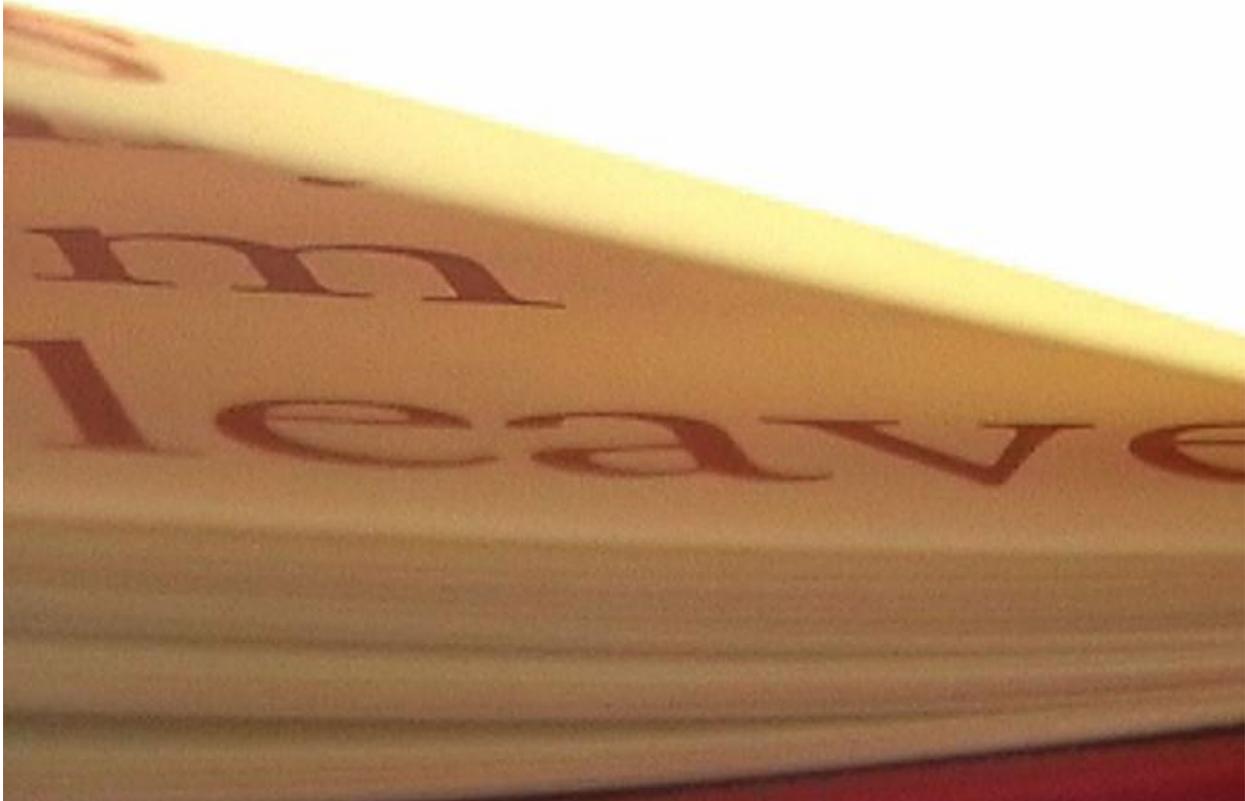


# COLLATERAL DAMAGE: CLOUDS, CRIMINALITY AND CHATBOTS

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This paper comments on language within digital technologies, regarding the application, modification, mutation and transformation of language(s) within such environments. It takes the position that the language(s) of technology, continue to be intimately entwined with philosophical questions about the nature of language, while in some cases extending and reshaping them.



*Scripta Manent, Verba Volant, Sheena Calvert, 2002. Artist's book, exploring the various qualities of material language, and the philosophies which which address them.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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This paper is intended as a series of small remarks, provocations, or pointers toward questions of language within online, digital contexts. Although beyond the scope of this paper, there is a more detailed argument to be made that the ways in which language frames experience, identity, concepts, and political and social realities, in online and digital contexts needs to be thought through entirely differently; and that philosophies of language which are primarily locked into a fixed, linear, speech or print-based mode of critique, cannot account for, nor adequately address, the specificities and shifting realities of language within those environments. As Ludwig Wittgenstein reminded us, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, language games change depending upon context, wherein new rules apply. [1] What language

games are we now playing, and why? Nonetheless, the primary question always remains: how do language and knowledge and/or experience interact? What becomes provocative is considerations of which philosophical questions about language remain the same, and which change, once we enter these new information playgrounds and environments. In terms of power, social interaction, identity and languages' relation to consciousness, there are new agendas, higher stakes, and altered realities. For example, in her paper *Precairous Flux*, Donna Leishman argues that testing the porousness of the boundaries between language and reality takes on a new significance within online contexts, when 'tongue-in-cheek' Tweets become the subject of court cases, and move towards criminal action.

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## LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTS

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Johanna Drucker, in her essay, *Digital Ontologies*, draws attention to one of the fundamental questions of Western philosophy; the relationship between linguistic signs and the representation of thought:

The attempt to understand the connections that link human thought to its representation through the act of forming (in language, image or signs) is central to Western philosophy and aesthetics. [2]

Similarly, Adorno's observation in *Negative Dialectics* that "[O]bjects do not go into their concepts, without leaving a remainder" [3] sets us on a path of thinking about the problematic and unstable relationship between language and the conceptual or physical reality it attempts to describe. Adorno suggests that language is a totalizing system which, unsuccessfully, attempts conceptual closure; and which in turn mis-directs, or suppresses experience, along with the evidence provided by the object itself. The question for this paper, and this research, becomes: where might we glimpse the kinds of linguistic 'remainders' he points towards, with their potential for revolution/redefinition, within the digital context? If objects of thought, are always more than their concepts (as apprehended through language); if they stubbornly refuse to be subsumed under such crude categories, then we might want to consider the many spaces and places within the 'digital,' where experience bleeds beyond the boundaries of the language used to frame or contain it. For example, the metaphors used to speak of intangible realities, such as 'Cloud' computing, arguably show the limits of language in matching either concept, or experience in digital contexts (later this metaphor will be explored as a version of the 'monstrous sublime'). However, where Adorno is speaking about the 'preponderance of the object' as something that breaks through the shell of the concept, what could be more immaterial, or non-objective than the digital? Leaving us to consider how we might use Adorno's ideas in this environment. I am indebted to Dr. Mark Walker for reminding me that when Adorno says, "[...] objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder' what *concept[s]* are we talking about? [...]" Do concepts themselves change in the digital reality, and if so, how does language follow and explore this expanded notion of the concept?

Hegel thought that any kind of stable knowledge is an illusion. William Wallace translates his ideas in this way:

There is, in fact, a logical flux, a passing of contents tracelessly into one another, which is even more ineluctable and ultimate than the sensible flux from which it is so easy to retreat by an effort of abstraction. This logical passage makes it impossible to achieve the clearness, distinctness, and fixity which the Understanding desiderates, except for a limited range or span.[4]

In Hegel's view, thought cannot even rely upon the 'objects' of thought to stay fixed, still, closed, in order that it can perform its operations. There is always (despite our best efforts to contain it), movement, contingency, and slippage between the concepts, terms, and objects, which we apply our thought to; perhaps more so in an immaterial, digital space of infinite dimensions which operates in a state of flux and impermanence.

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## LANGUAGE AND POWER

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The Situationist International's, texts on language and power, highlight the historical problem of language:

The problem of language is at the heart of all the struggles between the forces striving to abolish the present alienation and those striving to maintain it. [...] We live within language as within polluted air. [5]

In 1963 and 1966 respectively, The Situationist International and Mustapha Khayati published two articles on language and power within the magazine/journal *Internationale Situationniste*. The first, entitled *All the King's Men* offers a stark reminder of the ways in which language, in the grasp of authoritarian forces, does damage to the authenticity of human experience, by always designating something 'other,' in the servicing of capitalist ideology: "Under the control of power, language always designates something other than authentic experience." [5] The second essay, *Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary*, goes further, in claiming that, in the contemporary context, thought is in danger of becoming subordinate to mathematical rigor, stripped of its insubordinate, poetic potential via the 'instrument' (and instrumental use) of language. Both texts reiterate the Situationist theme of resistance to such power moves by proposing a language, liberated from its role as information, and which recognizes and harnesses the fact that: "[Words] are not completely automated: unfortunately for the theoreticians of information, [they] are not in themselves 'informationist'; they contain forces that can upset the most careful calculations." [5] Johanna Drucker returns to this point, when she says: "In every generation, some version of this question has been posed: If it were possible to understand the logic of human thought, would there be a perfect representation of it in some unambiguous, diagrammatic symbol set of entities and dynamic relations among them?"

Acutely aware of the nuances of language, including being opposed to any use of the ideologically-infused suffix 'ism,' frequently attached to their name, the Situationists both recommended and enacted an aesthetic and political *détournement* of language, with a view to reversing the power relations implicit in its various forms. The contemporary question that leads on from their work, is not whether complexities of power and language still reverberate within digital, contexts (clearly they do), but to ask whether the terms of engagement around those power dynamics have changed? Do we need new forms of *détournement* for these new times?

The Situationists said: "News is the Poetry of power." During the recent riots in London, much use was made of the word 'criminality' within the media accounts of the events. This word, reflecting a historical notion of a criminal class, was used as propaganda for a right-wing agenda. Language brands and proliferates spontaneously within re-tweets and news articles. The language game is the same, but the extent and speed of its pervasive reach is infinitely greater than the Situationists could have imagined.

Foucault, in *The Thought from Outside*, [6] argued that language is empty form. We fill it with subjectivity, but it pre-exists us, as a series of generic, non-particular entities. This is, perhaps, hard to think since we are always 'within' language, as we consider it. He says that the 'I' becomes our identity, but one born of an empty pronoun which lies in wait for a subject to utter it. We take over and bring alive the empty forms of language, with our subjectivity, but all language precedes *us*.

Only a determinate subject can animate the 'I.' We speak, we blog, we confess, we startle, we network, we dis/connect, through a language, which waits to be directed to a content, towards a goal. As Foucault reminds us, language, in itself, has an existence that is prior to its directedness; prior to its role in communication. It lies in wait, for a subject to inhabit it, and this strikes at the heart of simplistic notions of identity. The primary 'I' of language is impersonal, arbitrary, indifferent. The American Journalist, A. J. Leibling's statement that: "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one" has been reconfigured and infinitely extended, to the limits of that concept, and beyond; transgressing a previous boundary, to an 'extreme.'

On September 8th, 2011, an article appeared in the online Telegraph, [7] outlining an experiment in which two science students had set up a randomized conversation between a pair of Chatbots, or online avatars/robots. Normally programmed to converse with a human being, the experiment involved them conversing with one another, during which the discussion quickly turned to the existence/or not, of God. What became compelling was observing where the breakpoints came in that staggered, awkward exchange; how the logic quickly broke down, and the nuances and subtleties of conversational form were lost; how inhuman it was, without being able to explain exactly why. These synthetic voices lack the timbre and richness of the human voice: their timing is fractionally, but significantly out of sync; lacking a human agent to recognize that subtlety.

It is a reminder that so much of communication is in the gaps, the spaces, the interstices, in the non-informational, non-informational attributes of language. Expression in language is the unmediated dimension of language: its non-representational, libidinal form (its excess). Language is much more than simple point-for-point communication.

When the Situationist International, in 1963, wrote: "Under the control of power, language always designates something other than authentic experience," [8] Bell Labs were automating the human voice, forcing a new space to open up between writing and speech, in the poetry of code; one as fundamentally detached from authentic experience as it is possible to be. This new relation between language and experience, between the subject and language, has only just begun to be understood.

Tone, timing, emphasis and modulation: these are all tiny, but essential pointers to the 'human' in language, where tone of voice, pacing, and emphasis is everything. We can tell an entire story with the nuances and inflections of our speech, and with the coded spaces between elements; we can convey disinterest, annoyance, empathy, control. How can coded language simulate these types of intramundane, to use Adorno's term for the significance of minutiae, details of our interactions? They require a sensitive and attuned human agent, to be constantly reading for signals, and a feedback system to be in place, which allows for the subtle interplay between signs and responses, space for error and adjustment; and the ability to inhabit multiple timings. Understanding is found in the far-from-seamless flow of such interactions, it's not a question of communication, but of 'listening' and 'hearing' differently; and of a

heightened sensitivity to the most miniscule deviations. What happens to these intramundane nuances of language in the digital space, and especially within synthetic speech and artificial language?

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## LANGUAGE AND THE SUBLIME

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Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* remarked: “The feeling of the sublime [for Kant] is as a trembling between nature and freedom.” [9] Lyotard has talked about the ‘Sublime’ as that which invokes the unrepresentable, keeping open that which would otherwise be foreclosed by information technologies and by commodification. [10] For Adorno, Benjamin and Lyotard, concepts do not account for particularities. Whereas, the sublime recognizes the tension between reason and the imagination; between what can be understood, and what can be experienced. This form of difference involves the mind driving towards the limits of its abilities, toward the edge of conceptuality.

Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment*, makes reference to the ‘prodigious’ or ‘monstrous’ as being at, or exceeding the limit of, the sublime as a pure (immanent) magnitude. “An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept.” [11] In this sense, the monstrous can be seen to aggressively exceed and consume its own concept; courting self-destruction. This form of the sublime violates the commonality of judgments by exceeding our powers of apprehension. Cloud computing is a form of the sublime (monstrous) aesthetic, which exceeds the concept: libidinal, erotic, unrepresentable. It is immaterial and non-comprehensible in its potential infinitude. Clouds are (arguably), beyond representation; they are indescribable, limitless, exceeding their own concept. What could be more sublime than clouds? What could be more immaterial than the digital?

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## LANGUAGE AS CONSTELLATION

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‘Constellation’ is Walter Benjamin’s term for the method of relating ideas in a montage of fragmentary, disjunctive, often temporally unrelated configurations, which nonetheless produce meaning by allowing unseen correspondences to emerge, instantaneously. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin explains the constellation as the place where:

[I]deas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements... Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. [12]

Adorno’s understanding of constellation, which he borrowed from Benjamin, has been explained by Martin Jay as: “a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle.” [13]

For Adorno, concepts (mental constructs, or ideas) are how identity thinking operates. In conceptual thinking, which wants to make a simple or generic classification of something thought, objects of knowledge are ‘blocked’ by such thought, from achieving their fullness. As part of this ‘classifying procedure,’ concepts profoundly prohibit knowledge of the object, and strip away what Adorno would term the intramundane: the particularities, or singularities; what makes an object what it is, but not in an essentialist sense. Conceptual thinking traps us into never seeing what lies beyond our concepts, in turn excluding the truth of things, and this is a major problem for thought, and a sticking point in terms of languages’ ability to provide access to truth.

His answer to this problem is that concepts should 'enter into a constellation [which] illuminates the specific side of the object.' Concepts block, while constellations illuminate; concepts limit, while constellations expand and proliferate. Concepts are uncreative, while constellations are creative, and constellations are process-driven, rather than limited by outcomes, or defined by pre-existing categories. The concept by itself, cannot *but* formalize, exclude (difference), freeze (in static time), and identify. However, all that needs to happen is that constellations are allowed to explode the myth of identity thinking; such groupings of thought as are provided by the constellation cause identity thinking to evaporate. Single concepts are displaced by combinations of multiple concepts, such that subjective thought replaces abstract identity. The online, digital space, wherein language is constantly in a relationship of constellation-to-constellation, may be the ideal environment in which to recognize the power of the constellation to explode identity thinking, and its limited conceptual apparatus for apprehending the richness and multiplicity of the 'out there.'

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## COLLATERAL DAMAGE?

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In conclusion, the question I wish to pose in this paper is simply this: if we are collateral damage to the continual influence (some might say 'tyranny') of language, how do we resist and rethink this, in the new information environments and playgrounds we inhabit? Moreover, if the persistent taboo which haunts language is making any attempt to stand outside it, in order to assess its influence, how do we break out of this double-bind? This transhistorical taboo consists of talking about language from within language. Arguably, there is no 'view from nowhere' that can allow us to speak about the ways in which language forms our experience, and our understanding, without using language. Even the most radical excavators of language (including Lyotard/Derrida/Nietzsche) have embarked upon this exploration from within the logic of the linear text/book, and the 'laws' of written/visual language.

How might we philosophize differently about language in a digital space? Perhaps Deleuze points to some possibilities. As John Rajchman explains, for Deleuze:

[P]hilosophy is not theory; it is an art of plunging into this peculiar zone of 'the unthought,' that destabilizes clichés and ready-made ideas, in which both art and thought come alive and discover their resonances with one another. [14]

We need mutually cooperative works of art and theory which consciously interrogate new forms of language in digital contexts, and ask searching philosophical questions, since in the end, these are ethical, not just aesthetic concerns.

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