

Why we should be ‘Discrete’ in Public

Encapsulation and the Private lives of Objects

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“It is admirable to demonstrate that the strength of the spirit transcends the laws of mechanical nature, but this program is idiotic if matter is not at all material and machines are not at all mechanical.”
(Latour, 124)

There is a strong case for suggesting that in our contemporary epoch, interfaces play more of a fundamental role than ever; to consider the countless mediations of digital programs, collective groups, corporate fundraisers, phone apps, mobile platforms and social practices, is to consider many interlocking communicative systems and assemblages.

But why should we suggest that interfaces have played less of a role than they do now? This is not a historical interjection, but an *ontological one*. Digital interfaces may allude to boundaries between data and flesh, nature and artifice, platform and software; but this affords less of an interface as such, but more of a distinction between one boundary and another. The problem becomes bigger when we consider the bolstering of ‘culture’ onto the interface. Surely it is human culture that has special access to a specialised domain of meaning here? Or at best a post-human one?

We should consider that in the last number of years, Continental and Analytic Philosophy has undergone a major revision on a number of unfashionable issues. If we were once spellbound by discourses, social practices, texts, language and the finitude of human epistemology, then today’s scholars choose to orient their thoughts towards the independence of reality itself (Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek, 13)

Of the recently disbanded collective ‘Speculative Realism’ (a group comprising of the philosophers Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant and Graham Harman), it is Meillassoux’s criticism of the anti-realist term ‘Correlationism’ which has become the antithetical lynchpin of contemporary Philosophy.

As Meillassoux succinctly puts it, correlationism is the idea that ‘we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other’ (5). The speculative mode of enquiry is to access the properties of reality, materialism in-itself or objects of enquiry, without succumbing to a subject always-already relating to it. Arguably correlationism has been with philosophy since Kant, but it has leaked into many disciplines in many guises, not least studying media and its vicissitudes. Perhaps correlationism exists in its most potent form as the interface between human minds and the mirror of culture.

In the forthcoming publication *The Democracy of Objects* (forthcoming, 2011), the philosopher and Media Theorist Levi Bryant coins the view, ‘Malkovichism’ as influenced from the famous scene in the film *Being John Malkovich*. This view pertains to an ‘erasure of alterity’, such that the objects of our concern (in this case digital media) are mere vehicles of culture, meaning, perspective, ideology; in short they reflect our own concerns or the interests of a fractured, complex society.

We do not merely see PHP code in its own way or witness a search engine peruse data; we would rather interpret it as an interface that affords communication between a human witness and communicative informational output. We would rather see it as an attempt to address the ideological connotations inherent within the form of executable code that society produces and is ‘captured’ by (or as Richard Rogers recently called ‘back-end politics’).

These positions rely on the correlationist attitude that the inherent reality of things can never be disclosed and the world of digital media can only ever operate *for-us*, not for itself. The paradigm of interface plays a particularly ambivalent part in this argument by siphoning off platforms, software protocols and objects by way of a representative intention.

As a referent, we should note Andersen and Pold's introductory premise to *Interface Criticism: Aesthetics beyond the Buttons*, in so far as their investigation of the interface does not stop at the computer's surface but it progresses; "...beyond the buttons and reaches 'back' into history, and 'through' to the human senses and perception, 'behind' the concept of the interface, 'down' into the machine, 'out' into society and culture" (10).

We should note that at first glance, only one fifth of their investigation actually delves 'beyond the buttons'. The intention here is not to disregard the human senses, perception, history and culture, but to remind ourselves that in reality, it is not 'just' these points that are worth pointing to. To start off with, it would perhaps be better to suggest the alternative stance; interface is not a concept.

Of the original four thinkers that comprised Speculative Realism, it is Graham Harman who is currently influencing some media scholars into pursuing the speculative enquiry, and with one discrete reason that relates to interface.

Unlike many thinkers who wish to subvert correlationism from the inside, Harman suggests that, ontologically speaking, the relationship between a human user and an entity is different only in kind from any other relationship. The interface between human and browser is different only in kind to a USB stick and its interface to hard drive or even an interface between laminate flooring and trainer.

Harman argues for an ontology that suggests speculating on different kinds of interfaces between objects themselves. It is what he terms an Object Oriented Ontology. Instead of focusing on the multiplicity of interfaces surrounding human culture, Harman launches a challenge to the humanities; what relations are occurring between the discrete objects that we often occlude? Rather than accounting for Javascript keywords, LCD displays, ethernet cables and API's as tools that society use to communicate (or miscommunicate), Harman thinks the humanities should offer speculation on these objects themselves and their own boundaries and firewalls.

Those of you will already be aware that the term shares two thirds with another paradigm, perhaps even more closely related to interface; Object Oriented Programming (OOP). Even though this computational paradigm has many key differences between a speculative enquiry, it holds one key similarity; Discreteness.

Perhaps the American videogame scholar Ian Bogost is the most vocal media theorist to advocate Object Oriented Ontology. Alongside his own forthcoming publication (*Alien Phenomenology*, 2011, forthcoming), he also cites Harman's work in his first book *Unit Operations* (2006). This is a reply to his own version of the 'unit' which is "a material element, a thing. It can be constitutive or contingent, like a building block that makes up a system, or it can be autonomous like the system itself" (5). Both scholars seek to underscore the discrete reality of units and objects, both as ordinary things or complex, abstract and conceptual structures. For Bogost, the merging of computation and ontology into an aggregated unit framework is pitched against the usual understanding that digital expression utilises systematic, network thinking. Although Bogost makes it clear that,

...the relationship between units and systems is not a binary opposition [...] Unit-operational structures might also reaffirm systematicity, even if they deploy the most discrete types of unit functions. [...] The difference between systems of units and systems as such is that the former derive meaning from the interrelationship of their components, whereas the latter regulate meaning for their constituents." (4)

This key ontological insight sets the groundwork for analysing media as a complex set of discrete configurative units, and not as a totalising system that regulates and orders to one principle alone. Whilst its use has been considerable in videogame studies (it is after all, an approach to videogame criticism), its framework has been sorely lacking in researching digital aesthetics.

Immanently connected to our speculative notion of object interface is encapsulation, one of the four properties given to the Object Oriented Programming paradigm, alongside Abstraction, Inheritance and Polymorphism. For a system to be considered object oriented it must be discrete. Non- OOP systems do not have the luxury of encapsulation, and as such modifications of data structures can be accessible from any part of the program, making bugs and glitches an almost certainty. OOP's dominance is closely related to Graphic User Interfaces (GUI's) for this very reason. Minimise buttons, XML files and entire SQL databases are objects composed of more fundamental objects, with an equal intrinsic structure.

Encapsulation is the notion that objects have both public and private logics inherent to their components. But we should be careful not to regard the notion that private information is deliberately hidden from view, certain aspects of the object are made public and others are occluded by blocking off layers of data. The encapsulated data can still be related to, even if the object itself fails to reveal it.

Interfaces reliance on OOP does not just reach the visible practice of moving and operating folders, programs and browsers, but also reveals the inherent interfaces between computational objects *themselves*. Other objects adhere to the interfaces of objects without the need to understand their complexity. The Malkovichism view that public arena reflects human activity needs to be flattened, and not just with the enquiry into mechanical entities, but of units within all sorts of complex phenomena.

Finally, how does the interrelationships between units impact on artworks - especially those that befriend computation? Perhaps, a starting point would denote a re-appropriation of artworks that intend to visualise human use within different visualisations. Mary Flanagan's famous work *Digital Unconscious* (2000) highlights the already evident correlationist attitude. But instead of the application mining unconscious human use, consider the interface we witness – the application that mines the system it thrives on. The hidden layers of hard drive brought forward from the mines of encapsulation.

But even contemporary conceptual art can express the configurable. The German artist Florian Slotawa is well known for his transgressionary re- contextualisation of objects. For the work *Hotelarbeiten [Hotel Works]*, (1998-1999), Slotawa painstakingly reconfigures units within European hotel rooms and documents the outcome. The interrelationship of the room is reconfigured into an operation and then it is put back into its original position, as if nothing happened. The discrete encapsulation of the objects are not exposed but adjusted contingently. Chairs lie on mattresses and doors prop up tables alongside walls. Nothing is really transformed, but instead it is radically composed. In the 2004 piece *Kieler Sockel*, (2004) at Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Slotawa placed the museum's sculpture collection on bespoke plinths made from their office equipment – heads resting on bins and cabinets. For the museum, this led to a rather ambivalent position where it had to purchase objects that it already owned.

Configurability is not strictly the domain of computation, but the domain of units. Although it has been noted by commentators (Chilver, 37) that Slotawa subverts conceptual art's composition into something radically contingent, I would argue that it offers a speculative transgression onto the interface of objects.

Works cited:

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