The Virtual is Corked

by

Adam Stangeby

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**The Virtual is Corked: Dynamic and Schizophrenic Modes of Meaning-Production in the Spatiotemporal Register of the Virtual as an Interstitial Semiotic Space**

Adrian Mackenzie theorizes the *virtual* as an interstitial semiotic space producing meaning between the linguistic (or, language) spatiotemporal register and engineering (or, machine) spatiotemporal register of the discourse for a digital object or artefact (or, if you will – a digital “thing”). Through his examination of the philosophical, social and cultural value of Java as a digital thing, this interstitial space is conceived as an “interpretive community” which becomes the virtual place, for sharing and access – more simply, for “structured circulation” (Mackenzie, 464). Java is a complex object for the discourse on meaning-production processes in the practices of the virtual at work. Virtuality cannot be abstracted into a separate paradigm from the meaning-production processes that govern the experiences of the real – they are interconnected and synergistic. Digital media and traditional media inform each other in their semiosis. Virtuality does not abstract the material practices of a digital object (machine) and the meaning-production processes (language) of the real (Mackenzie, 444). Instead, the virtual operates as a lens for bringing into focus, and thus reifying, the relationship between digital and non-digital linguistic and engineering practices. Virtuality is a medium that mediates messages between media forms.

Mackenzie forwards that Java is a case of practical virtuality whereby its operation as a reifying lens at the semiotic level understands materiality in the invisible labour and infrastructure of digital practices (Mackenzie, 447). Java becomes a discursive formation and as an object of analysis it is difficult to define its ontological properties. The virtualization of digital practices such as Java, reveal a formation constantly in flux through a variety of material and immaterial development, alteration and modification – Java is not a stable object. The interstitial semiotic space, however, constitutes moments where the linguistic register and engineering register of the digital object’s semiosis produce meaning that become a floating signifier within that interstitial semiotic space.

This floating signification is the “seeing, without a guarantee of knowing” that Wendy Hui Kyong Chun refers to when grounding Baudrillard’s poetics on the ecstasy of digital communication (Chun, 27). At the semiotic level, the interstitial space of virtuality can signify the machine register or the register of language without necessarily connecting them. As such, referentiality becomes invisible and the virtual becomes a site of fetish and schizophrenic modes of meaning-production. This fetish in signification and schizophrenic mode of meaning-production is what Chun refers to as “visual culture” and the ideology of “transparency” (Chun, 27). For Chun, this process is a profound conflation manifesting through the disavowal of the register that was repressed (receiver) when the other register signifies (sender), thus, there is no production of signs through that process, but instead a fetishization of the signifier that then “floats” and constitutes the interstitial semiotic space of virtuality for the discourse of that digital object.

When I recently moved to Montreal from Toronto, I experienced a series of culture shocks. This came as quite the surprise given that both cities have several similar superficial markers of “Canadian” distinction. One relevant example of shock lends to crudeness, but may illustrate the schizophrenic process of signification I have described. In Toronto, as a loyal dog owner, I became somewhat resistant to always picking up after my dog. A value for me was that dogs must find it quite alien to have their “business” collected from a carefully-located spot and thus should be granted the opportunity to leave their “mark” on occasion. In Toronto, it was not an issue for me to fail in my social duty on these rare occasions as the rest of the community was vigilant in performing their civic duties to that end. However, within two weeks of living in Montreal I had stepped into dog excrement on three separate occasions. Although a little slow on the uptake, I did come to recognize that picking up after one’s dog is not treated as rigourously as a civic duty in Montreal as in Toronto.

Cultural explanations aside, I had to become loyal in picking up after my own dog because I could not conscionably contribute to an irritation I was enduring by stepping around carelessly in parks. The new value of not contributing to my own undesired toil took precedent over the old value of leaving my dog with some form of dignity that many dogs must go without. If I were to satisfy both values in conjunction then the result would be a fetishization of cleaning my shoes after careless treading. I would be forced to disavow the conflict of values and this would constitute a schizophrenic mode of meaning-production around the event. Values that are not compatible but that are maintained operating together produce a rupture in the chain of associations at the semiotic level. Contradictory values do not flow together like the double-helix but criss-cross like the bones in a pirate flag. The break or rupture as conflicting values pass through each other constitutes a trauma. For the incompatible (or contradictory) values to remain co-operating necessitates a disavowal of the trauma and a consequent fetish of a contrary value (perhaps something that can be understood as producing a skein for the broken chains and thus masking their brokenness). That process of maintaining co-operative contradictory values constitutes a schizophrenic mode of meaning-production.

The fetish process resulting from floating signification and the schizophrenic modes of meaning-production that are effected through the denial of referentiality for signification produces problematic formations within virtual culture and the consequent expression of virtual values in the social register. Lawrence Lessig notes the issue of governance in the virtual and that, historically, the virtual has been governed not by a body, but by a series of forces, starting with hackers & researchers and then taken-over insidiously by commerce (Lessig, 8). For Lessig, the schizophrenic modes of meaning-production interfere with an initiative to establish a Social Contract for the virtual that itself must be based in code – “Lex Informatica” (Lessig, 5).

It is this schizophrenic meaning-production process for the virtual that operates to produce particular effects noted by Bart Cammaerts. For Cammaerts, the bottom-up development of virtual culture has put a primacy in resistance and disruption while the hegemon’s top-down control has exercised co-opting and repression of virtual culture’s values. The virtual becomes a place of contradictions where a user in that spatiotemporal register can appreciate the hard work of Alicia Keys, but also deny her the fruits of her labour through refusing to purchase the music in digital or material form. Those contradictory values produce a fetish whereby Alicia Keys reinvents herself through live concert world tours. Her virtual presence is fetishized as a real presence in the stadiums. Meanwhile, the schizophrenic mode of meaning-production in this interstitial semiotic space – the virtual – sees the hegemon co-opting the real presence of Alicia Keys by issuing subpoenas against those who publish sound bites of her singing in the shower or whistling in a restaurant. The virtual culture values copyright and intellectual property concurrently valuing the violation of copyright and IP. The cultural exchange ethic and commodity exchange model operate in conjunction – they co-operate - for the virtual.

The schizophrenic modes of meaning-production for the virtual arise from it being an interstitial space that mediates instead of inertly connecting that which it signifies. Virtuality is a discursive formation rife with active and plural signification – signification that is constantly in flux. Lessig’s virtual Social Contract – or, Lex Informatica – is the code that would produce referentiality between sender and receiver when a digital object signifies through the virtual. Without the Lex Informatica, the virtual is corked. In oenology (or the study and science of wine and wine-making), “corking” is a process whereby a wine is said to go bad. Corking does not refer to a situation where particles of cork float in the wine, but rather where a natural fungi that may reside in cork, comes in contact with certain chlorides present in sterilization products used in wine-making. A chemical compound called TCA is produced (Gorman-McAdams). This “cork taint” chemical becomes an interstitial element for the wine and cork while redefining and controlling the meaning of each.

Virtuality as semiosis - or the virtual as a semiotic spatiotemporal register - becomes the digital taint for a digital object’s machine meaning and meaning in language (the engineering register and linguistic register, respectively). Virtuality is a virulent “chemical” that brings about Chun’s “visual culture” and the fetish of “transparency”, but this virulence need not necessitate neo-luddite reactions. In virtuality controlling its own fate, as it were, through producing its culture as a re-production (ie. floating signification), virtual culture has an opportunity to define its practices dynamically in a manner that cultures which originate in the real cannot. Thus, the stakes are great in the development of the visual culture of the virtual – tarrying solutions for the conflict of semiotic dynamism and semiotic schizophrenia in such a way that the process is productive and generative for human culture. The rest of this paper will examine how some authors addressing this topic lay out possibilities and realities for this aforementioned endeavor in the contemporary moment.

Cammaerts examines how three modes of digital sharing for the virtual culture – sharing code, sharing content and sharing access – articulate reciprocity and disrupt capitalist models of commodity exchange underpinned by neo-liberal economic ideology (Cammaerts, 47). The conditions for that disruption are provided through the schizophrenic modes of meaning-production operating within the virtual as an interstitial semiotic space. The digital object or thing that is shared (code, content, access) is articulated as a floating signifier in the virtual. As such, these forms of sharing can exert force and effect from the bottom-up while still being co-opted and repressed from the top-down. In the virtual, neo-liberal ideology does not produce signs when signifying. Through Hegelian dialectics, the neo-liberal economic model is the synthesis of its antithesis fallaciously seeking to cancel history and thus control the future in the Orwellian sense (Cammaerts, 48). Laclau and Mouffe note that the logical fallacy in this dialectic refuses neo-liberal ideology from becoming “permanently self-evident” in the virtual (Cammaerts, 48). The sharing process reflects neither the pure altruism of subaltern micro practices nor the power-based reciprocity of hegemon macro practices. The virtual as an interstitial semiotic space provides the process of sharing digital things with certain freedoms not possible for non-digital sharing – namely, cost and scale (Cammaerts, 49). Immaterial goods are subject to infinite reproduction without additional labour costs. The weak ties of infinite reproduced goods are made strong through distribution within a dense network.

The early hacker mantra was that, “information wants to be free”, and although there is a pathetic fallacy at play, the quip might be more accurately remediated as, “the virtual wants to be free”. The schizophrenic modes of meaning-production for virtuality constitute a sharing of digital things that value hacker ethos (micro disruption practices), as well as, neo-liberal ideology (macro co-opting practices). The co-operation of contradictory values within the virtual can put a software company out of business through code-sharing while at the same time providing those unemployed programmers with access to solutions that are necessary to make a software company viable.

With respect to digital goods sharing and the schizophrenic modes of meaning-production operating within the virtual, I have sought to live without the fetish that pervades the co-operation of contradictory values in the virtual. For many years, it was important to me that I not torrent media content. With many close friends that sought careers in music and film (myself included – for screenwriting) it became obvious around the turn of the millennium that entertainment producers were tightening the purse-strings for signing newly discovered talent. Eventually, I gave up my cause when my value of not contributing to my own neglect led to a conflicting value of not wanting to pay multiple individual times for the same content simply because of digital format obsolescence. I turned to P2P torrent sharing, but made uploading unavailable. I was not sharing per se. Instead, I have made my digital library available to those who I know in real life under the condition that there is a fair trade agreement. I caved on the value of not contributing to my own neglect but through the dynamism of the virtual found a way to still participate in a form of digital sharing without it being contradictory to that aforementioned value - in that I do not propagate digital things freely shared throughout the virtual. I also hold fairly firm to a rule that I do not download content produced in the last five years as I want the producer to have a chance to recoup their investment through all ancillary market windows. It is the dynamic quality of the virtual that allows me to have some flexibility with the schizophrenic quality of the virtual.

Chun explains that the engineering register of the virtual has been based in the machines of computer hardware while the linguistic register of the virtual has been based in the language of computer software. Their co-existence is necessary, yet leads to contradictory values in the virtual as an interstitial space. Chun writes, “programming languages inscribe the absence of both the programmer and the machine in its so-called writing. Programming languages enabled the separation of instruction from machine, of imperative from action.” (Chun, 30). The value of repressing hardware through automatic programming co-operated with its contradictory value of developing hardware that could then facilitate the running of more advanced software (Chun, 31). The virtual mediated these conflicting values for a discourse on computer technology. The openness of code and the limitation of machine language (binary) produce schizophrenic modes of meaning-production in the discourse of computers.

An example for how a fetish develops from this schizophrenia (as a means of retaining co-operation of contradictory values) can be shown in the virtual culture’s imagination of artificial intelligence. The virtual culture imagines AI as being capable of sentience through sheer juggernaut-like progress under Moore’s Law. Code-writing becomes easier over time through its penchant for pastiche (reuse) while robotics hardware provides a casing for the cutting-edge software. However, sentience in the simplest terms is based in “maybeness”. Sentient things are such because they can experience states where there is neither “oneness” nor “noneness”. For example, a human being need not confirm nor deny an impulse toward a particular action – there remains an interstitial space for oscillation which can be referred to as “maybeness”, or neither oneness (1-ness) nor noneness (0-ness). Machines are based in binary language (0s and 1s). There is no “maybe” for machines and no interstitial space of oscillation. The machine is either on or off. Algorithmic permutations through a proliferation of pastiche code might craft the semblance of sentience for the artificial intelligence, but this is itself artificial sentience. The dynamic semiosis of the virtual provides its spatiotemporal register with a potential surfeit of meaning that then tarries the incompatibility of schizophrenic meanings – the schizophrenic meanings are compatible with the ideal of dynamism while being incompatible when abstracted from discourse. That is to say, that the diachronic register of the virtual precedes the synchronic register of the virtual. I would like to suggest, that such conditions define processes of meaning-production that will have a schizophrenic articulation.

Lessig has a deep-seated anxiety regarding cyberspace’s lack of governance. Cyberspace requires the Lex Informatica (or virtual Social Contract) because its underlying architecture invites ideological apparatuses (such as the state or commerce) to enact cyberspace as an “invisible hand that exerts perfect control” (Lessig, 4). I would suggest that Lessig is noting that this “underlying architecture” is the machine-virtual-language spatiotemporal register and that the “invisible hand” is the virtual culture. The anxiety for Lessig, arguably, stems from understanding the virtual as a dynamic and schizophrenic semiotic space, and thus one that can operate irrationally against utilitarian interests - interests that, arguably, seem quite important to him as a thinker and human being. Lessig has hope that positive interpersonal relations within the virtual will guide it as a productive and helpful media form. However, the virtual is a powerful media form that produces meaning through both dynamic and schizophrenic processes, providing it with the quality of openness, yet unpredictability, and where it can enable a plurality of meaning but also fetishize from that plurality. Mackenzie writes, “practical virtuality consists of an ongoing incompleteness, a sense of something just about to be, but not quite, completed.” (Mackenzie, 466). This statement astutely and poignantly describes a fundamental property of schizophrenic meaning – to be, and not to be.

**SOURCE CITED**

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