuckerberg of course aims at the younger and the youngest, who won't know differently. They will enter and never leave this world of programmed, pre-packaged, datafied, and constantly analysed and commercialized content. Maybe we are already on the wrong track if we refer to Orwell instead of Huxley, because these young people will not consider the metaverse as "big brother is watching you", but as a "Brave New World", and they will like it. Maybe. We don't know.



**JOHANNA DRUCKER**

I think, if we inform them about the carbon costs and the ecological disaster that is risked by the use of this technology, that might be a useful counterpoint at the moment, to invoke Greta Thunberg and her passionate advocacy for survival. This is the other aspect of digital media, which is that the ecological costs of production and use of storage of network exchange are astronomically greater than people understand. I was suggesting to my colleagues yesterday that we need to have a little carbon calculator that's built into every browser and to every device. You need to know what costs you are running up with every one of your sustained transactions. To me that's the counter argument against the metaverse for the young, which is: Are they going to live in a fantasy world until the world is destroyed or are they going to come out of the fantasy and address the survival of the species? I'm calling for young people to reclaim their own lives and experiences.

\*\*\*\*\*

<END>

References

Bolter, Jay David and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors. Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, MA and London 2003).

Bruns, Gerald L., *Hermeneutics. Ancient & Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2009).

Drucker, Johanna, Interview: At the intersection of computational methods and the traditional humanities, in: *Digital Humanities and Digital Media. Conversations on Politics, Culture, Aesthetics and Literacy*, ed. Roberto Simanowski (London: Open Humanities Press 2016), pp. 43-68.



Burdick, Ann, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld Todd Presner and Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital Humanities* (Boston: MIT Press 2012).

Fuller, Matthew, Behind the Blip. Essays on the Culture of Software. *Autonomedia* 24 (2003), pp. 19–25.

Habermas, Jürgen, Hat die Demokratie noch eine epistemische Dimension?, in: *Ach, Europa. Kleine politische Schriften XI*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2008), pp. 138–191.

Habermas, Jürgen, Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit. *Leviathan* 37 (2001), pp. 470–500.

Marquard, Odo, *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991).

McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley: Ginko Press 2003).

Weiser, Mark and John Seely Brown, *Designing Calm Technology* (1995), <https://people.csail.mit.edu/rudolph/Teaching/weiser.pdf>, access: August 14, 2024, 3:40pm.

Simanowski, Roberto, *Stumme Medien. Vom Verschwinden der Computer in Bildung und Gesellschaft/ Mute Media. On the Disappearance of Computers in Education and Society* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2018).

Roberto Simanowski, The Death of the Experts, in: *Waste. A New Media Primer*, ed. Roberto Simanowski (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 2018), pp. 67–76.

Vattimo, Gianni and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Weak Thought*, trans. and with an introduction by Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press 2012).