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VISUAL, ERGONOMIC, AND FRAGMENTARY – KRAPP’S VISION OF THE DIGITAL

Previously published in Portuguese, this particular interview with Peter Krapp was an attempt of presenting some of the author’s fundamental ideas to the Brazilian public, in a country where his work remains less known. Although the archeological discussion offered by him (and by many other important writers) is enjoying a favourable repercussion in Brazil, a significant amount of the communication researchers there are still unaware of the terms of this debate. Expecting to fill this gap, Eduardo Luersen and Guilherme Maschke introduce the diverse set of problems that Krapp’s work explores by paying special attention to his book *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Culture*.

One of the most interesting features in Krapp’s writing is the tendency to think against the grain. His previous book, *Déjà Vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory*, reinterprets the relationship between remembering and forgetting revisiting the tendency to see the former as positive and the latter as negative. The déjà vu emerges as a strange kind of reminiscence, always imperfect and problematic, demonstrating these contradictions intrinsic to any recollection. A homologous perspective is present in *Noise Channels* that considers the error as the opposite of an unpleasant mishap.

This particular book aims to investigate a varied amount of subjects, whose dispersion is apparent. In this text, three problems seem recurrent. The computer graphics and the graphical user interface (GUI) is the first one. Without the manipulation of space through resources tributary to the visual culture, the task of thinking about interface ergonomics (the second category relevant to Krapp) would be very different. For the author, the measure of the individuals’ reactions during their handling of these machines seems to be crucial.

This formulation would not be complete without the database

responsible for introducing non-sequential ordering not only in information processing but also in media products. These questions allow *Noise Channel* to dwell upon very different subjects: games, music, hypertext, hacktivism, the aesthetics of noise, the ludic aspects of the manipulation of certain objects constructed with functional pretensions. Despite such diversification, some points seem recurrent: the relationship established between the visual aspect of computing, the calculation of human actions during the operation of the interface, and the non-linear character of the database. After all, from games to music, every one of these diverse experiences deals, on the one hand, with an indispensable fragmentation and, on the other hand, with the measurement of user gestures.

For instance, an audio recording indeed only exists in relation to an external event captured by a registering apparatus, as it is the case with cinema. Consequently, technical aspects such as frequencies or oscillations would be considered as less important than the indexical qualities of sound. However, precisely the opposite occurs. As with the moving image, the technical manipulation of content becomes an essential issue. The audio recording turns into the opportunity to transform sound itself by conferring new qualities to it, just as montage did with images captured by the camera. As Walter Benjamin identified in cinema, the mechanical registry breaks sequentially, a rupture which transforms the audio into a manipulation of a discontinuous mass of stored data. Noise is in direct correlation with this technical possibility.

Thus, not surprisingly, the same handling of a non-sequential group of information can also be perceived in the hypertext. Similar to the aural experience, the hypertext needs to be organised through pieces of information located in a database and presented to the user through an interface. This text constituted by other texts could not exist without this pliant collection of other information. Consequentially, the risk of error seems to be constant.

It is possible to observe a homologous fear of failure regarding cybersecurity. After all, these specific distresses with data violation would not exist without the characterisation of networks as vulnerable structures due to their decentralisation in the handling of information. Once more, flexibility and the absence of linearity become the subject at stake. Without this feature, the fantasies about a pervasive power and the mythical narrative of the challenge of that same power would hardly be possible.

It becomes indispensable to add to these characteristics the necessity of planning the relationships to be established between machines and users. Due to the analyses of the body and its movements, the gesture

becomes a systematical object of calculation. Actions as diverse as playing a game, producing machinima or using a graphical interface, turn into a question of measurement. Curiously, this issue approximates the interface operation with concerns other than those of the industrial world. The tayloristic technocratic pretensions become generalised in a varied way. Unexpectedly, a strange connection emerges between the worries regarding the organisation of labour spaces and the anxieties about welfare which guide the entertainment.

However, this is not the only question. Digital games, on the one hand, keep a tense relationship with the attempt to administrate the individual towards ergonomics. Then again, they also deal with the danger of interfering in the presumed transparent relationship between the machine and the individual, constructed through the interface. In this ludic space, there exists a promise that everything is possible. Nonetheless, as a programmed environment, it becomes crucial to building the defence against the imponderable, only allowing the execution of certain actions. In the middle of both, there is noise, an unexpected event. In the work of Krapp, non-sequentiality lives side by side with contingency. The coordination of both seems to depend on a profoundly modern characteristic: “shock”.

A certain fraction of this concern with security reverberates in the anxiety with insalubrity, the expectation to maintain body hygiene in harmful conditions. This perspective takes us back to the problem of ergonomics, this tentative to avoid any harmful experience to the organism. Krapp seems to treat these concerns as a defence of individuality due to the risks regarding the world outside. This protection seems to recover a concern with “shocks”. This retrieves an important subject that Benjamin discussed as a diagnosis of life in cities and the consequences of war. These practices of care are also present in digital culture. If, in Benjamin, the result is a subject closed in themselves through their identity, the problem in the digital manifests in everyday worries about the living conditions in the face of these mechanisms.

Most of the reviews of Krapp’s work are stressing recurrent characteristics. In 2011, a text by Kathryn Thompson described *Noise Channels* as a “deeply interdisciplinary piece”, proposing a “multivocal conversation” between different disciplines.¹ Writing in 2014, Iman Shayan Moradi considered the book an attempt to understand the “humanistic and social implications of new technologies”, assembling

¹ Kathryn Thompson, “*Noise Channels. Glitch and Error in Digital Culture*, by Peter Krapp. Reviewed by Kathryn Thompson”, *The Information Society*, 30 (1), 2014, pp. 83–84.

“media archaeology, philosophy, and politics”.² This sophistication is certainly present in his book. However, the most important issue seems his attempt to consider all these questions from an integrated and connected perspective.

² Iman Shayan Moradi, “Noise Channels. Glitch and Error in Digital Culture. Peter Krapp.” *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 29 (1), 2014, pp. 137–139.