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[...]

### ***Winkler's Bafflements***

It is a supreme irony that the most original, historicized, and dispassionate analysis of the new media technologies to emerge from the German discourse should once again come out of Frankfurt — albeit this time not from sociology but from the relatively new film department. Modestly subtitled *Towards a Media Theory of Computers*, Hartmut Winkler's 1997 book *Docuverse*<sup>50</sup> starts by taking several epistemological steps behind premises normally accepted as given by the German media debate. Winkler couches his sweeping critique of Bolz's and, to a lesser extent, Kittler's positions by professing to be "baffled" by what he sees as a central paradox of the debate on the new media: first, that

a public which, for the past 100 years, seemed to be hooked on pictorial media, on visuality, sensory experience and immediate 'uses and gratifications,' is now about to drop the entire paradigm to turn to a medium which — even though the current multi-media-hype may strategically cover up this fact — is absolutely not sensuous and absolutely not visual and offers very little immediate satisfaction.<sup>51</sup>

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49. In the same vein as Bolz, Peter Weibel conjures up a world of artificial environments in which the physical materiality of the human body is the ticket for admission into the new cyberspace. The new media enable humanity to conquer time and space, to be anywhere, at any time, simultaneous, ubiquitous. The Faustian pact, however, stipulates that only the senses may travel, the body must stay behind. The telephone thus becomes a disembodied voice, the video camera a disembodied eye; and in the world of virtual reality, a disembodied body can travel freely, anywhere in the world. Yet, according to Weibel, this pact is not so much dreaded as desired: ". . . telematic civilization is humanity's greatest effort so far at defeating death through the partial suspension of distance and duration. . . The 'telos' of telecivilization is the suspension of death's domain, as we experience it through the limitations of our bodies, of nature, of time, of space. The actual goal of the disappearance of distance is the disappearance of the body. The goal of the disappearance of the body is actually the disappearance of death." Here, as in Bolz's theories, the disappearance of the human subject is the precondition for the new media practice. Peter Weibel, "Vom Verschwinden der Ferne," *Vom Verschwinden der Ferne. Telekommunikation und Kunst*, eds. Peter Weibel and Edith Decker (Cologne: DuMont, 1990) 37.

50. Hartmut Winkler, *Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer* (Regensburg: Boer, 1997). Winkler adopts the term "Docuverse" from Theodor H. Nelson, *Literary Machines* (Sausalito: Mindful, 1987) 4. Cited in Winkler, *Docuverse* 10.

51. Winkler, *Docuverse* 10.

His second bafflement is that this paradox had not been noticed by any of the other contributors to the media debate. Neither Bolz's McLuhanesque euphoria at the twilight of the "Gutenberg Galaxy" nor Kittler's mourning over the suspension of print culture in the materiality of autopoietic systems account for the fact that the computer, at least in the manifestations we are dealing with for the time being, is a *sequential* medium (just like language) and, what is more, a language-based and language-driven medium, whether that language is code or verbal language. The gap between the enormous social and political expectations projected onto the web and its actual use value as a new communication medium provides Winkler with his first hypothesis, i.e., that the internet is a "wish machine."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, once that term is introduced, romantic projections from various euphoric treatises on the internet abound: the boundless plenitude of unlimited memory storage, instantaneous access, uncensored and nonhierarchical communication, and universal linkage stands revealed as the blue flower of the information society; Flusser's and Bolz's cyberpunk phantasies of shedding the limitations of the human body in the postmaterial, cosmic synesthesia of virtual reality appear as nothing more than the reversed side of a threadbare old cloak: the familiar German fascination with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And at this point Winkler takes a Blochian step beyond simply deconstructing these wishful phantasies as ideological delusions to ask what the underlying *lack* is.

Winkler then unfolds his sweeping master narrative of a cyclical media history, in which *all* technical media, starting with photography and film, figure as successive mechanical implantations designed to redress always the same dissatisfaction: the balkanization of the experiential reality in the wake of the ever-increasing division of labor, or, in less marxist terms, societal differentiation. Anticipating accusations that he is simply reintroducing reductive models, Winkler hastens to add that his concern is not the alienation between workers and their product, but the strain exerted on the collective memory by the centrifugal pull of divergent life worlds. Drawing on linguistics, anthropology, and cognitive science, Winkler develops a dichotomous model of language in which "language\_1" stands for articulated texts, materialized in linear sequences, and "language\_2" represents the "systemic part" of language, a non-linear, virtual structure, an n-dimensional network extant only as a

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52. Winkler, *Docuverse* 11.

repository in the collective memories of all language users.<sup>53</sup> In traditional (small) social groups, reality and identity appear as given, shored up by multiple redundancies created by geographic proximity, lack of differentiation, and rigorously centralized religious practices and concomitant hierarchic discourses. Differentiation shatters every aspect of this practice: linguistically, through increasingly specialized sub-systems, epistemologically, through the centrifugal forces of secularization and disparate experiential spheres, mentally through the perceived loss of identity and reality. It is this sense of a growing distance to the unifying sphere of the collective repository Winkler calls “language\_2” that is at the bottom of the “Sprachkrise” of the late nineteenth century. With the quantum leaps in differentiation brought about by the rapid industrialization of the mid-nineteenth century, writers like Hugo von Hofmannsthal sensed a growing alienation which they attributed to “conventional” language, but which should, Winkler argues, more properly be located at the collective memory structure at the center, a center which no longer holds.

In response to this sense of loss, media (photography, film, television) were entrusted with the task of reunifying the center with the fringes.<sup>54</sup> (Winkler is smart enough to sidestep the determinist temptation of suggesting that the media were invented for that purpose!) In the seemingly unambiguous concreteness of the photographic image (in reality the result of precisely the opposite, that is, the multivalence of the iconic sign), writers and artists believed to have found the rosetta stone of a universal signifying practice. This is the reason, Winkler argues, why the visual media tend to stick to basic human experience such as love and hate, success and failure, beauty or death: not because verbal language is ‘inherently more complex,’ but because these basic experiences hark back to the multiple redundancies of the small-group experience, we meet in these places to pretend once more that we share one world in common.<sup>55</sup> But this is not just an individual palliative. The concept of the bourgeois public sphere is unthinkable without the centripetal power of media to offset the centrifugal force of internal differentiation.

However, as each new ‘self-inscription of material reality’ eventually

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53. Winkler, *Docuverse* 28ff.

54. Although Winkler does not seem to be aware of this, the centripetal function of *all* media as outlined in this section (204ff.) corroborates what John Fiske and John Hartley had identified as the “clawing back” function of (more specifically) television. See Fiske and Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978) 87ff.

55. Winkler, *Docuverse* 208.

turns out to be subject to the same kind of ‘conventionalization’ as the original language, or, in other words, as each new medium develops its own signifying practice, once it is used in communicative discourse, pictures cease to be “worth a thousand words” but become ‘stale,’ ‘worn,’ ‘meaningless’ — just like the language they were supposed to replace.

This is the historical moment at which the computer enters the stage, and, with it, the internet. The promise (*not*, as Winkler shows later, the reality) of the computer is nothing less than the reconciliation of “language\_1” with “language\_2,” of bridging the painful gap between individual memory and collective memory, discrete and communal signifying practices. The utopian vision is the *externalization of language*, a project with closer affinities to the French encyclopedists or the library of Alexandria than to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The radical re-reading contained in this concept is that the internet, as a medium, is not so much a *beyond*, a transgression, but a kind of Hegelian loop, a *return* to the ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’ — albeit on a different epistemological dimension. The (implicit) hope is that collective memory, through the unlimited accumulated storage capacity of the World Wide Web can be stored externally, instead of being dispersed throughout humanity and thus largely inaccessible to a given individual or even group of individuals. Once all of “language\_2” becomes externalized, differentiation loses its “horror” (at least on the experiential level), because the “docuverse” will provide a universally accessible collective memory that never “forgets,” suppresses, or displaces anything stored in its memory banks.

It is important to keep in mind that Winkler describes not the reality of the internet, as he sees it, but a phantasy produced by a desire or “lack” [*Wunschkonstellation*]. Not only does he remind the reader repeatedly of this, he is also quick to point out the delusional character of this projection: the World Wide Web *does* indeed “forget” (data *is* deleted, new applications eventually have no downward compatibility beyond a few generations) and “suppress” (he proposes a research project on the selection criteria of search engines), and the practice of documenting “hits” on certain links even suggests a process akin to the process of “condensation” by which language piles significations one on top of the other to create relatively stable signifying conventions.

The fascinating paradox behind these latter observations is that, even as Winkler presents them in an attempt to deconstruct the myth of the internet as *Gesamtkunstwerk* or as the final death knell for the Gutenberg

Galaxy, they nevertheless suggest that the concept of the internet as an *exteriorized collective memory* may be utopian only to the extent that it is not the ultimate medium or the end of anything (just as 1990 was not the “End of History” nor 1968 the “End of Literature”). However, at least as a useful metaphor that allows us to perceive its uses and potential abuses more clearly, the concept appears far more convincing than either Kittler’s ruminations about world domination by the “integrated circuits of Silicon Valley” or Bolz’s cynical evocation of a dehumanized virtual universe. Despite its sweeping vision, Winkler’s argument is also far more down to earth than either of its predecessors’.

Paradoxically, the strongest link in Winkler’s argumentative chain may also be its weakest. The observation that informs his first and most basic bafflement, that is that the medium to compete with (and perhaps replace) television culture is *au fond* sequential, non-sensuous, the apotheosis of the Gutenberg Galaxy, rather than its liquidator drives the meta-reflection that results in Winkler’s elegant reinterpretation of media history and the place of the computer in it.<sup>56</sup> However, Winkler’s definition of language appears to oscillate between a narrow commonplace definition of the linguistic system that is articulated in writing and in various alphabets and a far more overarching concept of a societal code that would include the former as a subsystem. Yet in an inductive argument harking back to Derrida and Lacan, Winkler feels compelled to nail down the discrete, isolationist nature of computer-based communication once and for all. From here, it is only one step further to proclaim the ‘masculine’ inscription of the computer by drawing an Klaus Theweleit’s observations regarding male fears of transgression, context, flow.<sup>57</sup> In constructing a gendered, medium-specific theory of the computer Winkler not only risks simply being overtaken by empirical reality, he also comes close to the technological determinism he so eloquently critiques in the positions of Bolz and Kittler (and which he himself otherwise avoids).

56. One may quibble with the epic grandeur of Winkler’s ‘linguistic turn’ or even the fact that this is yet another German monocausal explanation. He never considers alternatives, even though some of his own observations suggest that, for instance, quasi-religious motivations may play a role in the internet craze, or when, in dismissing Bolz’s synesthetic euphoria by repeatedly pointing to the non-sensuous experience of engaging the web, he overlooks simple experiential facts such as the haptic qualities of moving and “clicking” the mouse or the sense of empowerment derived from actively manipulating a medium instead of being simply a passive “addressee.”

57. Winkler, *Docuverse* 321f.

The key to this puzzling phenomenon lies in the Heideggerian essentialism that leads Winkler to conflate the computer and the internet. Just as language, as Winkler points out himself, is by no means as 'digital,' 'linear,' and 'sequential,' as Bolz *et al.* suggest, so the World Wide Web, I would suggest, is qualitatively more than merely another computing application. If we stop to consider what people actually *do* with the two media, then the computer may (or may not) be digital, discrete, isolationist — the underlying technology certainly is. But the internet, if measured in terms of the *social practices* it has created so far, is certainly *linked, contiguous, and intertextual*.<sup>58</sup>

While Winkler may well be correct in his skepticism towards the utopian dreams projected onto the Web, this does not mean that what is emerging in the millions of links and cross-connections made possible by the net is not a new kind of medium, a medium that shares certain characteristics with the material carrier that drives and stores it, but that transcends this base just as film transcends its material base, photography. It is at this point, I believe, that Winkler is hamstrung by his expertise as a programmer that otherwise serves him so well. His off-hand, and somewhat arrogant, dismissal of *all* the activities engaged in by users of applications (as opposed to the initiates who write the code) as "paint-by-numbers stuff"<sup>59</sup> ironically underestimates both groups: the users of applications who are denied any creativity *and* the programmers whose templates, he seems to be implying, are so limited that nothing creative can be accomplished through them. On the other hand, if we treat the computer and the web as two *different* phenomena, related, but not coextensive, we might find a handle that enables us to retain the productive bafflement that produced Winkler's fascinating historical meta-narrative, without resorting to gendered determinism: the sober insistence on the computer's (and, as he sees it, the Web's) affinities to linguistic code, to sequence, discreteness, and isolation, enable Winkler to come up with a convincing explanation for both the utopian and dystopian projections onto the net; yet the mechanistic guise of the no-nonsense programmer may have prevented Winkler from recognizing the new communicative *practice* superimposed on the internet by its international community of users. This practice may or may not prefer

58. Perhaps one needs to live and teach in a geographically isolated area, as I do (Middlebury, Vermont), to appreciate the structural revolution brought about by the internet (and satellite television).

59. Winkler, *Docuverse* 377.

linearity and the Gutenberg Galaxy to visuals, synesthetic effects, and cyberspace, or the two may coexist (the most likely scenario, in my opinion). Winkler's insistence on discreteness and isolation, that is, a "masculine inscription" of the Web as the epistemological corollary of the underlying technology is already being contradicted by the new communicative practice. Yet Winkler's really pathbreaking accomplishment, in my view, lies in the construction of a plausible historical scenario for the evolution of the internet as a new communicative practice, a scenario that provides an overarching narrative at equal distance from Kittler's belletristic larmoyance and Bolz's trendy leaps of faith.

Just as Zielinski had done for television, Winkler's historical sweep situates the computer within the structural and epistemological trajectory of media history without suggesting that the Word Wide Web is the *telos* of this narrative — a trajectory which is simultaneously subjected to a radical and highly original re-reading. This makes Winkler's book, in my opinion, the most productive contribution to media studies to come out of Germany in many years.

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