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The New Aesthetic and its Politics

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Let us be clear: just as my work on the form of the book in the digital age was concerned not with the physical or digital object, but with people's understanding and emotions concerning literature; just as my drone works are not about the objects themselves, but about the systems – technological, spatial, legal and political – which permit, shape and produce them, and about the wider implications of seeing and not seeing such technological, systematic, operations; so the New Aesthetic is concerned with everything that is not visible in these images and quotes, but that is inseparable from them, and without which they would not exist.

Much of the critical confusion around the New Aesthetic has clustered around the use of the term “aesthetic”, by which I meant simply, “what it looks like” – I wasn't even really aware of how key the term aesthetics was to art historical and critical discourse. As a result of my use of this term, much of the critical reaction to it has only looked at the surface, and has – sometimes wilfully it feels – failed to engage with the underlying concerns of the New Aesthetic, its own critique and politics. This criticism still concerns itself only with images, despite the wealth of texts also included in the project, and the numerous recorded lectures I've given on the subject. The tumblr is just one aspect of, the sketchbook or playlist for, a wider project. In short, this form of criticism has been looking at the pixelated finger, not the moon.

There are two necessary understandings to counter this, I think. One is the important recognition that the New Aesthetic project is undertaken within its own medium: it is an attempt to “write” critically about the network in the vernacular of the network itself: in a tumblr, in blog posts, in YouTube videos of lectures, tweeted reports and messages, reblogs, likes, and comments. In this sense, from my perspective, it is as much work as criticism: it does not conform to the formal shapes – manifesto, essay, book – expected by critics and academics. As a result, it remains largely illegible to them, despite frequent public statements of the present kind.

But I think the deeper and more interesting aspect of this misreading of the New Aesthetic is that it directly mirrors what it is describing: the illegibility of technology itself to a non-technical audience. From the very first post about the New Aesthetic I have been talking about what these images reveal about the underlying systems that produce them, and/or the human viewpoint which frames them. It is impossible for me, with an academic background in Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence, with a practical background in literary editing and software programming, with a lifetime of interacting with the internet and other systems, not to look at these images and immediately start to think about not what they look like, but how they came to be and what they become: the processes of capture, storage, and distribution; the actions of filters, codecs, algorithms, processes, databases, and transfer protocols; the weight of datacenters, servers, satellites,

cables, routers, switches, modems, infrastructures physical and virtual; and the biases and articulations of disposition and intent encoded in all of these things, and our comprehension of them.

And it's worth bearing in mind too that many of the images are snapshots, or stills, in many forms, and not fully-formed objects. Whether a frame from an online video, or a screen capture of an online map (remember, digital maps are animations on pause), or fragments of code or spam; all of these are snippets, they are only momentary representations of ongoing processes – as indeed the New Aesthetic is intended to be. Each image is a link, hardcoded or imaginative, to other aspects of a far greater system, just as every web page and every essay, and every line of text written or quoted therein, is a link to other words, thoughts and ideas. Again, in this the New Aesthetic reproduces the structure and disposition of the network itself, as a form of critique.

Let's look at some recent examples. Every satellite image posted is a meditation on the nature of mapping, that raises issues of perspective and power relationships, the privilege of the overhead view and the monopoly on technological agency which produces it. A photograph of Eric Schmidt wearing a flak jacket – as he does in his Twitter avatar – is a spur to investigate the circumstances of the photograph and the self-presentation of the corporation. It was taken on a visit to Iraq in 2009, when Google promised to digitise what remains of the National Museum's collection, raising further questions about the digitisation and subsequent ownership of cultural patrimony, and of Google's involvement in political activity and international diplomacy through its Google Ideas think-tank, which actively supports a programme of regime change in certain parts of the world. A photograph of the "Free Bradley Manning" contingent of the San Francisco pride parade in 2011 is an entrypoint to a consideration of intersectional politics, of the parallels between the political and the personal in an age when networks permit the sudden rupture of secure systems by individual conscious actions, when states can use such ruptures to justify ever greater clampdowns of freedom and transparency (both in the sense of information freedom, but also the ever-threatened right of the individual to remain opaque and illegible to the state), as well as the tendency of the media and popular protest to focus on the individuals (Manning, Assange, Snowden) and the technological front-ends to such disclosures (Wikileaks) rather than the deeper transfer networks, protocols, or even, god forbid, the actual substance of the information disclosed. A screenshot of a promotional video for the telepresence company Anybot which features a robot wearing a bow tie commanding a human employee to "work faster!" is in one frame a terrifying vision of labour futures, and an indictment of visions of automation that emerge from executive and engineering cultures which perceive the value extractable by technological innovation differently to the major currents of social advancement throughout the 20th Century. An Adobe-sponsored "prank" at a bus stop – 12 million views on Youtube – where a live artist inserts passersby into a digital advertisement speaks to our internalisation of surveillance culture and our corresponding expectations of the individualisation of technology, and its framing by corporations – where in the video are the passersby who felt shocked, violated or just plain creeped out by such an intervention? Are they edited out, or did they simply not exist, and if not, why the hell not? This individualisation effect is seen at every level of technology, from the dot which places each of us at the center of the digital map, up to the robot sensor networks which rely on a codified abstract of the world to guide them, rather than the truth on the ground: the map indeed becomes the territory. Powerpoint default styles which describe corporate visions are reproduced in the NSA prism slides and the US Army's famous "death by powerpoint", even as those corporate slides are infected by the absence of meaning best expressed in the war on abstract nouns. Endless views of protest, repression, revolt and schism are framed not through the lens of critique, but the lens of iPhones and iPads held aloft; photography, unable to see the network, photographs photography, but in the glitches and unicode characters of printed database commands and international shipping labels, an underlying structure is made visible, the horsemeat scandal of information systems. And so on and so forth; it's not the writing that's hard, it's the thinking.

The New Aesthetic is not superficial, it is not concerned with beauty or surface texture. It is deeply engaged with the politics and politicisation of networked technology, and seeks to explore, catalogue, categorise,

connect and interrogate these things. Where many seem to read only incoherence and illegibility, the New Aesthetic articulates the deep coherence and multiplicity of connections and influences of the network itself.

I believe that much of the weak commentary on the New Aesthetic is a direct result of a weak technological literacy in the arts, and the critical discourse that springs from it. It is also representative of a far wider critical and popular failure to engage fully with technology in its construction, operation and affect. Since at least the introduction of the VCR – perhaps the first truly domesticated computational object – it seems there has been a concerted, societal rejection of technical understanding, wherein the attitude that “I don’t understand this and therefore don’t like this and therefore I will not investigate this” is ascendant and lauded. This attitude manifests in the low-level Luddite response to almost every technical innovation; in the stigmatisation of geek culture and interests, academic and recreational; in the managerial culture of economic government – and in the elevation of sleek, black-box corporate-controlled objects, platforms and services, from the iPhone to the SUV, over open-source, hackable, comprehensible and shareable alternatives. This wilful anti-technicalism, which is a form of anti-intellectualism, mirrors the present cultural obsession with nostalgia, retro and vintage which was one of the spurs for the entire New Aesthetic project; it is boring, and we reject it.

But if we don’t move the debate to a deeper level, none of this will change. There is a justified and rising opposition to drone warfare (and in the last week, to issues around computational surveillance and intelligence), which may or may not produce lasting political change; but even if successful this will only change the images and objects employed, not the modes of thinking, coupled to technological mastery, which drive it. Without a concerted effort to raise the level of debate, we just loop over and over through the same fetishisations and reifications, while the real business of the world continues unexamined. Those who cannot understand technology are doomed to be consumed by it. (The idea that these ideas lack politics is especially laughable when you look at what’s happening in much of the art world, and most of the digital art world. A young, post-Iraq generation who have had all hope of political participation kettled out of them, and are then endlessly accused of apathy to boot. No wonder it’s all personal brands, car culture, glossy gifs and facebook performances.) Technology is political. Everything is political. If you cannot perceive the politics, the politics are being done to you.

I was recently asked if the New Aesthetic would coalesce into “something more serious”: a book, collection of essays, or a manifesto. While I would like to, and probably should, produce a book or book-like object at some point, it itself would not be “the New Aesthetic”, but a commentary upon some of the issues it raises. I strongly reject the notion that a manifesto is an appropriate or “more serious” (and thus worthy) way to address the issues under discussion here, as it would represent precisely the kind of premature codification of the subject that the New Aesthetic explicitly sets out to avoid. (While admitting, with respect to that statement, all the contradictions presented by this piece of writing: where the two accounts differ, trust the network and not this document.)

In part, this unwillingness to codify is a reproduction of the network’s own refusal to be pinned down, controlled, routed and channeled, which must be considered one of its core, inherent qualities. But it is also born of a sincere desire not to foreclose discussion: the New Aesthetic may be considered a work, a conversation, a performance, an experiment, and a number of other things (although, please, not a movement). This intention of keeping the field open was, and perhaps remains, naive. Nevertheless, I firmly believe it is the way it has to be. As such, the presentation of a so-called gaudy heap of images is an appeal to, and act of confidence in, the network itself, in the systems and people that comprise it, to follow their own ideas and intuitions, educate themselves and, outwith a hierarchical commentariat, come to their own conclusions. The onus is on the reader to explore further, just as and because the onus is on the individual in a truly networked politics. So why is it important to critique the critique as well? Because we live in a world shaped and defined by computation, and it is one of the jobs of the critic and the artist to draw attention to the world as it truly is.

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