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Artifactualization: Introducing a new concept.

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Introduction.

In this paper, we want to briefly introduce a new concept, the dire need of which seems to be dictated by current parallel evolutions seen in technology and in the humanities. As theoretical questions are embedded in concrete objects (what we call “artifactualization”) they’re passing from the realm of traditional disciplines to an industrial or hyperindustrial world - as French philosopher Bernard Stiegler¹ puts it. What exactly is artifactualization? Why is it needed? Previous concepts already seem to dwell in the same territory. However, their precise domain of application might call for a broader alternative. Let’s first analyze two of them before we get back to artifactualization: remediation and thingification.

Remediation (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin)

About a decade ago, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin² coined the concept of remediation to help us to get rid of the fascination for the new raised by digital technologies such as video games or the World Wide Web. Arguing against the claim that new medias require radically new forms of representations, the authors concentrate on visual media and show that from perspective painting to photography, cinema to televisions, newspapers to WebPages, all can be understood as borrowing strong influence from earlier medias; earlier medias reshaping posterior ones, and vice-versa, in a constant loop (“remediation” being a never ending transitive process).

Thingification.

However fruitful this approach might prove, it still rests on the much debated notion of representation, one that is largely questionable in an age, as Scot Lash and Celia Lury puts it in their book *Global Cultural Industry: the Mediation of Things*³, of “thingification”. By thingification, both authors aim to capture the shift from an understanding of the commoditization of culture where cultural industry was still conceived as a matter of symbolic superstructure albeit driven by profit-making and accumulation as befits a capitalist society – an analysis which dominated critical theory back to Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁴, to what they call “global cultural industry”. In this new context of ours, culture, under the guise of things, has become ubiquitous. Once a superstructure whose autonomous sphere threatened to yield to economical infrastructure, much to the

¹ Stiegler, B. (2008), *Economie de l'hypermatériel et psychopouvoir*, Mille et unes nuits.

² (2000), The MIT Press.

³ (2007), Polity Press.

⁴ Transl. (2002), Stanford UP.

dismay of Adorno and Horkheimer, culture “takes on a certain materiality itself” and therefrom takes over infrastructure. While Bolter and Grusin analysis was eventually still limited to visual representations, Lash and Lury rightly see how images themselves as Deleuze puts it, have become “image-matter”⁵.

Yet, both conceptions suffer from the same prejudice: media as the point of departure of their analyses. Either media are remediating themselves (Bolter & Grusin) or things become media and media become things (Lash & Lury). Nowhere does this limitation comes under a brighter light than when Lash and Lury separate meaning, a fundamental aspect of representation for cultural industry, the means through which the latter was mediated, from operationality: “When media become things, we enter a world of operationality, a world not of interpretation but of navigation.” Our thesis is that we need a broader theory allowing us to understand how meaning itself is currently being operationalized.

Artifactualization

The current digitization (of just about everything) isn't tantamount to a dematerialization. It's quite the contrary since issues that used to be – or seem - strictly theoretical now permeate debates and practices in computer science and engineering. Digitization is no dematerialization but a broader form of thingification that does not affect only culture, whose effects are felt in every conceivable aspect of human life. Thus, philosophical topics like language or ontologies are being “artifactualized”; in other words, they now give birth to *digital artifacts*. For example, thanks to tagging systems, computer ontologies or digital proper names like URIs – the building blocks of the Semantic Web, philosophical theories about meaning are reworked in the context of the Web⁶, re-thought and reshaped through design, in other words, re-created (or even simply created sometimes, see *infra*). Other examples include texts which lately have become cybertexts⁷ - that is, video games – eliciting controversial debates between narrativists and ludologists as regards the place of narration in a new technological context where it is widely challenged. Yet, artifactualisation doesn't claim to be a uniform process, quite unlike the notion of *applied* science. Rather, every discipline and every period of time are concerned. It has already been made mention of the transition between texts and cybertexts. It could be argued, instead, that texts themselves were already the result of a technological evolution called grammatisation⁸ – long before the advent of computers. Hence, the former might well be artifacts themselves. Where artifactualisation does begin or end thus remains an open question, maybe the very first lesson to be drawn from this notion: more often than nought, artifactualisation is in fact re-artifactualisation, a shift from one *kind* of artifacts to another one⁹.

⁵ Lash & Lury (2007), p.7.

⁶ Halpin, H., Thompson, H.S., (2005) Web Proper Names: Naming Referents on the Web, WWW2005, May 10-14, Chiba, Japan. .

Halpin, H. (2006), Identity, Reference and Meaning on the Web, Identity, Reference, and the Web IRW2006, WWW2006 Workshop, Edinburgh, Scotland May 23rd.

Hayes, P., Halpin, H., (2008), In defense of ambiguity, *International Journal on Semantic Web & Information Systems*, 4, (2).

⁷ Aarseth, E., (1997), *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins UP.

⁸ Derrida, J. (1967), *De la Grammatologie*, Minuit ; Auroux, S., (1994), *La révolution technologique de la grammatisation*, Liège, Mardaga.

⁹ Just as it is difficult to draw an absolute line between what belongs to the realm of the natural or the artificial.

Whereas meaning for philosophy of language is a topic of reflection, for engineers and computer scientists working on the Semantic Web, facing its so-called “Identity Crisis”¹⁰, the question can no longer retain the very same theoretical flavour. Concepts themselves aren’t understood as components of “thoughts”, as in Gottlob Frege’s landmark theory, one that shaped our understanding of language in the XXth century - or even Plato’s Ideas to take an extreme example of conceptual realism, waiting to be *grasped*, but as “resources”, properly coded and identified, in other words, *operationnalized* through technological means (namely, RDF, *Resource Description Framework*, and URIs, *Uniform Resource Identifiers*, arguably the two main components of the Semantic Web) – thus also departing from more pragmatic approaches eager to put the emphasis solely on usages.

Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the World Wide Web in 1989, summarized his view in a widely quoted email:

“we are not analyzing a world, we are building it. We are not experimental philosophers, we are philosophical engineers. We declare "this is the protocol". When people break the protocol, we lament, sue, and so on. But they tend to stick to it because we show that the system has very interesting and useful properties.”¹¹

Following his remark, it no longer matters, for example, whether concepts do exist or not: only their coded “representation” is taken into account – as long as it doesn’t break the protocol, things are fine. While representation had to remain faithful to the thing represented, the criterion applied to something that was designed according to such and such principles isn’t faithfulness, an external criterion, but operationality, an internal one. In a sense, artifactualization is the opposite of William Morris’ *makeshift*¹². While the latter borrowed from a pessimistic vision to explain why real objects were being gradually superseded by fake ones, artifactualization needs not reflect reality. Our own mythologies, the way we conceive of things rather than things themselves, suffice – provided the system works. It still deals with representations but ones that may have cut every imaginable bond to their objects; indeed, the latter need not even exist.

Whence the newly-acquired relevance of themes inherited from the humanities (inheritance was fundamental to remediation too), and especially philosophy, to the designing of artifacts such as computer ontologies, tagging systems or even the Semantic Web. It coincides with the advent of a new era where radically new usages are contrived out of very old topics. Heidegger was wrong to declare the end of Metaphysics. On rather, he was right, provided we understand that technology is giving a new digital flesh the old metaphysical project; a feat that is not the consequence of new discoveries but rather of meticulous design.

Conclusion.

This transition has many consequences since artifacts are subject to material and industrial constraints, making them even more complex to comprehend. Just as philosophy imbues new areas and its concepts become “real” – though *by design*, the philosopher, in this new age of ubiquitous technologies, loses much of his prerogatives. Philosophy itself, once

¹⁰ Clark, K. G. (2002), Identity Crisis, <http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/09/11/deviant.html>

¹¹ Berners-Lee., T. (2003), Message on www-tag@w3.org list. <http://lists.w3.org/Archives/Public/www-tag/2003Jul/0158.html>.

¹² Morris, W., (1894) *Makeshift*, lecture delivered at a meeting sponsored by the Ancoats Recreation Committee at New Islington Hall, Ancoats, Manchester (18th November).

artifactualized, ascends to reality and falls into oblivion at the same time for there are reasons to believe it loses itself in the process.