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Some Brief Remarks on a Theory of Superface

The superface seduces the subject just as much as it permanently withdraws from it. Superface is between surface and interface. Vilém Flusser states: "Surfaces are surfaces of something: they are skins. The traditional surfaces are surfaces of bodies. The new surfaces are surfaces of concepts. The traditional surfaces are the result of a movement away from the concrete and towards the abstract. The new surfaces are a movement from the last abstraction towards the concrete. Where those two skins meet is where we are at present."[1] (Flusser 1993: 58-59)

But *where* is this in theory and in practice? The net project 'superfaces' attempts to answer this question by reconstructing in theory and depiction in art relations between human sight and digital code. This is done by means of the *periscientific category* "superface". As the starting point for this project, eleven theses on the relationship between surface, image and superface theoretically define the superface:

Surface becomes image when what lies 'under' or 'behind' ceases to be significant.

Whereas surface represents the outer (material) world itself, the (technical) image symbolizes its recreation in and from the virtual sphere.

The technical image (e.g. the screen) does not possess its own deep structure, but it can simulate any other deep structures. This means: It is all possible deep structures. This makes it the superface's ideal emanation.

The surface defines the order of the material world (the production); the area of the image, on the other hand, defines the order of the symbolic (the simulation). The latter's perfect expression is the superface.

It is the purpose of the technical image to either negate or eliminate every sensible space beyond itself. The screen realizes both utopia and dystopia of the absolute visibility of the world. For the first time, it constitutes the factual totality of the world as a One World.

The superface is the demiurgical principle of the One World. Its scope of creation is unlimited, acyclic and self-referential.

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[1] "Flächen sind Oberflächen von etwas: es sind Häute. Die traditionellen Flächen sind Oberflächen von Körpern. Die neuen Flächen sind Oberflächen von Begriffen. Die traditionellen Flächen sind Folge einer Bewegung vom Konkreten weg ins Abstrakte. Die neuen sind Folge einer Bewegung aus der letzten Abstraktion dem Konkreten entgegen. Wo diese beiden entgegengesetzten Häute zusammentreffen, dort stehen wir gegenwärtig."

The superface changes the world by changing the in-terpretation of the world. At the same time it demands *and* realizes the control of the symbolic over the material, of the representation over the represented.

Superface turns around all vectors of meaning, ultimately the relationship between what is signifying and signified: The re-presentation becomes the projection.

Surface is a border area; the image, on the other hand, is a transgressing area. The superface ultimately makes the transgression of borders impossible by eradicating all limitations of representation.

Surface simply exists: sensuously superface, on the other hand, exists in two ways: dependent on sense and creating sense. In superface signifier and signified coincide.

In superface sight encounters code, the two merge and create a new quality of reality.

The *emanation* of superface *refers* in a double sense to the formation of an "order of simulation" (Baudrillard): The superface displays *and* authenticates this order. How can this be understood? In the fable of Borges referred to by Baudrillard, a kingdom's cartographers produced a map so detailed that the emerging relationship of direct representation ultimately forced the map to disintegrate together with the kingdom. Baudrillard reverses the relationship of representation described by Borges in an *attempt* to exemplify the order of simulation: One could say the map *now* precedes the territory, that it "[…] engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map." (Baudrillard 1996:1). But even this does not seem sufficient to him. Baudrillard continues: today, "the sovereign difference" between map and territory, between the representing and the represented has disappeared. It would therefore be more accurate to say – and this is where the superface connects with the simulation: The map transformed the abstract space into concrete places and thus subjugated the earth's *surface* to human rule. Today, however, superface transforms all concrete places into abstract places (randomly interchangeable *and* constructible) spaces and thus subjugates any relationship of representation to the rule of the code. The operation of a substantiating representation of space (an all other dimensions of reality) using 'maps' has thus not become impossible, but it has only mythical functions by now.

In a very abstract manner, one could say: The superface developed from the second transformation of the perception of surface. The first transformation was the development of the difference between surface and meaning and the birth of the idea of a beyond – both in the spatial and the religious sense of a kingdom-come. The second transformation of the perception of surface is closely linked to the dissemination of screen media. In the course of this transformation, it became increasingly apparent that certain optical impressions withdraw from

this duality, that there are surfaces which refer to no meaning outside of themselves. Precisely these are surfaces which we call superface.

The *idea* of the superface is older than the technical screen with which we currently associate it. Pre-technical superfaces are the crystal balls of the clairvoyant and the magic mirror of the magician. Based on the will of the expert observer, they can view any place and any time. Magic mirrors feature in innumerable fairytales and legends; right up to the present day, the crystal ball symbolizes occult knowledge and magical practices. The idea of the magic of the crystal ball or the mirror is a result of humanity's old desire for something which shows the whole world and can transform it into the One World. Crystal balls and magic mirrors are the dream of the superface before their (technical) realization. The link from the crystal ball and the magic mirror to the screen is just as historic as it is futurological: The emergence of the superface is a sign and indication of the gradual re-enchantment of the world and the emergence of new magical and religious practices in the context of machines with the primary interfaces screen and video projector. The superface creates desire for the divine sight that can see everything at once. It remains to be seen what price will be paid for this.

Screens are typical places where superfaces emanate today. What is behind the screen – the tube, the plasma elements, etc. is different from what the image means. In contrast to the conventional image, where image and medium are a physically inseparable combination, image and carrier are only coupled on the level of the code and of its actual form of representation, depending on the specific format. It should therefore be distinguished between the screen as a surface (material) and the screen as superface (symbolic-immaterial). For the fly crawling on it, the screen is the surface, for the people to whom it shows/generates the world, it is the superface.

By the depth and the weight of the apparatus, traditional screens based on picture tubes suggest a material quality that is negated in the superface. It was not before the development of TFT and plasma monitors, but in particular the video projector that it was possible for superfaces to develop and be perceived: Now the immateriality of the superfaces had found its adequate technical expression. In contrast to the classic picture tube, TFT and plasma monitors do not even produce an illusion of a *boîte à l'italienne*. Right from the outset, they rule out the possibility of something being 'inside there', which is in any way related to the content that is shown on the surface.

The *ideal* superface ultimately has not real spatial dimension of depth and no longer exists materially. It is produced by the video projector, which transforms smooth surfaces into superfaces – irrespective of their other qualities. This turns all surfaces into virtual superfaces. The superface is place and interface of a double projection. The video projector, on the one hand, projects the code that has been transformed into light waves; the observer, as always,

projects his sense into what he perceives by means of the light. Where the projector's light is reflected from the surface (which therein becomes superface) is into the eye, the observer's meaning is reflected into the projecting lens and the code behind it.

The omnipresence of the screen merely marks a transition point in the social dissemination and impact of the technically generated image: The idea of the superface and the collective experience of its existence. The perception vortex generated by the screen results in an increasing number of surfaces in everyday life being transformed into superfaces. One example of this is black leather surfaces. We regard them as an expression of the human desire to be surrounded by superfaces. The black leather surface is not really a superface but merely its reflex in a wishful dream, the *shadow* of the superface. Due to their semi-reflective quality, they provide the observer with the insinuation of the image or, more precisely, the in-sinuation of the re-presentation.

To once again quote Vilém Flusser: "The traditional images are mirrors. They catch the vectors of meaning approaching us from the world, codify them and reflect them, codified, on a surface. Therefore it is correct to question them on their meaning. The technical images, on the other hand, are projections. They catch meaningless signs that approach them from the world (photons, electrons), and they codify them to give them meaning. Therefore, it is wrong to ask what they mean (except for the meaningless answer: they mean photons). The technical images need to be asked why they mean what they show, as what they show is only a function of what they mean."[2] (Flusser 2000: 54)

The idea of the superface is a virus that attacks perception. It jumps from the eye into the screen and from the screen into the eye and the world.

Whoever wants to expose himself to this virus can find it at: http://www.ueberflaechen.de

Literature

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Flusser, Vilém: Lob der Oberflächlichkeit. Für eine Phänomenologie der Medien, Bensheim: Bollmann.

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[2] "Die traditionellen Bilder sind Spiegel. Sie fangen die aus der Welt an uns herankommenden Bedeutungsvektoren auf, codieren sie um und reflektieren sie, derart umcodiert, auf einer Oberfläche. Daher ist es richtig, bei ihnen zu fragen, was sie bedeuten. Die technischen Bilder indessen sind Projektionen. Sie fangen bedeutungslose Zeichen auf, die aus der Welt auf sie zukommen (Photonen, Elektronen), und sie codieren sie, um ihnen eine Bedeutung zu geben. Daher ist es falsch, bei ihnen zu fragen, was sie bedeuten (außer man gäbe die bedeutungs-lose Antwort: Sie bedeuten Photonen). Zu fragen bei ihnen ist, wozu sie das, was sie zeigen, bedeuten. Denn was sie zeigen, ist nur eine Funktion dessen, wozu sie bedeuten."