

REAL, DIGITAL AND (NEO)MATERIAL:

Thinking Digital Dualism through Media Archaeology

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IN 1984, IN HIS ICONIC cyberpunk epic *Neuromancer*, William Gibson coined the term ‘cyberspace’: “a consensual hallucination experienced daily ... Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding” (Gibson, 1984, p. 69). Although even Gibson later dismissed the term as a mere buzzword that might be evocative, but ultimately remains meaningless, cyberspace has entered not only into everyday vocabulary, but also into academic jargon. In the nineties, the early days of cyberculture studies, it would have been quite difficult to find a piece of research on the topic of computer-human interaction

that did not in some way contain a reference to cyberspace. In a 1994 article, Michael Benedikt declared that cyberspace does not exist. And yet, cyberspace, or rather the possibility of its existence, is at the core of some of the most exciting debates within the field of cyberculture nowadays: digital dualism.



To put it simply, digital dualism assumes the existence of an ontological separation between a material reality and an immaterial ‘world’ sustained by the network of the world’s computers. The idea of the Internet being a kind of spectral second reality was common

enough in the early days of cyberspace studies, and it still has not been completely abandoned. In her most recent book, *Alone Together* (2011), Sherry Turkle maintains that the Internet is forcing people to replace 'real conversations' with shallow connectivity, and to privilege a 'virtual self' in the detriment of a natural, pretechnological subjectivity.



...Is it still worth speaking about the offline and the online as two different things?



That the Internet, as a medium of communication should evoke the presence of an incorporeal alternate universe is nothing out of the ordinary. Earlier technical media, such as the telegraph or the radio did the same: they effectively created a place in-between that could overcome time and space, which transformed human contact and let itself be populated by 'ghosts' (Peters, 1999, p. 138-139).

Seeing the medium as a kind of parallel universe is simply part of the history of communication (Ibid., p. 141), but this vision is now being challenged from multiple places. Digital dualism (which we might as well call the faith in cyberspace) has found some of its greatest deterrents among the writers of Cyborgology, a scholarly blog that has recently ignited an entire brouLOL (the online version of a brouhaha, obviously) on whether it is still worth speaking about the offline and the online as two different things. Over the past few years, the Cyborgology collective has made it their goal to establish a solid theory of digital dualism – not only because an alternative framework is sorely needed within cyberculture studies, but so as to highlight the ways in which it falls short of describing how people experience and conceptualize the digital medium.

The young authors who regularly write for the blog have approached the question of digital dualism from points of view as varied as ontology, ethics, aesthetics and even affect theory. Their main argument is deceptively

smooth: the online medium is not in any way similar to a virtual reality separated from the physical world. But the main problem with the theory of digital dualism is not that any self-respecting scholar might believe that the Internet is akin to a science-fictional alternate universe. Rather, the distinction comes from “the everyday ontology of regular folks” (Vial, 2013). And in some ways, the everyday ontology is not devoid of an empirical basis: the digital medium functions according to its specific set of rules: it creates new languages, codes of conduct, potentialities for identity construction which do not exist in ‘physical reality’.

On the other hand, the person sitting in front of a computer is an embodied subject produced in conjunction with their cultural, social, political, and material milieu. In short, it is becoming rather difficult to either completely accept the online/offline distinction, or to completely reject it. So is there any philosophical or practical use in even discussing digital dualism at all? I am not suggesting that we should lock the concept of digital dualism away in a box, together with its critique. However, the anti-

digital dualist argument as articulated on the Cyborgology blog is not yet able to account for why people experience a difference between the digital and the physical, and the variation in the ways in which they experience it. Part of the answer might be found in new materialist media theory and media archaeology – areas of research which specifically deal with the cultural and material history of technologies and media of communication, and focus on human and nonhuman connections and processes of interaction.



But first, a brief historical context on digital dualism. The cyberculture scholarship of the past two and a half decades is too rich, complex and varied to be condensed in a nutshell. But if one is to distill the most extreme strands of digital dualism that haunt a considerable part of it, it would go something like this: when the Internet user sits down in front of a computer screen, they enter a virtual space by becoming disembodied; the interface screen is a portal through which a new self emerges. The material body

of the user might still be sitting comfortably in a chair, but the self wanders freely through the mental geography of a realm of pure information. The net was seen as a prosthesis, an extension of our physical bodies (Stone, 1996, p. 100), or as another space which, granted, functions on the basis of the same metaphors as the real space. What much cyberspace and cyberfeminist scholarship had in common was, in short, the idea that there are two sides of reality, the offline and the online, which interact in various ways, and yet are divergent. And despite the fact that only the most naïve utopianism of cynical dystopianism would have said that the offline and the online have nothing to do with each other, the binary of offline vs. online, material vs. immaterial, artificial vs. natural was still maintained in theory in order to explain how humans related to technologies of communication. And it is precisely this distinction that the Cyborgology authors are attempting to dissolve.

In 2011, one of the founders of the blog, Nathan Jurgenson, published a short post detailing his apprehension over the continued use of 'online' and

'offline' as opposite principles, and suggested that thinking through a concept of 'augmented reality' could lead to more productive ways of looking at the cultural, social, political and philosophical implications of the Internet (Jurgenson, 2011). Instead of drawing a boundary between the digital and the physical, atoms and bits, real and digital, augmented reality sees these elements as always already enmeshed. Over the past two years, the theory of augmented reality has developed in increments through the contributions of other young scholars, most of whom were enthusiastic about the possibility of coming up with a theory that erases binaries and adds a new materialist twist to cyberspace studies. In his most recent post on the topic, Jurgenson further discusses the assumptions underlying the digital/real binary. Ontologically, what we call the 'real' and digital spheres have different properties, yet they interact, and this is a stance that almost everyone, academics or not, can get behind (Jurgenson, 2013). However, making a stark distinction between the two leads to statements along the lines of 'Internet friendships are

less authentic than real-life ones'. What is at stake within this sort of discussion is not the fact that the digital and the 'real' are different spheres, but that they are talked about as if they were different, and one unavoidably ends up being privileged over the other (Jurgenson, 2013).



Nicholas Carr argues that the online/offline binary is reflective of a tension between people's online and offline experiences...



The issue of digital dualism is quite interesting in itself, but it is made truly fascinating by the passion with which many still defend it. In February 2013, Pulitzer prize finalist Nicholas Carr, a writer whose main interest lies in technology and culture, published a scathing critique of augmented reality (or digital dualism denialism, as

he called it) on his personal blog. In fact, precisely this piece was the starting point of a deluge of discussions on the Cyborgology blog and elsewhere, now jokingly called the 'Great Dualism Debates'. In his piece titled "Digital Dualism Denialism", Carr argues that the online/offline binary is reflective of a tension between people's online and offline experiences, caused by the fact that the digital is in the process of "eroding their sense of the real" (Carr, 2013). The real, in Carr's conception, means 'the natural', a nature that is pre-given and pre-technological: "Wilderness existed before society gave us the idea of wilderness. Offline existed before online gave us the idea of offline." In the end, digital dualism is not only a question of ontology or of privileging one half of the binary over the other – it is a question of whether something natural (or perhaps more than that, something 'human') is lost when cyberspace enters the equation. Carr's contention does not relate only to the denial of the separation between the real and the digital, but also to the fear that the digital is somehow 'denaturalizing' human ways of living and of knowing. In an

earlier article, he laments that computers are making people incapable of deep reading and therefore deep thinking, which used to be stimulated by print media (Carr, 2008). Digital dualist thinking makes it possible not only to dissociate an 'authentic' reality from a less authentic virtuality, but also to set apart people who are biased towards one or the other.

It seems like the question of digital dualism will be a hot topic for a while yet, and I am far from being able to offer any kind of resolution to the question. However, I would like to illustrate some ways in which neomaterialist media theories such as Jussi Parikka's brand of mediality can potentially lead to a way to avoid the binaries that come into play in digital dualism. New materialism's theoretical underpinnings posit the world as made up of more than mere representations or discourse, but as a "network of concrete, material, physical and physiological apparatuses and their interconnections" (Parikka, 2010). Parikka, as well as Eugene Thacker, favour a Deleuze-inspired theoretical stance that encourage the replacement of demarcations

with such concepts as flows, intensities, affects, milieus, networks, viral becomings and temporalities.



The idea of time is intimately interlinked with digital dualism, and better yet, with digital communication technologies more broadly. The most glaringly obvious way in which perceptions of time are shifted in a digitally enabled medium is through the immediacy of the information transmission. But time figures in other ways in the debate on digital dualism, and one of them is framed in historical terms. The offline/online divide is a product of the internet age – supposedly it did not exist before the Internet was created. So one way to get down to the roots of the ontological conflict between the offline and the online is to erase the conflict entirely, and take a media archaeological approach in Jussi Parikka's style. Parikka describes media archeology as a method that owes much to Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, and Friedrich Kittler's mediatic spin on it. In short, media archaeology allows

the “rethinking of the temporal structures of newness and opening up, through a variety of historical apparatuses, the question of what is new and how we should incorporate historical knowledge into thinking about current and future events” (Parikka, 2012, p. 11). Internet technologies and the imaginary geographies associated with them can be therefore seen within a stream of innovation that also incorporates older techniques and technologies going as far back as the invention of writing, for example. This does not mean to say that the Internet is the newest and therefore best iteration of a linear hierarchy of media, but merely that it is a mode of hearing, seeing and sensing in general (in Siegfried Zielinski’s terms) that demands a non-linear, nonhegemonic temporality. One does not speak of books, art, photography, telephony or cinema as divorced from reality: they are part of reality, and are a mode of experiencing it. And yet, when discussing media, touching upon issues of immersion, virtuality and interaction is inevitable. But virtuality does not necessarily demand a separation of what is virtual and what is physical, of

the online and the offline, as both are ways of experiencing that don’t require a different way of existing: the experience of the technical medium is most certainly different from experiencing a print book, for example, but both the computer and the book exist within the same material reality.



Another theory that might prove interesting for the framing of the Great Dualism Debates (as the debate sparked by Carr’s piece came to be jokingly called) comes from the work of Jussi Parikka again, but can be encountered in the work of Eugene Thacker as well. Parikka draws several of his insights from the ethological work of biologist Jakob von Uexküll. Following Uexküll, Parikka proposes a vision of media as ecology, as a web of intensities, affects and forces in which the subject and the object become practically indistinguishable. In this context, one cannot look at the Internet without taking into consideration its material bases, and the relationalities that constitute it. For Parikka, media is “assembled of various bodies

interacting, of intensive relations ... as an assemblage of various forces, from human potential to technological interactions and powers to economic forces at play, experimental aesthetic forces, conceptual philosophical modulations” (Parikka, 2010, p. xxvi). This sort of reasoning avoids altogether the question of the ontological difference between offline and online, which can no longer be seen as distinct and bounded, and are instead linked by streams and flows of affect, of organic and nonorganic material, and other forces. The media ecological approach offers an alternative to the problem of cyberspace being seen as parallel universe or a common mental geography (which, granted, are notions that have been previously critiqued by theorists such as Michael Benedikt), but it can also be used to explain why there is even a need to talk about experiencing the online and the offline in different ways.



The fact that some users might experience the online and the offline as distinct, or that they might feel a certain tension

between the two is not necessarily a convincing argument for the denial of digital dualism, as Carr would have it. When it comes to the perception of the digital medium, or the affects that come into being in relation with it, Uexküll's ethology is again a useful lens of analysis. According to Uexküll, it is impossible to speak of a unitary space and time for all beings, and what we have instead is a variety of perceptual worlds, which are nonetheless linked together (as cited in Agamben, 2004, p. 40). In other words, one way to see the Internet is as an assemblage of material and immaterial, human and nonhuman flows, a space of potentials to which each user relates in different ways, none of which is privileged.



It seems like contemporary neomaterialist theorists concerned with the issues raised by digital technologies have a marked preference for a ‘fluid’ language, one that describes the world through flows, intensities, energies and potentials. The sort of flexibility and openness to relationality

that Parikka and Thacker confer to mediums and networks point towards the centrality of affect in connection with technical mediums, even when affect is not explicitly among the terms of discussion. Digital dualism, at least in the version of Turkle or Carr, is more concerned with effects rather than affect, which on the one hand fails to grasp the nonlinearity and somewhat cyclical nature of the history and philosophy of technology, while on the other hand ignores the fact that digital communication involves more than simply two actors: the human and the technological. I will not go in detail into why and how affect theory can be useful for media studies¹, but it is worth mentioning that its use in media archaeology is quite pervasive and very useful for pointing out why it is worth excavating the past in order to understand the present. For example, John Durham Peters (1999) looks at the affectivity of the telegraph in the 19th century, which not only transformed the conditions

¹ Among many others, Mark Hansen links an “affective topology of the senses” to digital technologies in his books *New Philosophies for New Media* (2004, MIT Press) and *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (2006, Routledge).

for human contact and produced a “revolution in both space binding and time binding” (p. 138), but was also imagined as a means of junction with other bodies and with immaterial entities (p. 147). It is the distribution of affect across human and nonhuman actors, as Richard Grusin put it (2010, p. 91) that forms the core focus of much media archaeological work – and looking at digital media from this perspective can definitely add to the existing theoretical framework.



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Neomaterialist theoretical insights such as ethology or media archaeology complicate the idea of digital dualism instead of simply taking it apart, by adding various layers to it.

However, it shows that perhaps simply debating whether the online and the offline are different and how they are different is not enough - from the point of view of theorizing the web it is perhaps more productive to reveal how to conceptualize them in such a way that the mere possibility of separating them becomes fruitless. The above bite-sized snippets of theory are not intended to provide an exhaustive framework, nor to settle the matter of digital dualism, but as a potentially valuable entry point. Digital dualism does not care about the materiality of the medium, its intricacies, and the way in which it affects and can be affected by human and nonhuman actors. It would be unjust to characterize digital dualist theories as based on mere binary reductions, and many of them offer sophisticated and compelling arguments why the offline and the online should be kept separated. But however seductive it might be to imagine that media can create a “dwelling place of ghosts” (as John Durham Peters puts it), the symbiotic and synergetic approach to technology offered by media archaeology is just as

captivating – I, for one, am completely seduced. ◻

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