AN AESTHETICS OF THE METAINTERFACE

CHRISTIAN ULRIK ANDERSEN AND SØREN BRO POLD:
THE METAINTERFACE: THE ART OF PLATFORMS, CITIES, AND CLOUDS

Andersen and Pold's *The Metainterface*: *The Art of Platforms, Cities, and Clouds* is a book that marks the material and cultural effects of the metainterface on our lives; it defines the metainterface relative to precursors, locates its aesthetics within net art, software art, and electronic literature, and maps the paradigm's influence on culture, the way we see and interact with cities, and the design of interfaces.

The 1980's computer interface, tied to productivity in offices—a founding example of human-computer interaction (HCI)—has now become the signal-computer interface. Our role as actors in a human-machine relationship has been overshadowed by algorithmically constructed statistical bodies (signal), a displacement of individuals by quantified behavioural models. This process is underwritten by businesses that trade data for the free or nominally priced use of various kinds of data-collating software—like Facebook, the Google suite of apps, or Netflix. The metainterface is in one way the largely invisible architecture of this software-for-data exchange. It commodifies our usage habits. Within such a system, any choice made, even a statistically anomalous one, generates data for a predictive model, therefore improving that model, which perpetuates itself and data-driven cultural futures in a feedback loop (p. 37).

As the authors point out, apps, services, and walled-garden ecosystems are the largest distributors and regulators of cultural content. The integration of data in these systems makes analytics the primary driver in the metainterface's [re]shaping of culture and consumption. Andersen and Pold suggest the metainterface has transformed consumers of traditionally "passive" content—movies, TV, music, and books—into curators and producers of regulated content. This new role is visible in the integration of likes, recommendations, reviews, and general shareability of content on media platforms. The metainterface maw does not

care *what* we do with the controls and levers (through our phones and smart devices), as anything we can do in these software environments is quantified, codified, and then repackaged to shape the experience of other consumers. The impetus is for *more* data above all else (ibid.).

Part of Pold and Andersen's goal in *The Metainterface* is to define an aesthetics of the metainterface beyond an accounting of its relative history, technical systems, and cultural integration, asking what visible marks does it leave or patterns does it develop? The aesthetic texture of the metainterface and its virtual disappearing act, hidden in or behind "the cloud," is drawn out in *The Metainterface* through (tactical media[1]) illustrations borrowed from net art, software art, and electronic literature. The art Pold and Andersen cite engages with the affordances of the metainterface—in some cases affecting its gaze, its way of parsing the world or mode of being—in order to understand and critique its features, ubiquity, and self-obscuring tendency.[2]

For example, data primacy is highlighted through Ben Grosser's *Facebook Demetricator*, a browser plugin that acts as a filter, removing all the quantified aspects of a user's post. Likes, shares, comments, and timestamps are removed (p. 37). This reveals "the logic of quantification" and eases the pressure of the "prescribed patterns of sociality" that Facebook cultivates (ibid.). As another example, Pold and Andersen highlight the project of artist duo Ubermorgen, Luc Gross, and Bernard Bauch to automatically generate eBooks and distribute them through Amazon's Kindle store: "producing a whole literary ecology including crowds, authors, books, titles, accounts, pricing, and a defence system against erasure" (p. 57). The project is called *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb*. The text in the books is drawn from YouTube comments and framed as if characters in a drama are producing/performing social media. Depending on the original context of the video under which the comments appeared, the layers of intertextuality could be complicated and highly relational, while necessarily highlighting a machinic mode of reading and writing—its generated feel—as well as its "embedded[ness] in a machinery that commodifies words" (p. 59). The result is that the text feels like it is borne of "both human and machine agencies" (ibid.), achieving the titular forkbomb effect,[3] and turning the reader's gaze toward the mechanics of the Kindle distribution system.

These examples pulled from net art, software art, and electronic literature, reflecting the metainterface in-context,

are a major pillar of Pold and Andersen's method. Their general structure in each of the body chapters, which represent different applications and contexts for the metainterface, is to introduce material and theoretical conditions surrounding and framing the chapter's subject, along with art as evidence and to parallel, emphasise, and further their exploratory aesthetic project. This mode of scholarship, moving from the broad affect, historical, or material framing and import, inward, sometimes more than once, or from various angles, narrowing toward analysis of specific example texts (particularly the work of artists) is reminiscent of Lori Emerson's approach in *Reading/Writing Interfaces*, which is a noted precursor and constellated text for Andersen and Pold (p. 18). Emerson describes her method a couple times as cutting with a conceptual knife into the past, or the ground of the past;[4] she also describes it as "asynchronous cuts into the sedimentary layers of technological change" in alignment with Foucauldian practice, which avoids the linear progression of traditional historical analysis (p. 131). This scope and scale of analysis, its movement between various levels and perspectives on its subject, is something Andersen and Pold share with Emerson.

Despite the mode of scholarship, what I have characterised as cross-sectional cuts—sometimes moving from macro to micro, material/technical to theoretical, and from close reading to cultural—the focus in evidence and primary texts on net/software/ electronic (literature/) art keeps the scope of *The Metainterface* narrower than something like Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack* (for example). This is not a cosmology of the metainterface in which various layers and strata are defined in their relation and placed in a hierarchy. And although some may want to see that approach done, I think the scope of *The Metainterface* and its choice of primary texts recommend it better to a variety of audiences as it is. With media theory/studies as the broadest disciplinary boundary, *The Metainterface* is recommended to those interested in net/software art and electronic literature, digital humanists that already harness elements or features of the metainterface in their work, (naturally) to those that study interface/design in HCI or other fields, to literary scholars interested in the ways reading/ writing have changed over time, and to scholars interested in Big Data and its effects.

In instruction, graduate-level classes on smart cities, interface theory/design, or any class related to the chapter headings, would benefit from including *The Metainterface* (at least in excerpt). And given the organisational rigour (an in-depth framing/introductory

chapter), clear style of the writing, and topical relevance, undergraduate classes could also benefit from *The Metainterface*.

Although I read *The Metainterface: The Art of Platforms, Cities, and The Cloud* as a hardcover book, I could not resist taking a look at the Kindle edition afterwards to hopefully find metainterface logic, design, and/or features, applied to it. Unlike *Phone Story*, a Molleindustria game that critiqued Apple and therefore was denied saleability on the app store (p. 55), *The Metainterface* does have a Kindle edition, which is a good start.

The eBook edition, like other Kindle books, provides a section that collates the ten most popular highlights from all the readers that chose to highlight sections while they were reading. These highlights are pulled out of the context of the text into a list/section available in the Kindle app. No information is provided by the interface as to the best way to parse the ten highlights as they sit in their list. Presumably, the best way would be to click on each and read the context around them. Not doing that, however, presents the best example of a logic of *more* data, devoid of other cultural markers and divorced from a traditional context of reading. What value does knowing the ten most popular highlights provide? Is it a holistic view of the book and its projects? What modes or avenues of reading does it afford?

Here are what people thought was most important in *The Metainterface* in descending order rated from most to least important by the number of people that highlighted it. When there was a tie, the Kindle interface presented the highlights that received the same votes in chronological order from the beginning of the book forward. I have done the same. Technically, in order to highlight these popular highlights myself and copy them, I have added a vote to each one.

A Metainterface Review of *The Metainterface: The Art of Platforms, Cities, and The Cloud*, written by Andersen and Pold, ordered by popular vote, with text selections by 49 anonymous users and one Book Reviewer, brought to you by Kindle (part of Amazon).

1. "It is this shift, and how the interface disappears, not into seamless work-related activities, but into the environment and everyday cultural practices, that is the topic of this book, conceptualized as a metainterface." (Kindle edition, location 313)

2. "The concept of metainterface consequently performs three different, but related, functions." (Ibid., location 328)

3. "Third, the notion therefore points to metainterfacial artworks along with ways of analyzing them as critical explorations of their own material conditions that not only reflect the metainterface industry's corporate production of new realities but also depicts alternative ways of constructing and designing the metainterface." (Ibid., location 336)

4. "Second, the industry around the metainterface presents this as a new reality of smooth access and smart interaction." (Ibid., location 332)

5. "this book focuses on the interface as a material and technical format that juxtaposes the operational with the representational, and thus is deeply entangled with the cultural and aesthetic domain." (Ibid., location 561)

6. "The central claim of this book, however, is that despite the attempts to make the interface disappear, and conceal it behind a mask of smoothness and real-time information flows that all seem to be for the social, individual, or functional good, it gradually resurfaces. Although the interface may seem to evade perception, and become global (everywhere) and generalized (in everything), it still holds a textuality: there still is a metainterface to the displaced interface." (Ibid., location 320)

7. "The metainterface industry transforms reading and writing: consumption, which traditionally has been considered passive, becomes a productive inscription of behavioral data, and the production of culture becomes a kind of consumption. The interface itself is no longer just a consumer product that can be bought or sold in a traditional sense, but is a networked streaming service that is financed by the capturing and inscription of user behavior." (Ibid., location 370)

8. "The interface thus becomes a text in an analytic strategy, but a text that is material, technological, and part of more extensive political and social contexts than what existing notions of text traditionally point at." (Ibid., location 584)

9. "In a critical perspective, it concerns the ways in which the interface reflects new perspectives as well as new ways of perceiving, organizing, and thinking brought about by media technological changes." (Ibid., location 689)

10. "The arts that deal with interfaces are, in other words, not just innovative. They do not belong in the realm of commercial products and services that people usually associate with computer interfaces, nor do museums or libraries institutionalize them. Rather, they are part of an arts scene that receives attention from both sides, and demonstrate an ability to reflect the larger conditions of a new regime of production." (Ibid., location 226)

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1   Rita Raley, *Tactical Media*. Vol. 28 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 6. Rita Raley: "[tactical media] signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible."
2   "Tendency" is a conceptual/theoretical thread Andersen and Pold explore throughout *Metainterface* from Walter Benjamin: "related to a dialectic material examination of production and technology through artistic production, rather than an abstract ideology or immediate attitude of the work." (p. 24).
3   "In computing, a forkbomb is a denial-of-service attack, meaning it is a process that continually replicates itself inside the system, draining it of its resource like a parasite and ultimately causing the system to crash." (p. 60).
4   Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*, Vol. 44 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 2.