ROOTS OF DIGITAL MEDIA
Cybernetic Serendipity, Tendencies 4, etc.
Summer 2010

Frieder Nake

Roots of Media

Note **01** | 13 April/17 May 2010

Outline & Schedule

Content

The digital world is upon us. In the ruins of the industrial age of capitalism, we organize a world of media. We wrap the evil into glittering spectacles. Was Gui Debord a visionary, a critic, or a propagandist of the world falling prey to digitality? Totality? How do we know, and what difference would it make, if we did know?

At the start into a new semester – the main element of the academic structure of time – it may be appropriate to pause for a second or two, and recall what is happening around us, before we return to the studio or workbench to resume or continue some design work which in itself appears as fascinating, although, upon a second view, may be nothing but boring and more or less the same, day by day.

Just think of some names from the daily news. Obama. Bin Laden. Thailand. Afghanistan. Irak. Merkel. Benedictus. Putin. What's his name in Britain? Sarkozy. Berlusconi. The evil. And, perhaps, Karl Marx. Or Lev Manovich.

Think of why you study? For what purpose are you doing it? For fun? That would be great. For the blossoming and growth of your skepticism. That would be greater. Do you want to become an artist or an intellectual, or both, or none of the above, and if so, why not? Think.

Pain & critique. Critique & pain.

The agony of the spectacle that is so easy to look through and that we all have come to love so much.

Poverty and hunger are rampaging through the world and we take it as the excuse for our complacency eith the world of practical decision.

Catastrophe and corruption. They love each other.

The German word *Enttäuschung* is disappointment in English. Using the Heideggerian hyphen in German, you can segregate the word into *Ent-täuschung*. This lets the word *Täuschung* stand out which, by itself, means deception, delusion, fallacy, illusion. So the construct is something like dis-delusion or dis.illusion. *Auf-klärung's* (enlightenment) goal is *Ent-täuschung*. This may sound funny because we don't want to be disappointed when enlightened. However, in the light of the analysis it means that in the process of enlightening you lose your illusions that you may have of the world, and that's good. You lose your fixpoint, your illusions, for the sake of skepsis.

The intellectual, in the very moment that he believes he has won some secure ground, must react skeptically by calling himself to order. How can you believe, he will ask to save his intellectualist attitude, that there could ever be anything secure, safe, or certain. Certainty is for believers, not for us.

I should stop this. In the series of graduate courses and seminars I have been offering at HfK over the last few semesters, this term I want to delve a bit into history. Into the history of our beloved field, digital media. Does it have any history? When did it begin? What are its forerunners?

Oh yes, you have read the names. Vannevar Bush. Ivan E. Sutherland. Doug Engelbart. Ted Nelson. Alan Kay. Grab your copy of *The new media reader*. Or of *Multimedia, from Wagner to virtual reality*. There you will find an illustrous collection of names, texts, and events. Enough for us to chew on for a full semester, and more.

In fact, we may select a few texts from these two great anthologies. But, in general, our approach will be a different one. I thought of doing this course when – in the context of my research and development project, compArt, and in the context of two recent exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, UK – I was again thinking about the strange fact that two remarkable events took place on almost the same day in August, 1968. The two events had something in common: computer art. And they developed very differently in a way that I invite you to study with me.

The two events were the large exhibition, *Cybernetic Serendipity. The computer in the arts*, that opened at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London on the 3rd of August; and the symposium, short exhibition, but several years of more, *Tendencies 4 and 5, Computers and visual research*, that started on the 4th of August at the Galerije Grada Zagreba in Zagreb.

I don't want to say more now. My first idea was to do nothing, for a full semester, but dig deeply into the history and details of these two events. But I decided later that this would not be such a good idea for a general seminar. It would be good for a research seminar with six participants who would prepare for their Master or Ph.D. theses.

A general seminar could still use the London and Zagreb events for its starting points, but widen its perspective. I want to submit an hypothesis that we should explore:

> *The roots of digital media can be found in computer graphics and art of the mid 1960s.*

The goal is an improvement of your personal understanding of digital media, i.e. the heritage of your area of study, plus, perhaps, contributions to the daDA compArt database of Digital Art.

Conditions for credit

You are invited to join the seminar as an active participant just out of intellectual interest. But I know, this is no realistic perspective these days. More realistic is that you take it for credit, and you are most welcome and become my friend, if you do this. These are the simple and predictable conditions.

> *You may get credit for this seminar if*
>
> *(1) you actively participate throughout the term,*
>
> *(2) you contribute to one of our topical meetings by reading, studying, researching, giving a presentatuion, and writing an essay, hopefully even contribute new or improved entries to the daDA compArt database.*

More detail will be given about these conditions once we know of our set-up and situation (who is going to work on what?).

Preliminary Schedule

13 April	A first introduction. A discussion and research. Organization of work. Conditions for credit	
20 April	Cybernetic Serendipity & Tendencies 4	(FN)
27 April	Guy Debord, The society of the spectacle	(FN)
4 May	Max Bense & Marshall McLuhan	(FN)
11 May	Max Bense & Marshall McLuhan	(FN)
14/15 May	Special: Excursion to ZKM Karlsruhe	-----
18 May	Marcel Duchamp & Jackson Pollock	(FN)
25 May	Paul Klee & Josef Albers	Behnam Asadi
1 June	Concept Art, Video Art, Computer Art	Diying Tang, Guangtao Zhang
8 June	Interactive Art	Paulo Torres-Neto, Qingteng Chang
15 June	Early animation: Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter, the Whitneys	Joseph S. Zang
22 June	The happening & environments	Fabian Grote
29 June	Ivan E. Sutherland & Douglas Engelbart Lucy Suchman	Tobias Hildebrandt Kaberi Naznin
6 July	Wrapping up. Grand summary	