Reading Digital Art in the Age of Double-Coding

Roberto Simanowski

City University of Hong Kong, Department of English and School of Creative Media
rsimanow@cityu.edu.hk

Abstract

Against the background of the collapsed dichotomy between high and low culture as well as the concept of postmodern double-coding (allowing surface and in-depth perceptions to occur simultaneously), the essay offers a close reading of a classical example of digital art: *Der Zerseher* (*Iconoclast*) by Joachim Sauter and Dirk Lüsebrink (1992), an interactive installation where viewers (observed by hidden eye trackers) deconstruct a painting (presented on a screen) by looking at it. Beyond the facile claim that the work reverses the power hierarchy between painter and onlooker, the essay discusses the irony that (if we understand perception as an autobiographical act) the image cannot be de-viewed on a semantic level if it deconstructed on a physical one. The essay finally reveals the artwork as a commentary on art history and connects it to aesthetic discussions about the end of interpretation and the culture of presence. Against the prevalence of technique over content and meaning often in place in digital artworks, the essay ends with a call for an "erotics" of interpretation.

The postmodern bridge of cultural gaps and the collapse of the dichotomy in art after the advent of digital media

Jay David Bolter, in his ISEA keynote 2012, addresses the dichotomy of high and low/popular art referring to the common opposition of classical music and painting versus pop and rock. Bolter holds that there is no center of art today and he elaborates this idea in his book *The Digital Plenitude*, forthcoming with MIT Press in 2016. In this book Bolter, as he explains in a forthcoming interview, aims to examine the two developments in the second half of the 20th century that define our media culture in the 21st century: the advent of digital media, websites, video games, social media, mobile media and all the remediation of so called traditional media like film and print that now appear in digital form on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the end of our collective belief in Culture with a capital c, the collapse of the agreed on hierarchy in the visual arts, music, literature and scholarship and even politics. As Bolter holds: "This collapse is a sort of open secret in the sense that we all know implicitly that it is happening. But many of us are unwilling to acknowledge the consequences of it. Many of us write about media culture today in a way that seems to be determined to ignore that history, taking extreme positions seeing digital media either as utopia or dystopia and utopias and dystopias are always measured in terms of implicit cultural standards." [1].

Bolter's talk is indebted to Leslie Fiedler's famous essay "Cross the Border – Close the Gap" (1972) declaring the obsolescence of the old distinction between low and high culture. Equally important in this context is John Barth's essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980) that offers the concept of a post-modern perception of art as a synthesis of pre-modernist and modernist modes of writing, i.e. the naïve illusionism, suspense, immersion and clarity of "traditional" writing on one hand with the anti-illusionism, self-reflexivness, irrationalism of modern writing on the other hand. [2]

Barth's suggestion is a kind of postmodern double-coding which allows the audience to enjoy the artwork in both, a rather superficial as well as a deep digging approach. His examples are Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965) and Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and he could easily have added Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1980) that was released shortly after his essay. Barth's idea is not limited to literature but includes all kinds of art. Thus, he offers an analogy for a perfectly double-coded artwork referring to "good jazz or classical music: One finds much on successive listening or close examination of the score that one didn't catch the first time through; but the first time through should be so ravishing – and not just to specialists – that one delights in the replay." [3]

The concept of double-coding is also used in architecture – as for example in Charles Jencks' 1977 *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* – to describe architecture whose playful elements contain historic references simultaneously allowing a perception on the surface but also a reflective perception open to complex significations. In a similar way, Paul de Man, in his 1979 *Allegories of Reading*, distinguishes between a rhetoric and aesthetic reading, the former being more analytical, distant and attentive and the latter more sensual and immersive.

The concept of double-coding leads to a kind of democratic aesthetics: In contrast to the conceptual *modern* artwork, the *postmodern* artwork attends to both demands on art (pleasure and reflection) at the same time, liberating the audience to decide about the depth of its engagement. If one reads Fiedler with Barth, the gap which Fiedler urged to close has moved from different artifacts to different ways of perception: the new "high" art is the coding of and search for the *deeper* meaning, the old "low" art is a superficial perception.

Against this background one can argue that writing about media art today can still undertake distinctions concerning the aesthetic potential (and arguably value) of a specific artwork. However, such distinction and evaluation can no longer apply old criteria of high and low, reflection and pleasure, meaning and presence. Rather it has to discuss the potential of an artwork to allow for an encounter with the artwork on different levels of engagement. The following discussion intends to illustrate such constitution of an artwork and approach to it with a classical example of interactive art from the early days of the artistic use of digital technology.

Interactive viewing as remediation: A case study of double-coded perception

Der Zerseher (literally, "dis-viewer," also known as *Iconoclast*) by Joachim Sauter and Dirk Lüsebrink (1992) is an installation where the viewers deconstruct a painting by looking at it. The painting – Boy *with a Child-Drawing in His Hand* (ca. 1525) by Giovan Francesco Caroto – is a framed rear projection onto canvas behind which, invisible to the viewer, an eye tracker is installed (camera, PC, video-tracking software). The cam- era sends the information about the viewer's eye movement to the computer, which locates the center of the iris and the point where an infrared light reflects from the viewer's eye. With the resulting data, it can precisely identify the part of the painting the viewer is looking at. This part of the painting is consequently distorted. The observer who encounters this work in a museum environment, not expecting a painting to dissolve under her gaze, realizes that the more she looks at the painting to discover its meaning, the more she destroys the object of her analysis. Because this comes as a surprise, it may contribute to confusion, but it will certainly also reinforce a reflection concerning the difference between this kind of experience of a painting and the more traditional way. It is part of the irony of the work that the painting can be restored only by disinterest in it. If more than thirty seconds elapse without the picture being viewed, it reverts to its original condition.

This installation fundamentally changes the perception of a visual object. As the artists state, "In the past an old master might leave an impression in the mind of the passive onlooker—now the onlooker can leave an impression on the old master." [4] *Der Zerseher* promotes one of the most important qualities of the computer, namely interaction, as Sauter proclaims in an interview. [5] This interaction, this impression (and power) of the onlooker on the old master is the basic experience this artwork provides. The onlooker experiences herself as dis-viewer of a painting looked at. However, a closer look at the meaning of the grammar of interaction reveals that *Der Zerseher* deconstructs the painting presented only on a superficial level while preventing the painting from being deconstructed, dis-viewed in a deeper sense.

Marcel Duchamp once declared that the gaze – that is, the spectator – makes the painting which is mirrored in Jean-Luc Godard's famous saying: "It takes two to make an image". Concerning statements about the participation of the viewer in creating the picture one can argue that de-viewing does not require the technology applied in *Der Zerseher* but – in a less literal and more conceptual way – takes place all the time when looking at a picture. "Making the picture" in this case means to see in it what one brings to it. The viewer is never the passive onlooker that Sauter and Lüsebrink suggest, but rather a person with certain ideas and ways of seeing the world. The viewer carries all the pictures she ever has seen with her when stepping in front of a new picture. She activates all the concepts she has developed about children and childhood when looking at a painting of (and by) a child.

It is this problematic effect of knowledge as overwriting or distorting the perceived painting that inclines Georges Didi-Huberman to suggest a more passive mode of perception, the alternative of "not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of *letting go one's knowledge about it*". [6] Knowledge and concepts govern our perception of reality, not only of painting or art. "We see what we know and what we are" would be a colloquial way to express the fact that perception is an autobiographical act.

If one agrees that the spectator constructs the picture she sees and therefore deconstructs the picture the artist saw while painting, one understands that *Der Zerseher* only renders literal what is a general phenomenon of perception. One could even argue that this interactive installation allows the onlooker less in way of opportunity to make an impression on the old master's painting than would be the case in a painting that does not physically react to the viewer. Because each area of the painting fades away under the viewer's gaze, there is limited time for her to look ideas *into* the painting. The painting seems to escape its appropriation by the viewer. The installation prevents the painting from being de-viewed on the semantic level by de-viewing it on the physical level. It is a shift of deconstruction from the viewer's mind to the canvas' surface.

So far, the argument does not take into account the painting itself. If one moves on from a sensual to an analytical approach to the artwork one will wonder why Sauter and Lüsebrink have chosen this particular painting for their installation. Is there a deeper correlation between the painting and the installation? The artists note: "This painting shows the first documented child-drawing in art history – an adequate metaphor for the state of computer-art at the early 1990s." [7] This explanation affirms the importance of the painting's content for the installation's message. Equally important, however, seems to be the fact that the painting duplicates the action of the installation: looking at a painting.

The mutuality of this feature helps indicate a difference. The boy in this painting does not de-view the drawing in his hand in the physical way. Does he do it in the semantic sense? One doubts this for two reasons: The drawing is assumed to be his own creation, which explains why the boy looks up while presenting the painting rather than looking at it – and, more importantly, the boy represents an innocence that makes him unlikely to be a source of de-viewing. It is understood that a child has developed less in the way of cognitive concepts to guide his perceptions. A child is expected to be more open to reality than an adult, to carry less baggage of other pictures and ideas when stepping in front of a painting.

Hence, the boy in Caroto's painting may indeed be the passive onlooker in whose mind the painter leaves a strong impression. He represents the innocence that the adult viewer no longer possesses. *Der Zerseher* is the symbolic destruction of such innocence and thus becomes symptomatic for the history of art and of media. The boy in Caroto's painting not only represents innocence in an ontogenetic way, but also in a phylogenetic way. Living at a time when images were exceptional in everyday life and may have had a huge impact when encountered in public spaces, this boy also represents the 'childhood of visual culture.' The time of this painting is the time before or just around the birth of the history of art – which, as Didi-Huberman notes, places the figurative under the "tyranny of the *legible"* and was effective in terms of "dissolving or suppressing a universe of questions the better to advance, optimistic to the point of tyranny, a battalion of answers". [8] The child in the painting embodies a certain suggestion of the innocence of mankind in its dialogue with paintings.

By contrast, people today – especially in the Western world – are adult when it comes to the undertaking of looking at paintings and images. We are trained in the reading of paintings, and we are familiar with different modes and forms. Not only impressionism, which caused scandals once, but even the most abstract representation seems usual to us. Painting has more and more moved to the edges of representation, reflecting not only its own materiality as in formalist painting but also its environment beyond the canvas: the tools, the frame, the gallery. Examples are the use of living objects as brushes, such as reeds or naked women in Yves Klein's *Cosmogonies* and *Anthropométries* in the early 1960s, the use of houseflies as paint in Damien Hirst's *Armageddon* (2002), and Daniel Burens *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973), with its moving beyond the gallery space.

The actual content of a painting can often be found in the way of its production and in the way of its presentation, in dialogue with its location. *Der Zerseher* moves one more step in this direction by making the audience an active physical element of the painting. It is one more step away from what is represented on the canvas within its frame toward a meta-reflection. This is

also, as it was the case with Yves Klein's anthropomorphic brushes, a step toward the spectacular. The de-viewing of an inexperienced child from the early sixteenth century seems to be an appropriate symbol for the expression of such a situation of excess and lost paradise. One imagines the artists behind this installation smiling, as proud of their clever production as the child is of his drawing. In this light – the light of art history and visual culture – *Der Zerseher* provides, as it de-views a painting, a clear view of contemporary painting and of viewing itself.

The erotic of art in the cultures of presence and meaning

The concept of double-coded perception as more analytical and distant perception or more sensual and immersive perception can also be discussed with respect to the "culture of presence" in opposition to the "culture of meaning" as developed by Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht in his 2004 *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey.* Gumbrecht attributes the culture of meaning with distance, reflection, interpretation and the culture of presence with the aspects of sensuality and intensity, pleasure and immersion. In opposition to the attempt of interpreting an artifact – and thus taming it – he advocates a sensual connection to the world.

Gumbrecht's concept results from his interest in the material aspects of an artwork, which dates back to 1988 when he co-edited the anthology *Materialities of Communication* (English-language version 1994). The title of his essay in this anthology, "A Farewell to Interpretation," is already allied with Susan Sontag's critique of interpretation in her famous 1964 essay „Against Interpretation". In the same spirit Gumbrecht states: "We should try to reestablish our contact with the things of the world outside the subject/object paradigm (or in a modified version of it) and by avoiding interpretation – without even criticizing the highly sophisticated and highly self-reflexive art of interpretation that the humanities have long established". [9]

Gumbrecht sees his position as in line with other condemnations of the paradigm of interpretation and dominance of semiotics and "intellectualism," such as George Steiner's 1986 *Real Presence,* Jean-Luc Nancy's 1993 *The Birth to Presence,* and Erika Fischer-Lichte's 2008 *The Transformative Power of Performance: Re-enchanting the World.* In a review Gumbrecht calls the aesthetic put forward in Fischer-Lichte's study the "philosophy of a new aesthetic sensibility" liberated from hermeneutics and semiotics, an "aesthetics for the present time" valid not only in the field of performance but also with respect to poetry or painting. [10]

The future of such „aesthetics for the present time" lies apparently in digital media as a passage in Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* suggests where he considers the "'special *effects'* produced today by the

most advanced communication technologies" as possibly "instrumental in reawakening a desire for presence". [11] Gumbrecht does not further explain this notion and never really applies his concept to digital art. However, the implication that special effects in digital media often do not convey any meaning but only intend to present themselves is in line with the observation in Andrew Darley's 2000 *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* noting the prevalence of technique over content and meaning in contemporary culture, the prevalence of a "culture of the depth-less image," a "fascination with the materiality and mechanics (artifice) of the image itself". [12]

It is exactly such "fascination with the materiality and mechanics" of the image itself that is central to the perception of *Der Zerseher* and many other examples of digital art: from *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv and *Deep Walls* by Scott Snibbe to *Listening Post* by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin and *Bit.Falls* by Julius Popp. From the perspective of Gumbrecht the appropriate engagement with such artworks would be the 'embrace' of their presence as he proposes in his essay "A Farewell to Interpretation". The erotic connotation of this proposition mirrors the final sentence in Sontag's essay „Against Interpretation": "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." [13] The eros of aesthetic immersion seems to be ensured best through a sensual and immersive rather than analytical approach to the artwork. Is, against this background, a close reading reaching beyond the fascination with the materiality and mechanics of an image or installation, a reading as illustrated above with the example of *Der Zerseher* the unerotic destruction of the artwork?

In his essay "Criticism and Truth," published at the same time as Sontag's "Against Interpretation," Roland Barthes notes, "Only reading loves the work, entertains with it a relationship of desire." [14] Although to read is to desire the work and to "want to be the work," to go from reading to criticism intensifies and redirects the desire: "It is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language". [15] Criticism makes the reader embrace herself rather than the work. The desire of one's own language is a form of narcissism or autoeroticism. It is the eroticism of a person who uses interpretation to find her own voice; erotics on the ground of hermeneutics. The invitation to this form of autoeroticism, however, starts with the author of the artifact allowing the audience to enjoy the artwork in both, a rather superficial as well as a deep digging approach. The hermeneutic erotic of the artwork presupposes a double-coded artwork that offers to just fall in love with the materiality of the artwork but also to find love in the semiotics of this materiality.

The role of the artwork in the age of visualized communication

It is digital media that intensify the trend towards spectacle and immersion away from reflection and interpretation. One example is the visualization of communication in social media such as Facebook and Snapchat. The promised deletion of pictures in Snapchat promotes a visual chatting where one does not text that one is going to the movies but sends a snapchat of the entrance to the theater; one does not write about how one is doing but sends a selfie in front of the TV with a drink, feet up, on the coffee table. Snapchat thus promotes the transition – and in terms of media history a return –from the symbolic practices of language to a 'language' of visuality that media philosopher Vilém Flusser predicted as part of the development of digital media in the 1980s. [16] This transition replaces a reflexive communication model of language with an associative model applied to images. The sender's sovereignty over information is reduced from that involved in choosing the words that describe a situation to simply choosing the situation that is proposed for description. In other words, one only has to decide whether a certain moment should be transmitted in a snapshot or not.

The next step in this development of non-verbal and non-reflexive, immersive and frictionless sharing is proposed by Mark Zuckerberg. As he declares in a virtual town hall Q&A session on July 1, 2015 about the role of the Oculus Rift for the future of Facebook: "We'll have AR and other devices that we can wear almost all the time to improve our experience and communication. One day, I believe we'll be able to send full, rich thoughts to each other directly using technology. You'll just be able to think of something and your friends will immediately be able to experience it too if you'd like. This would be the ultimate communication technology." [17] Zuckerberg proposes the same changes in the field of journalism and hopes for "more immersive content like VR" on Facebook calling it "rich content" in contrast to "just text and photos". Thus, in a full-fledged "Facebook-Society" the BBC slogan "We don't just report a story, we live it" could become true in an unexpected and unwanted way once eye witnesses with immersive material on developing stories draw the audience from extensively researched and analysed reports. [18]

The ongoing boom in affective computing and wearables may lead to a form of communication that is, deep inside and through its medial setting, an obstacle against interpretation – though not at all against algorithmic analysis. This situation raises the question of how art – especially art working with/in digital material/ity – should reflect the cultural consequences of technological advancement. Will it simply embrace the development and celebrate the beautification of visualization as Aaron Koblin, head of Google's Data Arts team, suggests: "in the hands of a new generation of digital artists, data is undergoing a metamorphosis – from a unit of information into a fascinating, beautiful, and expressive medium"? [19] The heroes of such

perspective of "data-driven digital art" are "artists" such as Facebook employee Nicholas Felton "who tracks the data generated by his everyday activities – what he eats, who he meets, where he goes – to create beautiful annual reports of his life." [20] To be sure, there is nothing wrong with beautification and fascination – as long as it does not degenerate into mere "Data Love" [21] but still invites to what John Barth considered the second stage of perception where one starts to see more and think more about the work at hand. However, if beautification and fascination does not lure the audience into a deep digging approach, if digital art does not side with meaning, it may be popular but hardly high in terms of deep reading. [21]

References

1. Jay David Bolter, "From writing space to designing mirrors", in: Roberto Simanowski, *Digital Humanities as Digital Media Studies. Interviews on Politics, Culture, Aesthetics and Literacy in New Media* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016).
2. John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in: John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 193-206: 202f.
3. John Barth, The Literature of Replenishment, 203.
4. www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/der-zerseher
5. Joachim Sauter, "Interview with Susanne Schuricht" in: *Chinese Art and Collection Magazine 2001* (http://www.sushu.de/sauter_sushu_01_en.pdf).
6. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, transl. John Goodman (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005), 16.
7. www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/der-zerseher
8. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images,* 8 and 6.
9. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 56.
10. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, 2005. "Sanfte Wende: Erika Fischer-Lichte findet eine Ästhetik für unsere Gegenwart" in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (January 22, 2005), 18.
11. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, XV.
12. Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge 2000), 192 and 114.
13. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), 14.
14. Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* transl. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 93.
15. Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 94.
16. Vilém Flusser. *Does Writing Have a Future?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
17. William Davis, „Mark Zuckerberg and the End of Language," in: *The Atlantic*, September 11, 2015 (www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/09/silicon-valley-telepathy-wearables/404641).
18. Roberto Simanowski, *Facebook-Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2016).
19. Aarob Koblin, „Data Visions – Think with Google" (2012) https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/data-visions.html]
20. Aarob Koblin, „Data Visions – Think with Google"
21. Roberto Simanowski, *Data Love. The Seduction and Betrayal of Digital Technologies* (New York: Columbia University Press 2016).
21. Roberto Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning. Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 2011).