Aesthetics of the Banal – "new aesthetics" in an era of diverted digital revolutions

Christian Ulrik Andersen, Søren Bro Pold

What is "new aesthetics"? James Bridle, who first introduced the term, provides a number of examples of associated cultural practises and phenomena on his tumblr-blog (Bridle, 2011-). Through the images of how pixels are used in the design of t-shirts, of 3D prints that visualizes how Microsoft Kinect sees a player, and satellite photos of agricultural fields appearing as mosaics, the examples point to the side effects of technology. Such cultural practices and phenomena are often brought about by cheap gadgets and services, and produce a new and positive sense of beauty, almost at the fringe of kitsch and banality.

Figure 1 Image of agricultural landscapes from space (from (Bridle)).

In short, a new aesthetics refer to situations where imageries and structures, that

are usually associated with the digital networked computer, are superimposed on - or leak out into - the physical world. Such scenarios are usually associated with high-tech myths of "ubiquitous" and "calm" computing, where information technologies leave the screen-based human-computer interaction to become an enhancement of physical space that appears as a silent hum in the background (Weiser, 1991) or an engaging experience (Rogers, 2006). However, the presence of a term like "new aesthetics" indicates that the paradoxical combination of the digital and the physical space in contemporary network culture appears differently than the corporate and research driven visions of smart spaces, or the use of storytelling and emotional triggers in interaction design. How are we to perceive this sense of beauty brought about by a digital gadgets and their expressive side effects that leak into our everyday-life? In other words, what is "new aesthetics" as an aesthetics?

As an "aesthetics", a new aesthetics is particular. Aesthetics is a composite term that at once refers to a *practice*, an *experience*, and to aesthetic *theory*. As a practice, new aesthetics constitute a description of computational practices that often are caused by misuse and failure, and where we see "an eruption of the digital in the physical" (Sterling, 2012), and a "grain of computation" (Jones, 2011). However, such practices do not appear as a coherent movement or art form, and it has even been discussed whether it exists or is just a (failed) hype (Cramer in Ludovico, 2013). Nor do they appear to include a reflection on their own status as interfaces or media (Berry et al., 2012). In other words, new aesthetics is not an aesthetic theory that relates critically to the implications of new aesthetic practices and experiences. Rather, new aesthetics is to be understood as an experience, "a vibe, an attitude, a feeling, *a sensibility*" (Berry et al., 2012).

In this article we want to explore new aesthetics as critique (the theoretical aspect of aesthetics). This does not imply a dismissal of the term and the phenomena of new aesthetics, but an exploration of the superficiality itself, and whether this points to deeper fractures within digital culture. In a digital culture where the interface has moved beyond the screen, and the relation to computational processes is seen in landscapes, objects and T-shirts, can an aesthetics reflect such phenomena's own status.

The article's answers to this include critical speculations on the proclaimed newness itself as a sign of crisis, and further, the reason behind the crisis. Rather than a

noisy technological revolution, we suggest that a computational revolution appears silently in culture as trivial facets of everyday production and consumption. Hence, an understanding of a crisis begins by comprehending how revolutionary visions of emancipatory technological futures are compromised: by way of anamorphic machine visions, built on networked technologies (that relate to contemporary models of business as well as warfare), a new aesthetics appear with an air of banality.

Has the emancipatory digital revolution been reduced to 3D prints, pixels on a t-shirt and other trendy and banal surface phenomena? In order to refrain from utter disillusion, we finish the article by holding on to new aesthetics as indicative of a moment in technological development. The expression of a "sense" and "feel" of technology suggests that people have moved beyond senseless execution and are already learning how to speak the language of contemporary computing. Rather than being an expression of hegemony, new aesthetics is an arbitrary character that leaves a space devoid of meaning but open for new visions.

Interface culture beyond the screen

The background for exploring new aesthetics as critique is a changing politics of the interface. "Ubicomp" and "calm computing" along with other framings of human-computer-interaction suggest a politics based on how to overcome the arbitrariness of such interactions. However, the challenge of interface critique today, is not merely to address the myth of "the invisible computer" but to address how, as expressed by Cory Doctorow, the "war on general purpose computing" is perpetrated through computers that are no longer universal computers (as imagined by Alan Turing) but gadgets and media players such as the iPhone, Kindle, and Xbox. And further, how these media players express a new kind of interface whose primary aim is not only to produce engaging experiences, but also to control production and consumption in a market (see Andersen & Pold 2014), and not least control the user her/him-self. As the Edward Snowden files have demonstrated, contemporary interfaces are also important tools for surveillance and military intelligence, and the reason why the new aesthetics is flourishing now may be a sign of a crisis.

In this crisis, the very same companies who brought it up in the first place have apparently betrayed the idea of the emancipatory computer, and the digital revolution has

turned against itself. The computer, which was originally developed as a military technology but redefined as revolutionary by Apple and others, in the wake of the hippie and zippie movements, is now back again where it began: as a military intelligence technology. As the independent computer security researcher and hacker Jacob Appelbaum argued in the German newspaper Der Spiegel, United States' National Security Agency has what resembles a mail-order catalogue of tools to tap user data from various hardware platforms (Appelbaum et al., 2013). In this way, everyday technological objects like laptops, smart phones, keyboards and USB-cables are currently being "weaponized" and turned into potential hostile objects in an everyday environment, with no chance to see through the technical and networked complexity.

In other words, we want to discuss whether it is possible to see the new aesthetics as a liminal phenomenon that marks a changing politics of the interface, and to connect it's "vibe" to a critique of the political, social and creative implications of digital networks. We also want to suggest that such a critical theory of a new aesthetics must begin by acknowledging how IT gadgets, media players and other modes of controlled consumption turns the utopias of digital revolutions into banalities in our everyday lives.

From "new media" to "new aesthetics"

Rather than remaining at the surface of banality and digital side effects, we want to discuss if a new aesthetics reveal a tendency in digital production. The notion is used by Walther Benjamin to argue for art's potential demonstration of formal relationships between aesthetics and production processes.[i] Technological revolutions in media lead to fractures in artworks and art history, making the deep tendency visible (Benjamin, 1980). Discussing whether expressions of new aesthetics demonstrate a tendency is a way of discussing new aesthetics potential ability to provide a liminal experience that marks deeper fractures below the surface, and the ambiguities in the otherwise invisible and unnoticed computational processes.

In this endeavour, a critical theory of a new aesthetics – as an otherwise sloppy description of a new cultural vibe – must seek to avoid a periodising logic that also characterises similar trends such as the "post-digital". As described by Geoff Cox, a reflection on the post-digital must invigorate Frederic Jameson's critique of post-modernity and reflection on what is displaced when conceptualising the present as "post",

or in this case "new". Jameson's claim was that the present had been colonised by "neoliberalism's effective domestification of the transformative potential of historical materialism" (Cox, 2014), and the effort for a new aesthetics must accordingly be to point to similar processes of subjugation. Hence, a starting point for a speculation on how the vibe and superficial sensibility of a new aesthetics can potentially relate to tendencies and deep fractures in the production process may begin by a critical reflection on the "new" in the aesthetics.[ii]

What is new today is definitely not the affordance of computational processes and computer interfaces. In fact, such phenomena do not seem to induce any disruption at all anymore, and even their conformity does not seem to be new. As Peter Weibel and others notice in the catalogue text of ZKMs seminal exhibition *Die Algoritmische Revolution* (The Algorithmic Revolution) in 2004, "A revolution normally lies ahead of us and is heralded with sound and fury. The algorithmic revolution lies behind us and nobody noticed it. That has made it all the more effective – there is no longer any area of social life that has not been touched by algorithms." (Weibel et al., 2004). In this sense, a new aesthetics – along with former digital aesthetics – is a priori bound to the domain of the vernacular, and any critique must begin by addressing this ordinariness behind "the new".

The nomination of a "new" aesthetics carries traces to a historical compulsion to define digital media as new – and the banal, old-fashioned-ness of defining digital media as new media. New media was a catchphrase during the 1990s and early 2000s alluding to the convergence of computational and audio-visual media in multimedia computers. The interfaces of new media were defined as combinations of technological tools and remediations of historical experimentation with immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Following this, one could ask whether new aesthetics is just the current version of what Lev Manovich in his 2001 book, *The Language of New Media,* termed "transcoding" or how the "computer's ontology, epistemology and pragmatics — influence the cultural layer of new media: its organization, its emerging genres, its contents" (Manovich, 2001)? A new aesthetics is in this view the superficial, trivial and vernacular signs of transcoding between computers and culture in a time where the computer interface has moved beyond the multimedia screens and frameworks of new media.

New aesthetics as "transcoding"

Though, as Weibel et al. point to, the algorithmic revolution always has been invisible, it has become even more so. Earlier, the eye-catching screens and other new media interfaces introduced in otherwise old media environments were fairly recognizable. However, when computational technologies and interfaces – understood as the interrelation between computational and representational processes, rather than the mere graphical user experience (Andersen and Pold, 2011) – are introduced in already digitized environments, the situation is more complex. We move beyond traditional concepts of media to include grey and evil media with their "dimly sensed links between affective configurations and the broader, unstable networks of agents and mediators of which we are a part, with their difficult-to-perceive boundaries and their correlative scope for producing troubling uncertainties..." as expressed by Matthew Fuller and Andy Goffey (Fuller and Goffey, 2012). In other words, the interfaces of contemporary transcoding processes in digital culture do no longer merely function through remediation and the re-organization of old media, but through both omnipresent screens and hidden operations between agents. As for instance in the intricacies of social media and other interfaces of controlled consumption, the hidden and the omnipresent are often combined.

As an example of this, Johannes P. Osterhoff has in his project *iPhone live* documented his everyday iPhone life by uploading a screen dump to the Web every time he presses the home button on his phone (these screen dumps are enabled by the platform itself to increase performativity when multitasking between apps). The documents include text messages, phone calls, photos, music, social networking, visited websites, location maps, and also data on app use. In other words, as a new aesthetics, its visualization of how the iPhones sees him expresses a sensibility to how his life is interwoven with hidden operations between human and non-human agents. Looking through the project, one realizes how these screens reveal his personal life, even private and intimate details and how smartphones are intimate interfaces woven closely into and reorganizing all aspects of everyday life (see also Andersen and Pold, 2014).
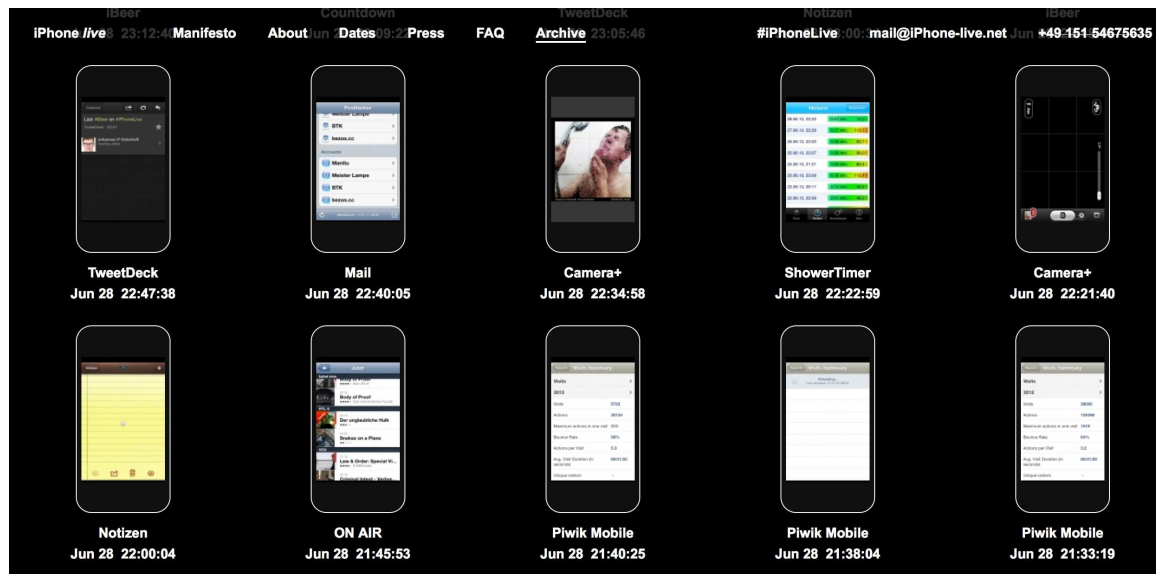
Figure 2 Johannes Osterhoff: *iPhone-live.net*

Expressed shortly, new aesthetics is the transcoding of evil and grey media that become sensible to us as banal effects of the everyday; effects that may even possess some kind of inner beauty. However, the inclination to reduce the transformatory capacities of computational processes and technologies to (evil) functionality and "beautiful" effects also calls for a reflection on the production processes, complex bureaucracies and material conditions behind such "beauty". In other words, for a new aesthetics to be meaningful it must point beyond the domain of the sensory that otherwise characterises the aesthetics (*aisthēsis*, Greek for "sense-perception") and enter the technological and structural domains; it must point to how also the technologies themselves are cultural constructs. As a critical theory, new aesthetics must be able to show traces of how computational media technologies and interfaces formulate new visions of life (work, play, creativity, politics, economics, art, etc.), and how visions of life are embedded in the digital objects at all levels (from the technical infrastructures to the human-computer-interaction).

Examples such as Osterhoff's suggests that we look in the direction of networks and hypertextual connectivity to understand contemporary processes of transcoding, and how myths of digital lives (engaging experiences, smart lives, co-production, etc.) appear in the everyday practices of gadget culture as unforeseen expressions and side effects. We

must pay attention to transcoding's networked character: the instable relations between agents and mediators we are part of in our everyday practices with computational interfaces, and how they are transcoded into the triviality of our lives – sometimes in troubling ways (as in Osterhoff's example).

Domestication of hypertextual connectivity as a means of transcoding

Dealing with the transcoding of "evil media," the new aesthetics not only points to how such processes appear as sensible and banal effects in our everyday lives, but in some instances (as a critical aesthetics) also to the process by which this happens. However, these processes are not only related to the networks within the platforms themselves but must be seen within a larger network where revolutionary visions of digital networked futures in general tend to end up in the domain of banality.

Looking back, the developments of hypertextual networks is arguably one of the most important cultural IT developments during the last 70 years, and has lead to practices of non-linear writing and reading as well as networked collaboration and sharing. Significantly, ideas of a less hierarchical and more "associative indexing" structure (already present in Vannevar Bush' *Memex* in 1945 (Bush, 2003 (1945))) are repeated with every new implementation of hypertextual networks. Dimensions of utopian thinking connected with this non-hierarchical structuring principle is present in almost every important theoretician and developer who have been part of driving the innovation of digital networks from the margins of the scientific lab, avant-garde literature and post-structuralist thinking to the current status of being a defining structure of mainstream net-media.

Examples of this are Douglas Engelbart's groundbreaking demonstration of *NLS* in 1968, later dubbed "The Mother of All Demos," and Ted Nelson's seminal self-published book *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* (1974), which spread quickly among the West Coast computer visionaries. Later George P. Landow, in his influential book from 1992, described a "convergence" of post-structuralist critical theory and technology, which laid important parts of the theoretical and cultural ground for the implementation of the World Wide Web in the mid 1990s. As he stated unambiguously "hypertext does not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice." (Landow, 1992) Ten years later, the web got revitalized with the discourse and development around the Web 2.0 from 2005 and

onwards (O'Reilly, 2005), again pointing to hypertext's inherent non-authoritarian tendency that seemed to fit equally well with 1960's counterculture values and 2000s neo-liberalism.

In the promotion of hypertext, and later also Web 2.0 and tablet computing, critical theory and technology production and marketing seemingly walk hand in hand. In a historical analysis of the relations between critical theory and technology and between "feral" and "tame" hypertexts written around the emergence of Web2.0, Jill Walker also points to this convergence, and to how it conflates important differences:

> "What I would like to emphasise here is that the concept of intertextuality and much other late twentieth century critical theory expresses an idea of texts as unruly and fundamentally beyond discipline. Much hypertext research, on the other hand, attempts to find ways to discipline and tame our thoughts, at the same time as its admits that our mind works associatively and that there are multiple ways of viewing connections in texts." (Walker, 2005)

Despite their affinities, there is in fact a contradiction between post-structuralist critical theory and hypertext technology research. The revolutionary visions of hypertext become instrumentalized, and implemented in concrete, limiting ways by developers and capitalists who use the revolutionary spirit as marketing but do not necessarily share the same visions of political emancipation. The results are limited versions of contained dreams that serve a business model. The feral hypertexts that Walker envisioned at the moment of writing (where new participatory and collaborative practices were emerging on the web), have now become tamed by services such as Facebook and Twitter and tablet computing's centralized platforms. As Osterhoff demonstrates, the tablet computer leads to collaborative writing and reading, but is to a large extend contained, owned and controlled by corporate platforms that build a business on the users' free production and monitoring their consumption and behaviour. After "the death of the author'" we see the rise of new powerful forms of publishing.

The subjugation of critique by market forces in relation to networked media technologies is perhaps not surprising. Already in 1991 Stuart Moulthrop argued, that the hypertext revolution was likely to be diverted. Although hypertext affords new revolutionary visions of non-hierarchical production modes, the responsibility for changes of this magnitude come from a diverse elite of corporate software developers,

literary theorists, and legislators, who remain faithful to the institutions of intellectual property in cultural production (software providers, content producers, publishers, universities, etc.,). In other words, Moulthrop suggests that "it seems equally possible that engagement with interactive media will follow the path of reaction, not revolution." (Moulthroup, 2003 (1991)) Through copyrights, patents, and the like, the implementation of a system of hypertextual connectivity may in the end prove to be reactionary.

Does new aesthetics – with its hip "pixelized" perspective on our reality – offer us any position of critique? No, and yes. In the remainder of the article we want to first argue that any aesthetics in our current crisis is a priori subject to domestication and banality, and then point to potential fractures within this banality.

New aesthetics as vernacular banality

Though central, and with big repercussions across the field of text production, production principles for hypertextual connectivity extends to the sharing, distributing and making of all cultural production. The sharing and remix revolution that threatened the music industry and created a feral music scene has to a large extend been tamed by platforms and corporations such as YouTube, Apple, iTunes and Spotify in ways similar to what happened to feral hypertext. Users did get new unprecedented and easy access to cultural consumption – and vice versa cultural producers did get easy access to new business models. However, the artistic and cultural revolution, announced by remix artists such as DJ Dangermouse on his *Grey Album* got co-opted and main-streamed.[iii]

In big headlines, the co-optation of network utopias by entrepreneurs in the digital maket is what links Napster and Pirate Bay with iTunes and Spotify; the personal blogging revolution, folksonomies and Wikipedia with the sanitised attention economy of Facebook and Twitter; amateur creativity on photo-sharing platforms with selfie-production in Instagram. Further and similar histories could be told about the co-optation of free software (e.g. from Linux to Android) and of hacking (from hacktivism to Fab Lab innovation). In general, with instrumentalization and co-optation the promised revolutions have turn into surface phenomena.

The kind of vernacular banality appearing with a new aesthetics and associated with processes of co-optation and domestication has also been described by Eric Snodgrass:

With so-called invasive technification looking more and more like a ubiquitous banal given (whose terms of reference were apparently signed off on long ago), little wonder then the appeal of an apotropaic mask of the banal that can attempt to at least partly assuage and apply some taming filters, quotation marks or hashtags upon such potentially alienating qualities, which at times may for its users feel like undergirding, emanating forces of the "always-on" technologies of today. The iconic black mirrors of moment: the drone, the anamorphic gaze of machine vision, Google Glass, the soon to be ubiquitous 3D printed "blobject," internet-aware soldiers and their streams of Instagram selfies and endlessly looping Vines – an oscillating and/or, this intimate/mundane portraiture of the war machine. Likewise, it is always worth recalling the way in which institutions of power, digitally born and otherwise, often adopt a certain strategically cosmeticised veneer of the banal, with their cheery doodles and seemingly plain vanilla shopfront windows, the wolf in sheep's clothing tactic. (Snodgrass, 2014)

Following Snodgrass' understanding of vernacular banality, new aesthetics is an "intimate/mundane portraiture of the war machine," where the military origins of computational technologies re-appear at the surface as Web 2.0 commercialisation, industrialized judgements of taste with an easy drop-down aesthetics (meme-factories, Instagram filters, etc.), and other stranded techno-utopias.

If this a description of the techno-cultural backdrop of new aesthetics, then new aesthetics is not a utopian, heroic, activist critical art form, but a vernacular aesthetics, a pop culture that should be judged more by its descriptive powers than by its critical insight. It has an almost philistine mundaneness, including a sense of impotence towards making any real change, and renounces anything but the description of life within powerful systems that have strangled their own ideas and values.

Google, the global giants within hypertext business, has turned the counter-culture visions of Ted Nelson into the motto: "Don't be evil". This is power and banality in its most intricate combination, or, in Snodgrass' words "a certain strategically cosmeticised veneer of the banal." Combined with the war on terror, it describes the way politics are instrumentalized to the point of banality, leaving no possible outside, and no space for opposition.

Snodgrass' description resonates with Matthew Fuller and Andy Goffey's portrayal of Google:

The maxim "don't be evil" and its rather more bellicose sibling, the ultimatum to be with us or to be against us, both portend, with cartoon simplicity, the coming of a world in which every byte of information and every tap on a screen, every waking thought and action, are expunged of the deviant and devious propensities of contrary forms of vital energy. Propensities to think and to act in ways that do not conform to social commands are neutralized and pacified by the shaping of behavior through media forms that aspire to friction-free transparency. Any activity that fails the pragmatic test of globalized informatics is thereby proscribed, leaving itself open to condemnation as malicious, viral, terroristic, or more simply to disqualification through cheery indifference." (Fuller and Goffey, 2012)

Google is far more than a hypertext business; its domesticated and co-opted visions of digital futures are carriers of a more general practical reason (positive thinking, compassion, etc.), and organize productivity on moral terms. Rejecting the positive spirit and escaping the banal expressions of hypertext's veneer does not seem to be optional.
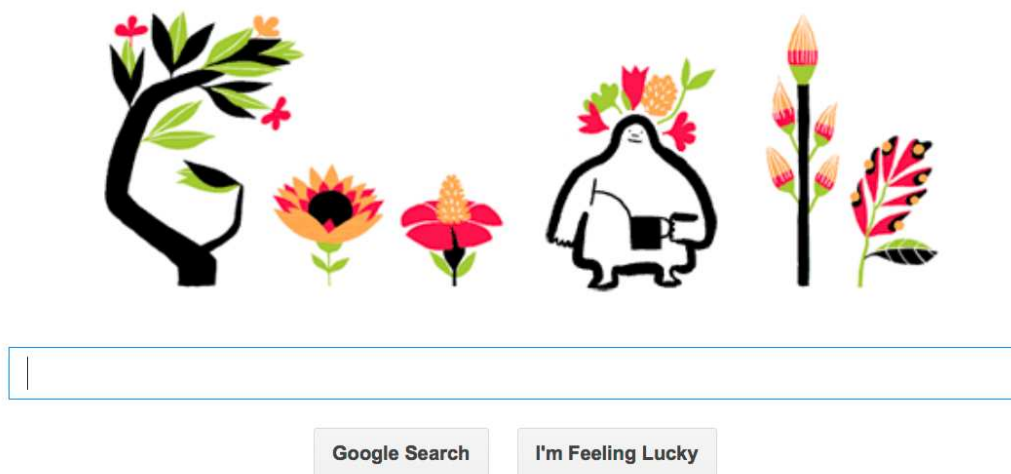

Figure 3 Google logo for Spring equinox, 20 March, 2014

The semantics of banalization

Discussing a potential critical aspect of a new aesthetics, one must ask how to get to the hidden fractures within aesthetics. A revelation of such tendencies and means of production in the domain of digital banalities must begin by the ruptures in the process of banalization.
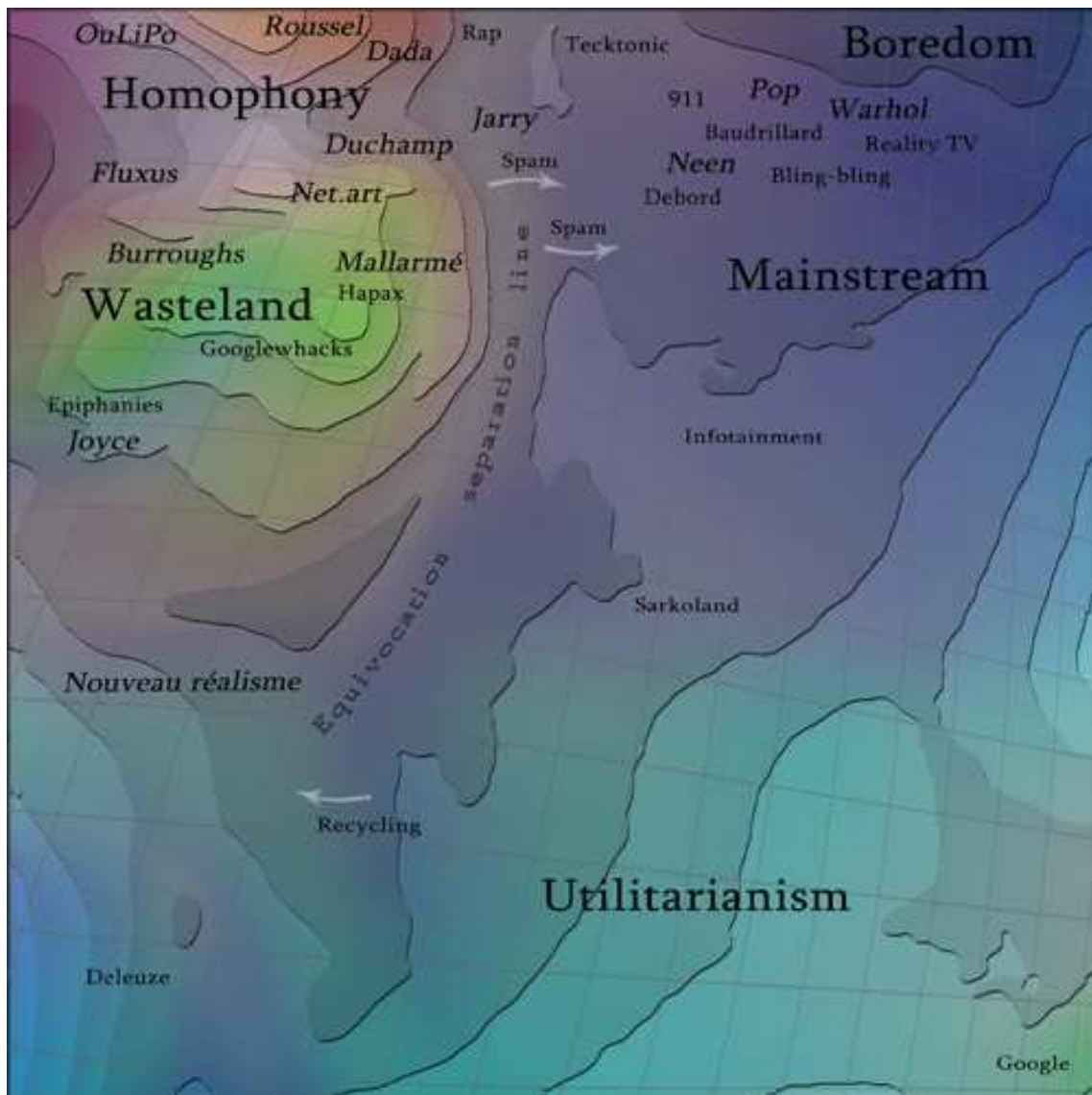
Figure 4 Christophe Bruno: *Dadameter map*

In his project *Dadameter* (2002-2008), the net-artist Christophe Bruno has mapped how language can be (and increasingly is) conceived and controlled by Google. The *Dadameter* is an attempt to make a "global index of the decay of the aura of language," and compares the proximity of words along two scales: homophonic resemblance and sematic relatedness/equivocation (Bruno, 2002-08).[iv] The correlation is represented in dada-maps that demonstrate how homophony and ambiguity appear in the "Wasteland" of language, whereas other words, in the "Mainstream", are strongly connected in the network, but also with a higher degree of boredom (banality). Words with no ambiguity and an univocal meaning (low equivocation) will end in

"Utilitarianism". The map depicts the decay of the imaginary (on the north-south axis) and the decay of the symbolic (on the west-east axis), a wearing out of language towards a crisis where everything succumbs to boredom and utilitarianism.

In this way, the map shows a potential crisis within language, a utilitarian instrumentalization carried out through search engine optimization, ad-words, and other means. Of course Google is a strong force, but not the only one. Twitter enforces effective statements of maximum 140 characters, Facebook enforces language that obtains 'likes' and comments, etc. Broadly speaking, the incentive from social media in general enforces particular ways of narrating and staging one's life out of the grey and ordinary, to be social, networking and significantly sign producing.[v]

New aesthetics in the phase of disillusion

Bruno also reflects on how his own net-art end up in utilitarianism, adopted by marketers (Bruno, 2011). This was the case with his work *Fascinum* from 2001. *Fascinum* is a net-art work that shows the ten most viewed images on different national Yahoo! portals, in real time. In 2004, Benetton produced a similar work, which was eventually sold to Yahoo! in 2004 (when web 1.0 became web 2.0). In 2007, during the French presidential campaign, web 2.0 became part of the political scene, and now Ségolène Royal's website showed something very similar to *Fascinum* (to Bruno, an example of 'clear plagiarism').

To understand the cultural development that media passes through, the trajectory of *Fascinum* may be compared to the German media theoretician Hartmut Winkler's three-phase model. Winkler's model raises questions of where we are currently situated in the development of interface culture, and the potential role of a critical new aesthetics when all critique is a priori domesticated by well–intended moral reasoning and production systems.

From a linguistic perspective, the first phase is characterized by seeing the new medium as a post-symbolic, concrete, iconic system of communication, presenting a solution to the traditional representational problems of media regarding the arbitrary character of their signs. Winkler sees a "deeply rooted repulsion against arbitrariness" as a motor for the media development since the emergence of technical visual media in the 1800s – "a long line of attempts to find a technical solution to the problem of the arbitrariness" (Winkler, 1997) . In the first phase of a medium's development, the new

medium is seen as an answer to the problems of earlier media, and this phase is highly effective in spreading the new medium and heavily influences the ways it is perceived by users and producers. A good example of this is of course how hypertext is seen as an answer to the problems of the book, providing a smarter, more intuitive and less hierarchical and linear structure. Furthermore, the utopias of the first phase cover over the costs related to implementing the new medium, since we are not just buying a simple utility but something more, a new way of living, working, thinking, dreaming.

In the second phase, the medium becomes stable, naturalised, and hegemonic. In this phase the medium is studied in order to learn how to understand, read and write it.

The third phase is a phase of disillusion and crisis, where the arbitrary character of the medium's signs is rediscovered, consequently fuelling the next media revolution.

Where are we currently in relation to this phase model? In many ways, the presence of a new aesthetics point to a phase of hegemony where people are condemned to execute without any visions of alternative futures; a vernacular aesthetics and a pop culture that does not formulate activist or critical futures, let alone utopian or heroic futures. Where is the spark for the next revolution?

To some extend "big data" is already being presented as a promising future that bypasses the arbitrary character of signs through collecting traces and behaviour instead of signs. To finish this article with less pessimism towards a future of interface culture: perhaps the presence of a new aesthetics, is also indicative of a phase of disillusion where people have already learned to speak the language of traces and behaviour, and reintroduced the language character and its arbitrary dimensions? Perhaps, new aesthetics is also a sign of how the language, rhetorics, style and iconography of the interface culture re-enter The Wasteland, as depicted by Bruno.
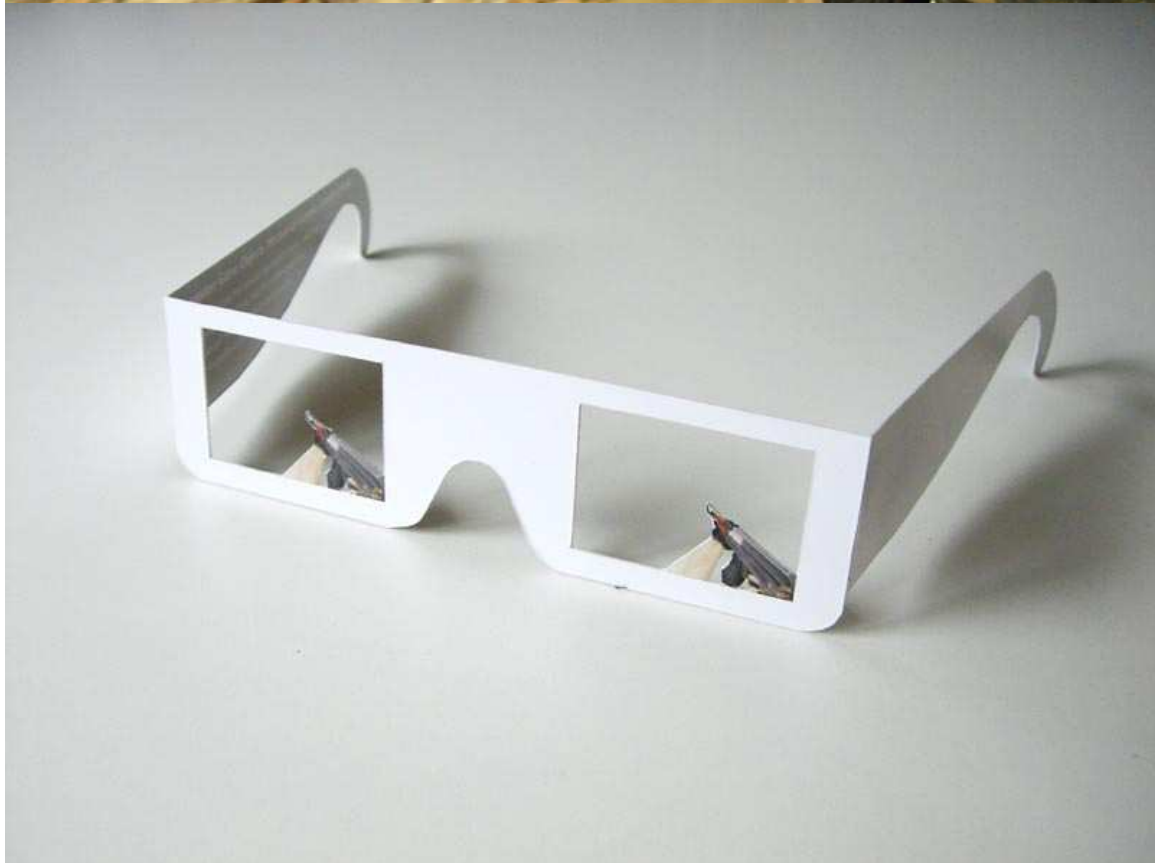
Post scriptum - The cardboard-based banality of ubicomp interfaces

What does the wasteland of contemporary interface culture and stranded techno-utopias look like? An example of an artist that points to the material dimensions and by-products of ubicomp and interfaces in the physical world is Aram Bartholl. Often through workshops and collaborations, where he together with workshop participants develop playful mock-ups and lo-tech, card-board-based versions of ubicomp interface infrastructure and iconography and implemented them in urban spaces. Some of Bartholl's earliest work concerned the very materiality of interfaces, for example light pixels in screens recreated through tea candles and modified beer cans flickering in a 5x5 'screen' grid (*Random Screens* (2005-08). He then developed a series of projects concerning the iconography and interfaces of social media and games, for example the distributed, textual synchronic mode of communication in the mobile performance installation *Chat* (2008) and *WoW* (2006-09) which mocks the way avatars carry signs with their name in online games. This lead to an interest for interfaced ways-of-seeing, for example a series of cardboard glasses demonstrating a first person shooter perspective including the weapon (*First Person Shooter* (2006)) or obstructing 3D viewing by blocking one eye (*Fuck 3D glasses* (2009)). Lately he has worked with Google's iconography and infrastructure for example with big Google-map signs in physical reality (e.g. *Map* 2006-12), with Google Streetview performances like the creation of a fake Google Street View car (2010) and a series of self portraits in Google Streetview (*15 seconds of fame* (2010)). Finally he has created a series of physical and localized networks including the global network of wall-mounted USB-drives in *Dead Drops* (2010-12), the curating of net-art exhibitions in internet cafes (Speed Show, 2010) and the recent *OFFLINE ART* (2013) exhibition format, where net-art is distributed from unique wifi routers.[vi]

The tendency of showing and performing the hidden traces of the digital interfaces in physical space and as lo-tech mock-ups is consistent through all these projects. This can be seen as a tendency - also in the Benjaminian sense of "Tendenz" - of showing the production process behind the apparent seamlessness of ubicomp, especially

when taken into account the way that Bartholl stages this through open workshops enabling participants to develop their own experiences and expressions with the language and iconography. Bartholl's work has been mentioned in connection to new aesthetics (Berry et al., 2012), though it predates the concept, and both in its iconography and through the mock-up character developed as quick sketches and puns, it definitely relates to the banal character of new aesthetics. In the tradition of Olia Lialina, Alexei Shulgin, Cory Arcangel, and others, Aram Bartholl works with popular surface phenomena and vernacular interface iconographies demonstrating how the utopias of technology look like and behave when they become integrated in ordinary settings and everyday materials. Through cut-and-paste mock-up workshops and performances, he demonstrates the banality of ubicomp hi-tech, the absurdity of how social media and MMORPG simplify perception, interaction, and social behaviour, and the 'evil' banality of how Google intrudes on our everyday environments. Especially in the later works on Google and the off-line networks there is a recognition of the current post-Snowden crisis, where the internet and IT has become synonyms with surveillance and control, and where earlier more utopian, naïve and innocent understandings of the internet are literally destroyed, such as in the *Dropping the Internet* (2014) performance, where Bartholl drops a flashy Internet sign from an 1990s internet cafe.

Figure 6 Aram Bartholl: *Dropping the Internet*

This Wasteland is a landscape where the commanding proscription of Google's motto, "don't be evil", and its conflation of moral and reason, is destabilized in a

cardboard vernacular banality. The utilitarian aesthetics of glasses, maps, and interface iconographies are reinstalled as humorous and strangely constrained mock-ups into the physical, urban space - the ubicomp interfaces are rendered producible, their workings becomes visible, and we get a glimpse of their fractures. Bartholl's work seems deliberately light-weight pointing towards the banality through both its form and its iconography. Looking closely one realizes that the hi-tech iconography is only cardboard, candlelight and people acting according to strange behavioural scripts: Pointing to how the big utopias become banal and mundane, including how they control sharing, communication and perception.

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[i] Art is here extended from Benjamin's understanding of literature, as he discusses in "The Author as Producer"; POLD, S. in print. The (Cultural) Interface Designer as Producer : Materialist dialectics as design thinking *In:* BARDZELL, J., BARDZELL, S. & BLYTHE, M. (eds.) *Critical Theory and Interaction Design*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT-Press.

[ii] See also the thematic issue on post-digital research from *A Peer Reviewed Journal About* (edited by Christian Ulrik Andersen, Geoff Cox & Georgios Papadopoulos), vol. 3, 1., 2014, http://www.aprja.net/?page_id=1291

[iii] DJ Dangermouse became famous with his mash-up album of The Beatles' *White Album* and Jay Z's *Black Album*, aptly titled *The Grey Album* (2004). Though the album got banned by EMI, he quickly went on to get a major contract and became a mainstream pop star, even working with EMI. Furthermore, after banning DJ Dangermouse' remixed Beatles album, EMI went on to release their own remixed Beatles album called *Love* (2006).

[iv] See http://www.iterature.com/dadameter/dadamap.php for a more elaborate explanation. The project includes real functioning scripts showing relations between homophony and semantic relatedness (measured as Google similarity), however it is also an art project with essayistic and fictional dimensions.

[v] Dave Eggers' recent novel *The Circle* depicts how a young, naïve woman hired at a leading social media company is required to give up her privacy and be increasingly visible within the Circle social media network and consequently withdraw from life outside of it. Also Eggers novel through the rather naive protagonist portrays the banality of evil today – it is not the totalitarian Big Brother of George Orwell's *1984*, which rules out privacy, but teenagers wanting to be liked (EGGERS, D. 2013. *The circle : a novel*, London, Hamish Hamilton.).

[vi] See http://www.datenform.de/index-all.html#all for titles, images and links to further descriptions of the art works.