

(Un-) Zeit der Digitalisierung: Technikleiche „Erdung“ eines aktuellen Umbruchs in der Medienkultur, Prof. Wolfgang Ernst. Institut für Musik- und Medienwissenschaft WS20/21

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As a university student, it is part of a new depressing normal to attend online lectures and digital seminars. The university institution that once founded its own learning environment, strategies and buildings for exchanging thoughts and knowledge are now, as Wolfgang Ernst highlights in the lecture series held this semester at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, moved to platforms that are controlled and outlined by large commercial companies like YouTube, Zoom and Skype. A tendency slightly similar to what Friedrich Kittler describes in the essay “There is no Software” concerning how Microsoft created a new normal for word-processing, and the fact that the program is created as a commercial program that requires to be bought.¹ What does it mean that the university must rely on external software companies to persist in a pandemic, and after all— what does the university actually consist of? Is it possible to reduce the functioning of a university to the minimum exchange of information in digital seminars? Or is the true material of the university also its buildings, cafés, corridors, libraries, elevators and offices where student might knock on the door from time to time? And what are we actually seeing? Prof. Ernst, or a pixelated interface, an image split and put together on my computer screen by tiny squares, hiding the operation of 0 and 1 behind it. A digital projection mimicking an analogue situation, with a slight delay— a slightly confused “now”.

As a student of Art History I was intrigued by a reference made to Dan Graham's early experimentation with video technology and feedback loops. In *Time Delay Room* the spectators can observe a delayed projection of their movement in the gallery space and the transmission from the camera eye to the video projector of their movement in space disrupt a common understanding of the present moment. Another work among early video art that is conveying a similar sense of a disrupted present is the work *Now* from 1975 by Lynda Benglis. In this work, the artist tapes herself in front of a pre-recorded projection of herself in which she tries to mimic her own gestures and reactions simultaneously to the already recorded projection. This causes a strange delay, and the artist and her doppelgänger turns their head towards the camera saying “now”— a constant repetition of the word that

¹Kittler, Friedrich “There is no Software” <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14655/5522>,

underlines the ambivalent connotation of its meaning. This also becomes evident in the transmission of online lectures that are seemingly synchronized to the present moment, that are so to say in “real time”, but still entail a slight delay. Maybe this is one of the reasons why it often occurs an unbearable silence during digital seminars. It is not a silence of reflection or contemplation, but rather an insistent dead silence/rustle that yearns to be filled with noise — A silence representing dispersed and singular experiences of time. In the lecture series, Wolfgang Ernst mentions the notion of polyphony to describe the confusion of time in digital space caused by the uneven pace of transmissions. The term is used in music to describe a situation in which every tone is singular from the other. It is not possible to achieve a situation of harmony in a situation where participants in a choir are separately singing through a digital platform. Their combined voices would form a disharmony because the time it takes for a tone to be transmitted and digitized is not instant or similar for the participants all together.

A similar polyphony caused the bizarre sound in the broadcast of the German Christmas carol “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht”, that was recorded simultaneously in different radio stations in the German Rundfunk on Christmas Eve 1942, right before the fall in Stalingrad. The polyphonic situation caused slight delay in the combination of the different stations, adding a twisted element to the sound. The transmissions of signals also leave behind a noise, a rustle: a rustle inevitable in the transmission of digital signals.

This brings me to the discussion put forth in the lecture series on the relation between analogue and digital. Wolfgang Ernst traces the first occurrence of digitalization to the transmission of language into the system of the alphabet and the written word. In this process, language forms a certain digital memory since it can hold and transmit information across time and space.

This is what Platon discusses in the text *Phaedrus* in which Platon reflects on the possibility of the written word in relation to the oral, the dialogue. The written word takes on a memory of its own, capable of endless readings and re-readings. But Platon also questions our capability of memorizing. In the discussion of Platon, Wolfgang Ernst points to how Platon might have deconstructed his problem of the relation between the written and oral word through writing his reflection as dialogues. The dialogic structure of Plato’s writing positions his writing as hybrid technologies. However, today, the memorizing function of written texts faces another transformation in the digitation process of archives. The archive is not longer only a physical place to visit, but also organized as digitized information. Media archaeology must ask what is lost in the transposition/transmission of information that used to be in a physical format but now only is produced as digital. Herein lie the differentiation

between digitalization and digitization. The national library in Oslo, as Wolfgang Ernst mentions, is an example of how the library have made their physical archives digital through what is called a digitization process. Apart from that, is the question of how to organize and archive materials that never were physical, but, like the present IKEA catalogue can never be archived and then digitized but is already digital. When our everyday becomes digital, it also becomes more difficult to grasp and collect. The digitalisation of our everyday then might imply a certain disappearance of information. As might it affect our (collective) memory and history.

Returning to the question weather it is possible to exchange the university (its buildings, cafés, libraries, corridors and so on) with computer software. In a recent survey sent to my student email account from Humboldt University, I am asked in detail about my capability to deal with digital studying. It asks about my skills in online research and my ability to differentiate between serious and non-serious actors the realm of the digital. This marks a shift form the last university poll that was more concerned with financial and social consequences of the digital semester and the pandemic. Posing questions around my ability to deal with so-called software indicates that the university is forced to regard the online formats as its main platform not just temporarily, and myself as a student, must regard online tools as something I must navigate successfully in order to be a student.

As a final comment in this short text, I would like to point to the essay Giorgio Agamben wrote only two months ago called “A philosophy of Contact”. To be in contact, is something different than being in relation, and Agamben defines a concept of contact/touch by its “void of representation”. “Two bodies are said to be in contact with each other when no medium can be inserted between them, i.e. when they are unmediated”² This lack of mediation or representation through mediation is what comes to define touch for Agamben. As Agamben highlights, in the act of touching you do not only touch the other, but also yourself. Agamben arrives at the conclusion that if we lose the sense of contact we might not only loose the experience of other bodies, but also “the experience of ourselves”.³ This might be a peripheral addition to the discussion on the digital university in which software is simulating crucial university functions. However, as it is a year since I last sat my foot in the Humboldt campus, (where the spirit of Hegel might be lurking in the walls) it is relevant to ask not only what the highly mediated and calculated situation of digital seminars and digital lectures implies for the conditions of studying, but also if lack of contact actually implies a

²Agamben, Giorigo <https://illwill.com/philosophy-of-contact> (11.01.2021), 22.03.2021

³ ibid.

loss in the experience of self. In Agamben words: “we would lose, purely and simply, our flesh”.⁴

⁴ *ibid.*