

The Anti-Language of New Media

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T. J. Clark observed once, with the simple voice of experience, that in Courbet the entire world is one of proximity; the paintable is that thing, that space, that can be transformed into a Second Empire drawing room. This is Stanley Cavell's assessment too when, in *The World Viewed*, following Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," he likens painting to a certain desire for presentness. Painting assembles a space. But it is always a proximal space, a bounded space of textures and things brought around, not too close exactly, but certainly unconcealed and arrayed for handling. Painting is not Cavell's primary concern in *The World Viewed*, it is cinema after all, but painting offers a road down which one might travel to ascertain a certain quality shared by painting, photography, film, and a number of other art forms. It is the desire that the world be brought near to us.

A desire to be brought near--such a desire is most certainly at the very base of human life. Indeed the relative nearness and farness of things may account for all manner of action, from love to hate, from the joy of communion to the perils of exile. But that is not all, for in art it concerns a specific, not a general, iteration of this desire for nearness. The phenomenon is most acute in photography, and thereby, for Cavell, in cinema (for him, a photography derivative); as he puts it: the world of the image is present to us, but we were never present to it. So it is nearness with a catch. The viewer does not attend the filming of the "profilmic event," to use the parlance of cinema studies. Thus it is a desire to be brought near, but one already afflicted with a specific neurosis, that of the rejection of the self. With each attempt to array the world in proximal relation to us, we must at the same time make ourselves disappear. With each step forward in Cavell's world, one becomes that much more inert. Every step done is a step undone.

In Plato there is a magical ring, the Ring of Gyges, that grants invisibility to the wearer and thus potential immunity from moral consequence. The cinema in effect forces us to don the Ring of Gyges making the self an invisible half-participant in the world.¹ The self becomes a viewing self, and the world becomes a world viewed. This is, in a nutshell, the cinematic condition for Cavell, and I guess I agree with him. The penalties and rewards are clear: to be "cinematically" present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the movies, one must be a masochist. That is to say, to be in a relation of presence with the world cinematically, one must subject the self to the ultimate in pain and humiliation, which is nothing short of complete erasure. It has been said that the cinema is the most phenomenological of media. But whether this is a phenomenology or the absolute impossibility of one is not entirely clear.

"A painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* a world," wrote Cavell.² What can one say then of the

1 Cavell's reflections on this are worth reproducing in adequate length: "How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens. It is, in this sense, the reverse of the myth of Faust. And the wish for invisibility is old enough. Gods have profited from it, and Plato tells it in Book II of the *Republic* as the Myth of the Ring of Gyges. In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition." See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections On the Ontology of Film* [1971] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 40-41.

2 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.

cinema? Or the computer? Paraphrasing Cavell's definition of cinema, one might say, with considerably less panache than he, that the cinema automatically projects worlds (in series). So might it be *for* a world? The computer, then, is simply *on* a world, as it tends to rise in separation from some referent, modeling and supplementing it. But enough phrase making, the crucial thing is to determine the nature of the machine.

The object of the computer is not a man, nor is it this or that human face or body. In this sense it breaks with those arts (painting, photography, cinema) that fixate upon the embodied human form--the face, but not always, the hand, but not always--and its proximal relation to a world, if not as their immediate subject matter then at least the absolute horizon of their various aesthetic investments. The computer has not this same obsession. It aims not for man as a object. The reason is simple: because the computer is this object in and of itself.

This is why we do not cry at websites like we cry at the movies. It is why there is no "faciality" with the computer, why there is no concept of a celebrity star system (except ourselves), no characters or story (except our own), no notion of recognition and reversal, as Aristotle said of poetry. If the theater screen always directs toward, the computer screen always directs away. If at the movies you tilt your head back, with a computer you tilt in.

But, you say, there is more affect than ever today, is there not? The net is nothing if not the grand parade of personality profiles, wants and needs, projected egos, "second" selves and "second" lives. This is true. The waning of affect comes at the moment of its absolute rationalization. At the moment when something is perfected, it is dead. This is the condition of affect today online, and it is why the object of the computer is not a man: because its data is one.

Might one go so far as to make the ultimate leap, then, and assert the following: that the computer is an anti-Ring of Gyges. The set up is reversed. The wearer of the ring is free to roam around in plain sight, while the world, invisible, retreats in absolute alterity. The world no longer indicates to us what it is. We indicate ourselves to it, and in doing so the world materializes in our image.

Again the penalties and rewards are clear: To be "informatically" present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the computer, one must be a sadist.³ That is to say, in contrast to the cinema, in order to be in a relation with the world informatically, one must erase the world, subjecting it to various forms of manipulation, preemption, modeling, and synthetic transformation. The computer takes our own superlative power over worlds as the condition of possibility for the creation of worlds. Our intense investment in worlds--our acute fact finding, our scanning and data mining, our spidering and extracting--is the precondition for how worlds are revealed. The promise is not one of revealing something as it is, but in simulating a thing so effectively that "what it is" becomes less and less necessary to speak about, not because it is gone for good, but because we have perfected a language *for* it. As it is in the work of Alain Badiou: there are only bodies and languages.⁴

Cavell, and he is not the only one simply the most convenient, speaks of the possibility of a medium. The possibility of a medium stands in intimate relation to what a medium is, that is to say, the definition of whatever medium in question. Thus when one asks "What is the possibility of video?" one is in the same breath asking "What is the definition of video?" Yet the computer occupies an uneasy

3 Much more could be said on the question of whether sadism is in fact a suitable opposite for masochism and how and why they might be paired in the first place. For example the necessary narcissism of the masochist, the fact that all trauma must ultimately find both its cause and its solution in the self, also finds an opposite in the "split mind" of the schizophrenic, for whom the fragmentation of the self connects to elements both external and internal, but also enigmatically *within* or orthogonal, to the subject.

4 In Badiou this is both a simple claim about being and a lament of the highest order. The existence of "only" bodies and languages indicates a triumph of a specific political regime, democratic materialism, for which Badiou has zero affection. In a trick of language Badiou reveals the secret: bodies and languages are what *are*, but there are also things that *are not*: truths.

position in relation to both definition and possibility, for in many cases the very words that people use to address the question of the computer are those selfsame words "definition" and "possibility." One hears stories about computers being "definitional" machines: not only does computer code operate through the definitions of states and state changes, but computers themselves are those special machines that nominalize the world, that define and model its behavior using variables and functions. Likewise one hears stories about computers being "possibility" machines: they operate not through vague estimations of practice, but through hard, machinic possibilities of truth or falsehood, openness or closedness, on or off. So I suggest that these terms "definition" and "possibility" might do more harm than good if our aim is to understand the machine and how it works. How can we determine the possibility of new media if new media are nothing but possibility machines? How can we define them if they are already cast from the mold of definition? To adopt a shorthand, one might summarize this state of affairs by asserting that the computer has hitherto been understood in terms of metaphysics. That is to say, when people speak about the computer as an "essencing machine" what they really mean is that computers simulate ontologies, they define horizons of possibility. This is the terrain of metaphysics. These sorts of definitions can be found in Lev Manovich, Janet Murray, and all across the discourse on new media today. The notion is that one must define the medium with reference to a specific "language" or set of essential formal qualities, which then, following the metaphysical logic, manifest in the world a number of instances or effects. (One of the shortcomings of this approach, which I will not delve into very deeply here, is the problem of essentialism, that is to say, the notion that new media objects are *a priori* a certain way, and it is merely the job of the critic to examine them, and extract the universal laws or languages that constitute their proper functioning in the world; my elders in the anti-essentialist critical tradition have rightfully pointed out how this leads eventually to a number of political and theoretical problems, least of which being that it forecloses on contingency and historicity, two things that turn out to be quite desirable indeed.⁵)

This is all well and good. However, the story becomes more complicated once one acknowledges that the computer is dramatically unlike other media. Instead of facilitating the metaphysical arrangement, the computer does something quite different: it simulates the metaphysical arrangement. In short, the computer does not remediate other physical media, it remediates metaphysics itself (and hence should be more correctly labeled a metaphysical medium). I shall refrain from saying it remediates mediation itself, but the temptation exists. The metaphysical "medium" of essences and instances is fundamentally dead today. And as dead, the medium of essences and instances reemerges in a new mediatic form, the computer. Informatic machines do not *participate* in the worldly logic of essences and instances, they simulate it. For example, on the one hand principles like disposability and

5 Another thorny shortcoming of the formalist approach is that it is often very difficult to find solid accord between one's formal checklist and the object at hand. I recount a recent lecture as an example. In a 2008 lecture, Warren Sack gave the following list of formal characteristics in defining what computer programs are (or to be more specific, how code differs from other forms of writing): (1) programs deploy the *imperative* (and sometimes the conditional) mode; (2) they are *autonomous*, meaning they can be executed; (3) they are *impersonal*, meaning they eschew pronouns like "I," "me," or "you"; (4) programs are below the level of the naked eye and hence *infinitesimal*; (5) they are *illegible*, as in the inability for humans to read compiled code; (6) and they are *instantaneous*. Now, I don't disagree with these observations, and in fact believe in the utility of many of them. However as definitional qualities, they all seem rather flimsy. As an exercise I will cite valid counter examples for each so-called characteristic: (1) code comments exist in programs yet are not imperative; (2) computer programs frequently crash putting their pure autonomy in doubt; (3) programs may not use personal pronouns, but variables and variable declaration are at the heart of most programs meaning they are quite fundamentally oriented around the identification and addressing of objects and entities; (4) consider the example of the computer punch card which is a program that exists at the human level of visibility; (5) open source code formats--HTML even--defy the principle of illegibility; (6) phenomena such as network lag routinely inhibits online games, making their non-instantaneous reality painfully evident. This is not to single out Sack, simply to demonstrate that formalist checklists are often extremely hard to ratify given the complexity of the subject matter.

planned obsolescence seem to occlude age old metaphysical problems about the persistence of essential identity in the form of universals or transcendentals. Quite frankly, the metaphysical questions are simply not the interesting ones to ask in the face of all this junk. But on the other hand, within the logic of the machine one sees little more than an effigy for and an undead persistence of these same metaphysical principles. A thing always reaches perfection in death.

But what of this notion of remediating metaphysics itself? The remediation argument (handed down from McLuhan and his followers) is so full of holes that it is probably best to toss it wholesale. But if any hope may be found for the theory, it is in the "itself." Television does not simply remediate film, it remediates film *itself*. The important issue is not that this or that film is scanned and broadcast as the "content" of television (this being one version of McLuhan's remediation argument). The important issue is that television incorporates film itself, that is, it incorporates the entire cinematic condition.

But as soon as the remediation theory is given any legs at all one realizes rather quickly a number of problems with the hypothesis that one medium could be a content for another, historically or otherwise. Friedrich Kittler's amazing discussion of time axis manipulation in recorded sound is a good example. Recorded sound may remediate performed music, but what is being remediated when a musician plays magnetic tape backward and hears for the first time a true sonic reversal (not simply the reversal of phonemes)? Or consider the computer. A computer might remediate text and image. But what about a computer crash? What is being remediated at that moment? It can't be text or image anymore, for they are not subject to crashes of this variety. So is a computer crash an example of non-media? In short, the remediation hypothesis leads very quickly to a feedback loop in which much of what we consider to be media are in fact reclassified as non-media, thereby putting into question the suitability of the original hypothesis.

To give a specific example of the remediation of metaphysics itself one might reference object-oriented programming--the metaphysico-Platonic logic here is awe inspiring--and the way in which classes (forms) define objects (instantiated things): classes are programmer-defined templates, they are (usually) static and state in abstract terms how objects define data types and process data; objects are instances of classes, they are created in the image of a class, they persist for finite amounts of time and eventually are destroyed. On the one hand an idea, on the other a body. On the one hand an essence, on the other an instance. On the one hand the ontological, on the other the ontical.

The cinema so captured the twentieth-century imagination that it is common to assume that other media are also at root cinematic. And since the cinema is, in general, an ontology (in particular it is a phenomenology), it seems logical to assume that other media are ontological in the same way. The computer however, is not *of* an ontological condition, it is *on* that condition. It does not facilitate or make reference to an arrangement of being, it remediates the very conditions of being itself. If I may be so crude: the medium of the computer is being. But one must take this in an entirely unglamorous way. It is not to say that the computer is the ontological actor par excellence, that it marks the way for some cyborg Dasein of the future. No, the point is that the computer has so degraded the ontological plane, that it may reduce and simulate it using the simple principles of logical relation. Being is its object, not its experience. And if being is merely its object, one ought to look elsewhere to try to understand its experience.

So if cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic. The computer instantiates a practice, not a presence. Perhaps a useful way to understand the distinction is to draw a distinction between a language and a calculus. A language operates at the level of description and reference. To encode the world, this is the primary goal of language. (Then of course beyond this one might also speak about the autonomous space of language, in for example textuality, as a space of interconnection and deferral of meaning, and so on.) A calculus, on the other hand, operates at the level

of computation and process. To do something to the world--or if you like to simulate doing something to the world--this is the primary goal of a calculus. With a calculus, one speaks of a system of reasoning, an executable machine that can work through a problem, step by step. The difference between the two, in one aspect, is that a calculus implies a method, whereas a language does not.

But to say that the computer is in general an ethic is not to say that computers are ethical. I make a distinction between an ethic, which describes general principles for practice, and the realm of the ethical, which defines such general principles for practice within the context of a specifically human relationship to moral conceptions of the good. Note therefore that mine is not a personification of the machine, but rather an anti-anthropocentrism of the realm of practice. And I will always defend the unpopular notion that, in the end, machines really have no need for humans at all (just in the same way that the Real has no need for us, but we have a horrifying need for it). But in actual fact the machine does have an anthropocentric relation, and this is where one might speak to the question of a computer ethic. As an ethic, the computer takes our action in the world as such as the condition of the world's expression. So in saying practice, I am really indicating a relationship of command. The machine is an ethic because it is premised on the notion that objects are subject to definition and manipulation according to a set of principles for action. The matter at hand is not that of coming to know a world, but rather that of how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world.

Let me restate the argument: the computer has hitherto been defined ontologically; but this approach (using the ontological concepts of possibility and definition) is dubious because the computer itself is already a matter of possibility and definition; thus if the computer might better be understood in terms of a practice or a set of executions or actions in relation to a world, the proper branch of philosophy that one should turn to is ethics, not ontology or metaphysics; as an ethics, the computer takes our execution of the world as the condition of the world's expression.

Where does this get us? First, one must address the response to Lev Manovich implicit in the above claims. The main difficulty with a book like *The Language of New Media*, for all its strength, is not simply that it participates in the various squabbles over this or that formal detail. Are games fundamentally about play or about narrative? What has greater semiotic priority, code or interface? In the end these territorial skirmishes do not interest me much. The main difficulty is the simple premise of the book, that new media may be defined via reference to a foundational set of formal qualities, and that these qualities form a coherent language that may be identified across all sorts of new media objects, and above all that the qualities may be read, and may be interpreted. This is what was called, many years ago, structuralism. Let me be clear, it is not so much that these sorts of books are misguided (and not so much to pick on Manovich, for there are scores of other texts that do similar work; his simply is one of the earliest and most accomplished examples), but that their conclusions are unappetizing. This is the crux of the matter: they contain no injunction. The problem is not formal definition--for after all I am willing to participate in such a project, suggesting for example that with informatic machines we must fundamentally come to terms with the problem of action. The sticking point is that, in this instance, the use of formalism as a method does not ultimately conform most faithfully to the object at hand. That is, if the computer *were* a formal medium, then perhaps our analysis of it could be too. But my position is that it is not. So in a certain sense, Manovich is avant-garde, performing an "intervention," while my call is much more conservative. If the language (of new media) is really an executable language and not simply a natural one, then would it not make sense for one's critical appraisal to be in step with that same notion of executability? So when I say their conclusions are unappetizing I mean it in the most mundane sense: that the discourse on "excitable" machines does not, to put it bluntly, excite me. In other words, if computers must be understood in terms of an ethics (those who wish instead to call it a politics should do so), then the discourse produced about them must also fulfill various ethical and political expectations. Else what is the good?