INTERFACE CRITIQUE

Developing a cultural science perspective of the human-machine interface

Call for Papers for an interdisciplinary symposium at the Institute for Theory and Practice of Communication at the Berlin University of Arts,
November 7 - 8, 2014, Berlin, Germany.

GUIs, TUIs and NUIs: An „I" in acronyms to describe human-machine interfaces has become as common as mysterious. The more it is taken for granted, the more it seems to escape our understanding. What does "interface" mean in the context of contemporary technical development? The trend towards unobstrusiveness is conspicuous: "Deep integration", "actionable notifications" or "Shytech" - the visual aesthetic trends tend to hide mechanisms, functions and processes. How can we critically examine interfaces that increasingly disappear into the background?

The symposium tries to understand the phenomenon "interface" in its dynamic development in order to develop critical perspectives beyond culturally pessimistic reflexes. We are looking for papers dealing with topics such as inclusion and exclusion, subjectivation and desubjectivation, continuities and non-simultaneity. Considering that many interfaces are not only connected with each other, but also merge into one another, that they not only enable communication with technology, but also normalize it, it becomes evident: understanding interfaces is an approach to understanding the world. We suggest the following perspectives:

Panel 1 - Theories, Terms, Concepts
From an understanding of "interface" as a separating but also mediating device to more controversial explorations of the term, this panel wants to discover new ways of thinking about interfaces. The theoretical discourse on "interfaces" varies from space theory (Drucker) to theories of power (Galloway). In the tension between these interdisciplinary perspectives the interface appears as an oscillating nexus, whose dynamic and actuality provokes ever new definitions. Spatial, process-oriented or as an effect – in this panel we invite to discover new understandings of the term, to step into its shadow, fathom the unseen and question assumed fixations.

Panel 2 - Micro history
Focusing on the artefacts' context and the details of actual practice, this panel draws relations between the historical protagonists and their surrounding world. The micro-historical approach offers an analysis of time periods within which the historical contexts are withdrawn from its écriture automatique, from the institutional and technological logic, and thereby throws the "human factor" back into the macro-historical discourse. Think of investigations about selected individiuals (designers, developers, entrepreneurs) and their environment, about concrete strategic orientations and actions of certain companies, or even about specific updates, revisions oder extensions of services, apps or operating systems.

Panel 3 - Trends and Paradigms

Within this panel we want to discover the paradigms of interface design as subjects of cultural criticism and reflection. It deals with current and past trends, with historical developments of design paradigms and the interactions of utilization and development, appropriation and normalization. How adaptive, open and context-sensitive is and was the conception of interfaces? Who gives whom how much room for appropriation? Is it possible to think concepts such as Skeuomorphism, flat or material design as concepts of cultural history? What does it mean to conceive the interface as an apparatus?

Panel 4 - Talk and Narration of and through interfaces

Hard- and software converge to create new forms of communication that we often live with before we can talk about them. We ask about the hermeneutics of interfaces, about the interpretation of their texts, signs and symbols. We are interested in narratives: those that enroll in interfaces and those that will – as parts of our culture – also be part of the writing of history. How do wording conventions (UIDL) and metaphors (such as stream, tweet, cloud etc.) become established? How and with which tonality do interfaces talk with users? Which zones, gaps, restrictions and accesses can be articulated? And what does this mean for our everyday construction of language and reality?

The symposium follows an interdisciplinary approach and addresses researchers of all disciplines who want to discuss their work in the context of cultural science. Explicitly invited (besides cultural scientists) are researchers of technical disciplines and designers. Papers can refer to the panels depicted above, but can also open up other perspectives. Proposals can be in English or German. Please send your abstract with a maximum of 300 words and a short biography to proposals@interfacecritique.net. Deadline is August 15th.

August 15th: Deadline Abstracts
November 7th/8th: Conference
proposals@interfacecritique.net
www.interfacecritique.net

Conference organizers:
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