The machine is an ethic

Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2012. 170 pp., £45.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 978 0 74566 252 7 hb., 978 0 74566 253 4 pb.

Historical questions of break versus intensification are unavoidable in the so-called information age. Does post-Fordism really replace Fordism in the overdeveloped world, or does it represent a stage of expansion both geographically and in terms of types of commodity? Do networks do away with the old sovereign and disciplinary power centres, or do they intensify their reach and penetration into all aspects of social and cultural life? Have video games really supplanted cinema as the cultural dominant of the age? Given the binary responses that such questions invite, it may be that the information age itself, for which the electronic digital computer provides both a technological substrate and a logical endowment, necessitates a return to fundamental questions of the relationship between criticism and history. Or, to take the more severe route, it may be that because the digital promises to do away with history altogether – a prospect that foregrounds the fundamental relationship between digitality and capital – it becomes all the more necessary to locate ways of first grasping and then overturning its aesthetic and political hegemony.

Such considerations are at the heart of *The Interface Effect*. For all of the foregrounding of 'windows, screens, keyboards, kiosks, channels, sockets, and holes' in the Preface, and for all of the discussion of varied cultural artefacts, from *World of Warcraft* to Jodi to *24*, this is fundamentally a book about critical method and history. Or, to expand this formulation in a manner suggested by Galloway's use of the term 'the control allegory' to group the various artefacts with which he engages, *The Interface Effect* deals with the aesthetic and critical principles with which one might represent and respond to the transition from (thermodynamic, decentralized) disciplinary societies to (communicational, distributed) control societies that Gilles Deleuze began to theorize in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Viewed as a book on method, a central organizational principle becomes clear: each chapter addresses the ways in which control necessitates a reconsideration of some of the approaches and terms that have been central to the critical analysis of culture over the past hundred years or so. The Introduction ('The Computer as a Mode of Mediation') uses a comparative appraisal of cinema and the computer, the media forms fundamental to discipline and control respectively, as a frame though which to consider two ways in which media technologies might be critically analysed. These are the concept of media and that of modes of mediation, and the distinctive critical traditions that the two encapsulate define two different possibilities for the study of media forms. Placing the concept of media at the centre of one's critical analysis necessitates a focus on form and structure, and precludes any political injunction; in such studies '*techne* is substrate and only substrate'. From here Galloway develops a critique of formalist approaches to new media, centred on Lev Manovich but applicable to any number of other writers from the late 1990s onwards. Focusing on modes of mediation, however, allows for a mode of analysis which views '*techne* as technique, art,

habitus, ethos, or lived practice'. Favouring this second approach Galloway is able to make the bracing claim, central to the book as a whole, that 'if cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic'. The computer is an ethic, Galloway argues, because it can only model worlds based on human action, or input, and as a result of this mediates humans (and all other objects in the world) so that they are reduced to abstract definitions configured according to the possible, predetermined inputs they might provide.

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 premissed 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.

In other words, it is not quite right to say that the computer is a formal medium, and thus declare that formalism is the appropriate way to approach it. Rather, the computer is a *formalizing* medium – literally, it cannot address a world that is anything but entirely formalized – and because of this it must be approached through the meeting point between world and formal model. This is the real significance of the interface in Galloway's book; not a screen or mouse, but the zone in which diachronic objects and identities meet the pure synchronicity of code.

Galloway's theorization of the computer as a mode of mediation offers rich possibilities for the critical analysis of the digital. By shifting focus onto the interface between action and formalization that computing machines afford, for example, it presents a nuanced way to approach the problem of so-called immaterial labour. For all of the inventive deployments of this theoretical frame that constitute the remaining chapters of *The Interface Effect*, it may be that this opening move is its most valuable contribution. Chapter 1 ('The Unworkable Interface') considers the relationship between art, theory and politics through the prism of cybernetic, networked logic. The defence of allegorical reading presented in this chapter, drawing on Marx and Freud, rests upon a mapping of play onto the historical phenomenon of digital mediation as a political-economic logic. Here the historical stakes of the book are restated though an association between play, labour and the decline in efficacy of a certain strain of critical analysis perhaps most closely associated with the 1970s' work of Deleuze and Guattari:

> [T]he present analysis is not particularly rhizomatic or playful in spirit, for the spirit of play and rhizomatic revolution has been deflated in recent years. It is instead that of a material and semiotic 'close reading' aspiring not to reenact the historical relation (the new economy) but to identify the relation itself as historical.

In Chapter 2 ('Software and Ideology') Galloway restates the central claim of the Introduction in terms of ideology, drawing on Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's 2005 essay 'On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge' to argue that the logical structure of software makes political interpretation the only appropriate mode of analysis. Chapters 3 and 4 ('Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' and 'Disingenuous Informatics') consider the problems posed to representation by the network-centric logic of control, drawing on a range of examples from the infamous 'McCrystal PowerPoint', a system-dynamic model of the Afghanistan war, to Frank Gehry's design for the Ray and Maria Stata centre at MIT, to the television series *24*. Finally, a Postscript ('We Are the Gold Farmers') considers the problems posed to identity politics and theory by the mediatic mode of the computer, which

can only deal in rigorous definition and the casting of positively measurable action into algorithms and logical structures.

Given the deftness of the critical framework Galloway develops and applies in *The Interface Effect*, a pair of interlinked areas appear worthy of greater discussion than they get within the book; the first is capitalism, and the second is material history. Galloway nods to both subjects repeatedly, but discussion tends to be focused at the twin levels of critical-theoretical method and close analysis of the above-mentioned range of cultural artefacts. The process of mediation that Galloway identifies with the computer – the mode of viewing in which all objects and identities within the world are flattened into formal models – appears identical to the abstract and abstracting function of capital described by Marx (see, for example, the first volume of *Capital* and the concluding pages of Ernest Mandel's 1976 introduction to it). An analysis of the way in which both the digital mode of mediation and the electronic digital computer are historically imbricated with the progression of capitalism would add a great deal to the theoretical and methodological debates the book develops. Equally, the book makes regular reference to cybernetics, and it strikes me that an examination of the historical development and dispersal of this postwar interdisciplinary method would allow for an essential engagement with the question of how applying the computational mode of mediation to the social began to appear both possible and desirable to certain political and economic interests in the second half of the twentieth century.

In other words, it may be that the hollowing out of history by information-age capitalism necessitates a bipartite historical response, a bringing together of two approaches to the past of culture that have until now appeared diametrically opposed: on one hand, the historicist method found in Marx and developed through the analysis of cultural objects by thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, and on the other hand, close engagements with material objects and archives associated with Friedrich Kittler and the field of media archaeology. Galloway develops a theoretical framework for the first part of this equation, and hints at the second part: developing the synthesis that would allow for the historicity of the digital to be fully confronted is a project that remains to be completed.

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