




VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY
OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 6 CLASS 2

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The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems

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The essay ...

- Updates Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (film vs video games).
- Discusses the shift from the fetishization of the **object** to the fetishization of the **process of interaction, of simulation.**
- Frames the discussion in terms of **power relations** (*Interaction offers a greater feeling of freedom, yet it's always constrained by the larger simulating system. There's a **tendency toward control rather than collectivity***).
- Asks how computers (vs cameras) transform our *conception of, and relation to, self and reality.**

The essay ...

- Asks, how do metaphors **acquire the force of the real**?
- Asks, how do institutions legitimate their practices, recalibrate their rationale, and modulate their image so that they can **preserve the existing form of social relations** (*ideological entrenchment vs liberating potential*)?
- **Walter Benjamin**: cites changes in **1**. The economic mode of production **2**. The nature of art **3**. Categories of perception.
- Authenticity cannot be mechanically reproduced; free from ritual, art gains political power (*the actor has an unlimited public*).
- **Objects without aura substitute mystique.**
- A radical change in the nature of art **changes the way we see.***

The essay ...

- Copies appropriate originals; film has none (*that which is filmed is organized in order to be filmed*).
- Film, specifically, **Montage** (Dada) -- **the connecting of dissimilars to shock an audience into insight** -- has **liberating** potential: it gives back to the worker a view of **the world as malleable** (*it is editable*).
- **Culture** and its norms are **artificial arrangements that can be changed**.
- But because the reordering of the world **exhibits explosive potential**, it must be **defused** and **contained** (*so affinities, collectivity, shared decision-making, interconnectedness can be contained by dominant power structures*), **to preserve existing production relations**.

Cybernetic Systems

- **Cybernetics** is the study of **communication**, **feedback** and **control** mechanisms in living systems and machines (*the study and science of systems*).
- A **system** is the **orderly processes at work** in any *complex array of multiple, interacting variables*, be it a living organism, an environmental milieu, or a computer.
- **Cybernetic Systems** (computational machines) *process information and execute actions*; **automated but intelligent behavior**.

Cybernetic Systems (1988)

- Include telephone networks, communication satellites, radar systems, robots, biogenetically engineered cells -- **self-regulating mechanisms** or **systems within predefined limits** and with **predefined tasks** (i.e. **controls and constraints**).
- Have **interactive simulations** and **simulated interactions** (equivalent of Montage) brought about changes in our perception of the world **that hold liberating potential?**

Simulacra

- A simulacrum is a vague similarity, semblance, likeness; **an imaginary Other** which serves as **a measure of our own identity** that can never be made part of oneself.
- In postindustrial capitalism, the **human is defined in relationship to cybernetic systems** -- *computers, ecosystems, cyborgs (Wiener, cybernetic organisms), artificial life.*
- The human cyborg is different from other cyborgs: Thus, questions of **difference** between **self** and **Other persist**.*
- **Human identity is vulnerable to modification** as the **Other** changes.**

Simulacra

- Computer systems are interactive rather than 1-way, open ended rather than fixed (print); **this dialogue de-emphasizes authorship** in favor of **messages-in-circuit**.
- These messages are **addressed to us** and **addressable by us**; i.e. they are **dialogic**. But, they only give the impression that they are responding to us; i.e. **they simulate conversation** (*communication is “staged”*).
- Computer systems demand immediate response; our reactions become automatic (unconscious).
- Instead of **reproducing/altering** our **relation to the original work of art**, cybernetic communication **simulates/alters** our **relation to our environment and mind**.

Simulacra

- Are a new form of social practice that represent nothing.
- Does not suggest having “been there” (like photography); rather “being here” and “having come from nowhere”; *sui generis (in a class of its own)*.
- **Computer systems simulate** the qualities of living systems, social processes, *life itself*. In doing so, they replace direct encounter.
- Cybernetic dialogue/simulated interactions offer the **illusion of control**.*
- Engaging simulacra, the **process** becomes fetishized, resulting in **a fetishization of systems and processes of control****.

Electronic Simulation vs Mechanical Reproduction

- In film, great effort is exerted to **mask the means of production** (*so that illusion is preserved*); but the “other scene” is always lurking.
- With cybernetic systems, the “other scene” recedes further, into “machine language” and electronic circuits. The complex rule-governed procedures no longer address us; they address the system.
- Copies reproduces the world; chips simulate it. Chips have replaced copies. *It is the difference between being able to remake the world and being able to efface it**.
- Desire for the **dialogic/interactive** and **illusion of control vs** desire for the **fixed/unattainable** and **illusion of possession**.

Cybernetic Metaphors: Transformations of Self and Reality

- **Human** as *automated, intelligent system* (reality of simulation); **Automated, intelligent systems** as *human* (simulation of reality).
- **Hyperreality**: more real than reality itself. **We negotiate the world by means of simulation** (first Iraq war).
- **Preservation/simulation of life through artificial means**: life-support systems* and surrogate mothering**).
- The power of cybernetic simulations prompts a **redefinition** of such fundamental terms as **life** and **reality**.
- Engineered fetuses become cyborgs. *Metaphor becomes operative. Simulation becomes reality.*

Cybernetic Metaphors: The Law

- Reconceptualization of copyright and patent law give **evidence of the processes by which dominant ideology seeks to preserve itself** in the face of historical change.
- **Abstract metaphors** are embedded in materials that make up **computers**; as **material objects**, they are **commodities**.
- **Authors** and **inventors** own exclusive rights to their **writings** and **discoveries: intellectual property** (copyright/ trademark) or **industrial/technological property** (patents).
- **Cyborgs are both intellectual and technological property.**

Cybernetic Metaphors: The Law

- Copyright is for **original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium**.
- That is, copyright doesn't protect ideas, processes, procedures, systems or methods, **only the specific embodiment of such things** (*though it doesn't protect utilitarian things.*)
- Until 1980, criteria = not found in nature (phones, new life forms, but not software: algorithms = mere mathematical procedures).
- 1988: chip templates are partly protected. *The law itself replicates the "having come from nowhere" quality of the simulation.*

Cybernetic Metaphors: The Law

- What are the perceived differences between mechanical reproduction and cybernetic systems vis a vis the law?
- The process of mechanical reproduction had assured that the copyright registration of one particular copy would insure protection for all of its duplicates (*the assumption being that all would be identical in their physical and visible parts*).
- The only visible part of the video game is the display (which is not identical in all cases).
- Is the game's genre -- pursuit -- copyrightable? No. But is pursuit given concrete, distinctive expression?

Copies, Video Games and the Law

- Pac-Man given protection for the **outward manifestation** of the **underlying software programs**.
- The algorithms/software on the chip are not registered; rather a **videotape of the game in the play mode is**. How is this “fixed in a tangible medium? The repetition of visual scenes from one playing of the game to the next (*like duplicates of a copy, they remain unchanged*).
- What constitutes repetition? Pac-Man vs Munchkin: the latter differs because the central character has a personality.
- Later, decision overturned because **Pac-Man found to have expressive distinctiveness** ... a particular type of pursuit which was blatantly similar in Munchkins.

Copies, Video Games and the Law

- What is this particular type of pursuit?
- The main attraction of video games such as Pac-Man is that **the process** of absorption and feedback **simulates the reality of pursuit.**
- The fetishization of the **image as object of desire** turns into the fetishization of a **process as of object of desire.**
- The emphasis is on both the **mental state of the participant** (a living organism) and the visual representation; yet ... the law legitimates private ownership of cybernetic systems (which include you).

Conclusion

- Should private entities (businesses, corporations) have the right to control the cybernetic system of which we are a part?
- Cybernetic systems and the human-as-cyborg metaphor **refute a heritage that celebrates individual free will and subjectivity.**
- **If we see ourselves as part of a larger whole that is self-regulating and capable of long-term survival -- *cybernetic connection, system governs parts, the social collectivity of mind governs the autonomous ego of individualism* -- we can decenter control and overturn hierarchy.**
- **The task is not to overthrow the prevailing cybernetic model but to transgress its predefined interdictions and limits.**