

Always Inside, Always Enfolded into the Metainterface: A Roundtable Discussion

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At the moment when post-fictional fictions, essayistic fictions, and design fictions emerge as a cultural dominant, Rettberg, Swanstrom, Nesheim, Anderson and Pold discuss an emerging "aesthetics of infrastructure." Quietly condoned, mostly unnoticed installations of "Camouflaged Cell Concealment Sites" are now being visited by artists such as Betty Beaumont and Trevor Paglen. When our cloudy digital industries are so busily constructing cell phone towers that look like pine trees or Saguaro cactuses (sort of), the role of literary and visual artists may be simply to document these found fictions - for as long as they don't get arrested.

This conversation is published as the second in a series of texts centered around the publication of The Metainterface by Søren Pold and Christian Ulrik Andersen. Other essays in the series include: The Metainterface of the Clouds, Voices from Troubled Shores: Toxi•City: a Climate Change Narrative and Room for So Much World: A Conversation with Shelley Jackson.

This discussion took place during an "EcoDH" seminar at the University of Bergen on June 14, 2018. During the event the participants were exploring books, digital art, and works of electronic literature that address the overlap between digital humanities and environmental humanities.

Scott Rettberg: I just read *The Metainterface* and I have a few questions for you, but first, Lisa Swanstrom is here, and earlier in the week she shared a presentation of her book, *Animal, Vegetable, Digital: Experiments in New Media Aesthetics and Environmental Poetics*. I think there are a lot of relations here between *The Metainterface* and your work, Lisa, particularly in the discussion of these sorts of artifacts that are embedded in the situations they critique.

Lisa Swanstrom: I'm especially interested in any kind of work that, as these both do, reveals infrastructural issues that so often remain invisible, and that's what I like so much about Tung-Hui Hu's book *A Prehistory of the Cloud*. There's been a lot of interest lately in infrastructure as a site of attention, of aesthetic attention particularly. Nicole Starosielski's book about *The Undersea Network*, for example, which is a book that traces the subsea fibre optic networks. She basically scuba-dives her way around the world in

order to chart the cultural history of that technology. I'm also thinking of Betty Beaumont's project "[Camouflaged Cell Concealment Sites](#)," (Villas, 2012) where she goes around and takes pictures of cellphone towers that are disguised as pine trees. They're terribly disguised, as pine trees or Saguaro cactuses, or just really unlikely natural features that you might overlook if you were not looking for them. As well as [Trevor Paglen's](#) work where he goes and looks at cell phone towers and covert infrastructure and seems to narrowly avoid being arrested every time he has a new art project, which is fantastic. So my question is about the aesthetics of infrastructure, because we don't often think of infrastructure of something that we experience and I think your work is so important because you're trying, like these other works, to maybe reveal something about the experiential of nature of that infrastructure. Does that make sense to you, as an impression?

Christian Ulrik Andersen: Yes, yes of course it does. Thanks for the references. I can just add to the list: I think one really old reference is Hans Christian Andersen. Because this is not something new, it's something that was also brought up with the introduction of globalization and the global cable network for Morse code. He writes about this in one of his fairy tales: "The Great Sea Serpent." (Andersen, 1871). It's a fairy tale about how the fish in the ocean see the cable as a sort of enigmatic new snake in the water that they can't make sense of. It's a really interesting parable, reading it today. But this is not a new issue, how to make sense of these things that seemingly do not emit signification.

Søren Bro Pold: In that sense, it also points to how the cloud interface is about this virtualization. That you shouldn't see all the infrastructure. You don't see the infrastructure when you do Facebook on your smartphone, or when you put something in your cloud drive. It looks like any other drive, so it's a concealment of the infrastructure. That's how it works. That's how the cloud becomes apparent to us. And yet there is this whole massive infrastructure out there. And that's part of the problem, basically. Joana Moll's project points very directly to that. All that infrastructure that we don't see when we Google, for instance. And its effects. And that's the core concern of our book, this metainterface. We also try to address how it becomes an issue for me, for us, as users of these technologies. And it's not just—if you take somebody like Trevor Paglen, I like his work, but it's also kind of exotic. It shows the stuff that is hidden, that's dangerous, that's kept apart, behind military lines, etc. — but we also want to show is that this is also right here in our daily culture. It's not just cloud centers or data centers, and the inside of those, but it's also... my Dropbox.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: We also include the work of Timo Arnall. I don't know if you know his work. He has photographed the inside of these large data centers. In his work, and many others, you could argue whether it's a kind of aestheticization of this infrastructure.

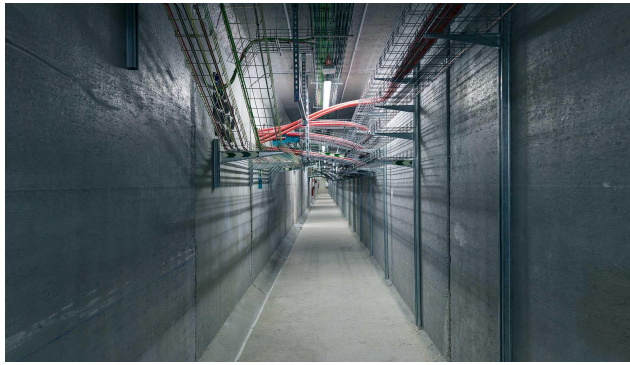


Image from *Internet Machine* by Timo Arnall (2014). image credit: [Timo Arnall](#).

Which I think relates to what the function of the work of art is in this relation to this infrastructure. Because you could argue whether it should just be an aestheticization? You could easily criticize his work for doing that, but I think it's also a work that points to the political aspects of the infrastructure, so in that sense I think it's a little more clever than just aestheticizing the infrastructure. I think that's extremely important that you operate not just at the level of aestheticization, as an artist.

Søren Bro Pold: Yes, and if you look at Paglen's work, it's often blurred, for example, it shows the difficulty of seeing this. We haven't written on Paglen, but he could have been included. One of the things we could have focused more on is this sort of material infrastructure. But I guess every one of our chapters could have been its own book. But we wanted to write a book that combined these different perspectives as a metainterface. That's our overall perspective. In a way we've just started.

Elisabeth Nesheim: I have a more general question. You write in the book about the art of the interface, or the practice of the interface, and I guess that you are talking about art practice as well, in the fact that you create your own interfaces to make sense of the world, or you decide how you want to engage with your data or digital world. Is that a correct assumption?

Søren Bro Pold: Yes. In a way we say two things. We are also saying that we see the work of Scott and Rod, and Shelley Jackson, as design. We see them as trying to make a different metainterface. We've also done some of our work in this vein. We write about that in the final chapter—

Elisabeth Nesheim: So my question is more that, when you say that usability is the human computer interaction thing of the past, and that that is not how we should critique the nature of interfaces today, I'm wondering what kind of role we have, as everyday users? I've been working with Pikel, the open-source software art festival, and the sense there is that if you don't build your own things, with free technology, you know, you're just a slave. It's like almost so that if you don't talk in machine code and binaries, you are already distanced and kind of alienated from the machine. And when you talk about how we don't see beyond the house infrastructure of the cloud today, like if you go inside

Google, I'm kind of struggling a bit with what is our role, as daily consumers. What is our role as critical users of the metainterfaces? Do you have any ideas, any normative advice, after doing this research?

Christian Ulrik Andersen: I think it's a really relevant question.

Søren Bro Pold: In a way you're always part of an interface, right? For instance right now we're all running Macs, and Skype, which I believe is owned by Microsoft. And we could discuss all kinds of criticism within that infrastructure. But there is no outside. And there is no essential level. That's also what you said in the beginning. We're working from the fact that we are embedded. And you know speaking of climate change, you can't go back. And we can't see the climate crisis without the metainterface. So it's not saying, you know, that we need it to go away—

Christian Ulrik Andersen: I think that's important—that you're always inside, always folded into the metainterface. And that also conditions you as a user. This idea that there's a safe haven where you can do something completely different, or switch off, is perhaps naive. Not to criticize maker culture, which we are also part of. But that doesn't mean that you cannot develop tactics as a user. I think that's important. One example of this: I don't know if you're familiar with the work of Eric Snodgrass? He recently wrote and defended his dissertation, *Executions: Power and Expression in Networked and Computational Media* (Malmö University, 2017). I was on his committee and can recommend reading it. He has a really good chapter, "Watching the Med," about the whole Mediterranean Ocean as a sort of highly politicized landscape and how real users operate in this landscape by using media tactically, by switching between different technologies. So when they are at certain places in the ocean they would switch between GPS technologies, and then they'd use Twitter, and then they'd sort of recombine the media in a tactical way. And I think this notion of tactics that we have somehow ruled out, because tactical media from the 90s sort of became platformed, and we started thinking of Facebook and all these sort of cloud services as platformed versions of tactical media. So we sort of had to distance ourselves from them and develop new tactics that completely abandoned them. I think that we need to reconsider ways of doing tactical media in the condition of the metainterface. And that doesn't necessarily mean that we cannot operate on these platforms. Snodgrass's case study is a good example of that.

Scott Rettberg: I have a couple of broader questions. I think one of the leitmotifs throughout the book, and perhaps throughout contemporary digital culture, is that of the reformulation of labor and the relation of labor to technology. That is to say that we may have moved from a conception of the interface as an intermediating layer between humans and the machines that do labor on their behalf, to a system where the interface generates human labor for the benefit of systems that produce profit for corporate entities. And in many cases, these systems, once set into motion, are themselves guided by computation rather than by any direct interaction between the producers and those who develop the architectures of the systems involved. It becomes this sort of post-human machine, which raises the question of what is the point of resistance, or what are

we resisting? Does this constitute a new labor framework, or a new idea of the alienation of labor? Can we be alienated from our labor if we are not conscious of the fact that we are laborers?

Christian Ulrik Andersen: That's a relevant question. I think you put it very nicely. Just to sort of reiterate your question: In computer semiotics, Frieder Nake, who we quote a lot, asks himself what does it take to make a computer work? For instance, what does it take to make a computer search, or sort something? You need to program it. In order to program it, you need to have a conceptual understanding of what it means to search for something or to sort something. You need to understand the problem at a conceptual level and then you can instruct the computer how to do it. And then the user: I can present it to the user in a way that he or she understands it, and maybe even give the impression that he or she searches, or sorts something. But really what the user does is that he or she sets in motion other kinds of labor, including the conceptual labor of the programmer. And what seems to be happening with the new paradigm of computing, in particular with machine learning, is that the conceptualization of what it means to search has become automated. Which means that if I want to program a computer that can search, I base it on a reading of behaviors of searching, on what people like to find, rather than on a conceptual understanding of search. That poses an epistemological problem: a shift from a kind of Platonic idealism to an Aristotelian realism. It produces a kind of entropy, that somehow consumes us. As you point to, it can feel very smooth, because it consumes us. So there is no alienation in this sense. So if you go back and compare this to the dawn of computer semiotics, where they worked with real alienation of the laborers —

Scott Rettberg: —when the humans were the computers—

Christian Ulrik Andersen : —the human laborers that participate in this system do not feel alien to it. And that's of course a problem. But I also think that there are ways of dealing with this. If you think of it as an epistemological problem between idealism and realism, you could also stipulate why did we do this shift? We moved towards this sort of agility of the computing and left behind the idealism of computing, this is also an ideological shift. It's a neoliberal shift that we somehow choose. In relation to climate change, this shift allows us certain opportunities, but it's also part of the problem, for instance the climate problem. So if we want an alternative, it also has to be an ideological shift. It has to be something that we choose to want to see in a different way. So the alienation may not be felt, but if we return to your work, Scott, I think that's also kind of the beauty of it, that you are somehow embedded in it, and you can also see it as an opportunity for new visions and new careers, but you also need to somehow choose a different path. So I think it's very much a question of ideology, of choice, that you are asking for.

Søren Bro Pold: If you want to discuss it more concretely in terms of what we see and what we do and how it does things to us, I think we are seeing a few things currently that are interesting. We're seeing a certain tiredness. The fact that we know, for instance, that Facebook is fraught. Yet we don't necessarily leave Facebook. We are still there, but I still

believe that we distance ourselves somewhat. We are not that honest with our hearts and putting them online as we were perhaps some years back. When these social media were new, there was this idea that "Hey we can collaborate! I can help you. I need to review that restaurant, because it's for the common good, etc." And now, at least to me, but I think many other people, instead think "Yeah, but it's also the business strategy of the Facebooks of the world, and if I review the restaurant I went to I'm also producing content for this platform, and why should I? Every hotel I've ever been to... why should I write reviews? You know, it was *ok*. I'm not complaining. But it was just *ok*, right?" But if I complain, I'll complain online, of course—

Scott Rettberg: Because that's your revenge—

Søren Bro Pold: —but there is this distancing that's interesting. Like, you know, Spotify. You know, it plays, and we listen, but we don't engage in the same way. And then people start buying vinyl records instead. So there's this sort of distancing happening. Which is also our way, as humans, as a culture, to react to what is happening. And yet of course we still produce data for Google, for Facebook.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: Just to return to a real labor situation: The metainterface business is also the economy of sharing, the sharing economy. And if you look for instance at studies of Uber drivers—you could say that they were completely non-alienated to this sharing ecology. But actually what the studies show is that they work for limited time periods. They work for only one year as an Uber driver. And while they're doing it, they develop very different strategies of circumventing the system. If they are categorized as a certain kind of laborious subject they can for instance turn off, reset the system. (Munn, 2018) They constantly develop tactics to deal with this system. So this sense that we are not alienated is perhaps not true. They do feel alienated, and they do try to develop tactics.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, although an Uber driver's situation is different from that of a Google searcher or a Facebook user, in many ways.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: But Søren, I think that you also point to how, even as Facebook users, we also become distanced to the act of participating to the platform. So we develop new tactics.

Søren Bro Pold: What you're doing when you're listening to music on Spotify or watching movies on Netflix is also participating in the way they are profiling tastes—your taste, my taste, our tastes, has become their business model, basically. Because if they can map it, and say you should be listening to something similar, you know if you like Nick Cave, you should listen to this band... you know, try this band, whatever. That's useful for me, of course, but it's also— of course it's also a production process, where I am part of that production process. But in a way you react by being less— in a way, taste was a way of producing difference— in the 80s you were a punker because you didn't like disco or

something. And that was a whole lifestyle. It meant a lot to you. Today I think it means a lot less. The profiling means less. It's not your honest self, in the same way. And culture also changes—

Scott Rettberg: Although maybe that's just revealing the artificiality of taste to begin with. I mean, maybe it's just that the metainterface has made those structures apparent to us, now that someone else is quantifying them—

Søren Bro Pold: Yeah, yeah, in that sense you could say the construction of taste, and youth groups, and genres of rock and roll was a commercial business ever since Elvis Presley, right? And there was some kind of rebellion but it mainly sold cowboy trousers. Which is you know, it's cool, I wear jeans too, but when we use these metainterfaces and engage in these production process, even though it's hidden, it becomes... sensible. One of the projects I think about related to this is our good friend Talan Memmott's project, the [Digital Culture Lecture Tour](#), he did a few years back when he was unemployed. And that was the story of the real person Talan Memmott. He was unemployed, and he produced these images of banners and street signs and posted them on social media, restaurants signs for example saying that Dr. T. Memmott will lecture for free on Digital Culture while you eat your shakes and burger.

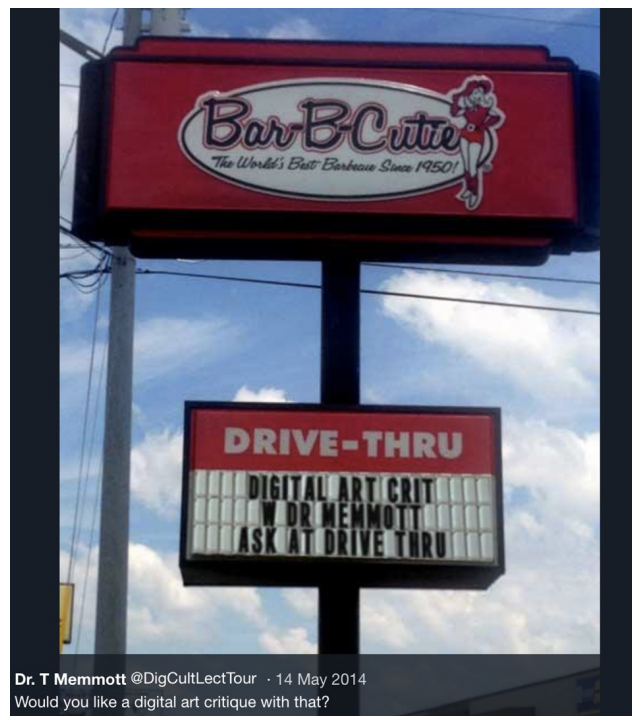


Image from Talan Memmott's Digital Culture Lecture Tour project (2014).

Trying to claim the fact that he was employable and looking for a job but also showing the precariousness and including the system that produced the precarity. I still need to grapple with it but I think this project both shows the system and comes to terms with it in a way, even though it doesn't... we're still precarious, you know?

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, at the same time I'm sort of feeling ambivalent about this—like when the revelations about Facebook came out over the last year, I didn't think they actually *were* revelations. I think we've sort of always already known—maybe not everyone did—but we've known that our data was being harvested in this way, that our data was being sold. It was written into the terms of service that maybe no one ever read, but we sort of had this awareness. And then afterwards, this sense of huge surprise, and is there going to be this mass exodus? I think the terms of the conversation need to change a little bit. Because to me, it's a sort of an inauthentic position to say "Oh I'm so shocked, I'm being exploited, I had no idea!" Well, yes, we sort of actually did have an idea. Not to sound like a shill for the metainterface industry or social networks, but I think we also need to talk about what we get out of these systems. Why are we still sharing jokes and pictures on Facebook, or why do I find it cathartic to engage in futile political arguments there with right-wing nut-jobs who I went to high school with? There is something that we get in return, something that we can't pretend that we're not complicit in, or that we're suddenly discovering.

Søren Bro Pold: But I think the big story of the interface is still there—twenty years ago people starting talking about the cultural interface, or interface culture. People like Lev Manovich, etc. and we all began talking about these things, that the interface is also part of culture. You have of course computer games and all the digital artistic traditions, while all the research money went into things like optimizing the efficiency of banking systems and things like that, so the industry and research worlds didn't acknowledge the cultural interface. But now the cultural interface is industrial and big business. You know, now people know it, and they produce for it, the new cultural metainterface industry of Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon etc. And I think we need to discover how the cultural interface industry is also territorial. Climate change is an issue that we can't just design away, but it's part of the story. We should develop a way to see the distance, in a way, the infrastructure, the pollution and effects to the environment. It's not just Google Maps. We should sense the snow in Brooklyn, the flooding of the Delaware Estuary and so on. There's this way that the infrastructure should be visible. Of course not all of it all of time, because then it wouldn't work, but still this territorial and environmental dimension needs to be part of the experience. Like the cultural interface needed to be part of the experience, and has become part of the experience. But today we're in a situation where the labor and the space of that cultural interface needs somehow to be integrated into our experience of it. What is that going to look like? Of course we don't know, but I think that's also what you're grappling with, for instance in *Toxi•City*. How do we see what we can't see?

Scott Rettberg: Yes, wrestling with these kinds of hyperobjects, as Timothy Morton calls them—

Søren Bro Pold: And it shouldn't be through these kinds of perfect interfaces. Because they just become aestheticizations. You know, the *nice* interface of climate change. So with *The Metainterface*, we argue that we need to make that visible and not hidden, experienced also. We also work with participatory design, as Christian mentioned. In the

1980s, that meant design that worked with the laborers. In that sense we need to work with Facebook users. You know, all of us, who are these laborers, producing while consuming.

Scott Rettberg: This reminds me of the "I Work for the Web" Netprov project that Mark Marino and Rob Wittig put together, that Talan Memmott also contributed to. Where you had this "Webblies" union, like the "Wobblies" of old, recognizing the labor they put in through their likes and tweets and posts of memes, and organizing, and going on strike. Yeah.



Image by Talan Memmott for the "I Work for the Web" Netprov (Marino & Wittig, 2015).

One of the questions I asked Lisa after her talk, and I was also thinking back to the question raised by Rita Raley in her book *Tactical Media*, is the question of what kind of efficacy activist artists can achieve. I'm thinking here of artists, of interface artists. One example from your book, for example, is the Molleindustria Phone Story game, where players interact with small episodes demonstrating the exploitative and environmentally fraught process of producing the smart phones we carry around in our pockets. How do you think the fact that the app was banned from Apple's app store reflects on a culture of controlled consumption? Is it ironic, or merely a function of the logic that drives the system to begin with? I also wonder if the gesture of the Molleindustria game actually represents real resistance. In some ways, I wonder if many of the digital art projects that comment ironically or serve as critique of the corporate-technological framework are "made to be banned." In some way, it seems like these projects are like Eduardo Kac's

glow-in-the-dark bunny or Duchamp's readymade urinal. The aesthetic focus of the artwork might not be about anything intrinsic to it in itself, but the reaction it is intended to produce, and in the realization of that reaction. In other words, I think that *Phone Story*, like a lot of these sorts of projects we produce, is in a way more conceptual than driven by efficacy.



Screenshot from *Phone Story* by Molleindustria (2011). The iPhone game about the process of producing and distributing contemporary smart phones included minigames with children mining coltan in the Congo, factory workers committing suicide in China, American consumers mobbing stores, and environmental waste workers in Pakistan.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: I think you're right, in the sense that this work is also in the tradition of the Yes Men, of media hacking. In the sense that the work is not just the *Phone Story*, but it's the whole story, not just of how phones are produced, but also how the app circulates in the media afterwards. And there are many examples of this with Molleindustria. One example of this is *Pedo-Priest*, which is a sort of game where you manage a ministry filled with pedophiles and you have to prevent the pedophile priests from getting caught. And the interesting thing about that of course is that it's a commentary on the Catholic Church, in that sense it has a procedural rhetoric as a game but it's also a media hack of course in the sense that you cannot do something like that unnoticed in a country like Italy. So what happened was that the game was actually banned for showing pedophiles. So it had this sort of weird story around it too. The story around *Pedo-Priest* is that he in the end had to store it on a server outside of Italy because it was banned in Italy.

Scott Rettberg : —exiled like a heretic of old—

Christian Ulrik Andersen: It's not necessarily that he anticipates it, but he constantly looks for it.

Scott Rettberg: I have one last wrap-up question for you that's relevant to what I do and I think to what a lot of people in our field do. I know that Søren, you started out studying literature. And for many of us working with literature, there's in a way been a move beyond the book. This week when Sean Cubitt and Terry Eagleton were talking here, I was thinking about art and literature as themselves being metainterfaces. When we read now—sometimes we read art and literature, and they have a purpose—but there has been a change in how and what we read. And what we're called on to write. Many of the

works you look at in the book are interfaces as artworks: interfaces that reflect on other interfaces. But we also now need to read the interfaces of everyday life as literature, or as constructed artifacts, in a different way. I know that's sort of rambling, but I'm asking about the broad function of art and literature as metainterface, and also what's the point? What's the function of art and literature in an age of environmental crisis and metainterfaces?

Søren Bro Pold: Well of course that's part of our own histories. That we came from art and literature, but were also kind of annoyed with this discussion of whether this or that is literature or not. In a way, I don't care, even though of course I like being with literary people and I like working with literary students, and with libraries. And I realize for some people, who are for instance in an English department, you have to relate it to the tradition. Which is good—it's just not necessarily our project. But you could say in a way that our book is a book about literature, in the sense that there's a lot of discussion about reading and writing, and of textualities. Even for example when we look at your piece, we discuss the narrative structure, which is a very literary discussion, but we also discuss the panorama, which is more of a visual discussion. So yeah, in a way for us everything is literature, but we don't necessarily care much about boundaries. Everything includes image and sound, etc.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: One thing we also discuss in the introduction is our literary perspective. And the question of how you should see the role of the author. Where you could think of the author as someone that produces content for the book. But I think we follow Walter Benjamin's description of the author as a producer (Benjamin, 1996): as someone who not only produces the narrative, but who is a realist in the sense that he or she reflects what it means to produce in the circumstances that you are embedded in. So that's why we are interested not in literature but in interfaces. Because the ability to not only use the interface as a media for the production of new narratives, but also use the interface, and reflect the interface as a system of production, is now the role of the author nowadays. So I wouldn't say that it's non-literary, I would just say that it's a different kind of literature that you start looking at, where you're not confined to traditional narratives.

Scott Rettberg: I think there's also a sense that what comes from literature is an awareness of how *we're* being written. When Sean Cubitt was here a couple of days ago, much of his talk was focused on the question of how have we become media, how are humans functioning as media systems that are both communicative media but also what he would describe as the media for late capitalism, where we are written to. You know: What drives growth? Waste. And what is the media for that waste? Humans, human consumption. I think that's one strength of an approach based on literary awareness, the idea of reading the human as a media that is being written. If you think about N. Katherine Hayles' work as well, her idea of technogenesis (Hayles, 2012) is in part about how we are both writing and being written by the systems that we engage with, and by the metainterfaces you describe.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: I think the question of reading is important. If reading is fundamental for modern democracies, for enlightenment, we also have to consider that reading is not just performed by humans, but also by machines that somehow inscribe us as readers in the system. So what does that fundamentally mean for modern democracy?

Elisabeth Nesheim: I just finished reading a science fiction book by Dan Simmons. He has a two-book volume called *Ilium/Olympos*. It's a future where technology has become so advanced that humans have become these, like quantum-state beings, and they have completely lost the ability both to write and read. As a result they can no longer create stories, because technology has just kind of advanced beyond that. So they begin thawing up DNA of old Homer scholars, which they then rebuild, and then set all out of the original factors of Homer's *Iliad*, and just let it play out to figure out how the story ends, using the scholars to make sure the story stays on track, because they themselves can't read it. They build a simulation, but it's with real people and gods. They walk around Troy and Ilium. So, Simmons suggests that at some point technology is taking away our ability to make sense or create.

Perhaps this is like Kurzweil's singularity? Are we moving towards some state where we are unable to understand, or deal with our environment, or be creative, if machines take over all of these processes?

Christian Ulrik Andersen: Essentially that's why people like us are important (laughter). I really do believe that we do play a role in understanding what enlightenment, what sort of enlightenment, technologies bring to us, so that we don't end up having to simulate Homer.

Søren Bro Pold: But also big data, management of artificial intelligence, all of these technologies are also technologies to emulate reading, or even interpretation.

Elisabeth Nesheim: Exactly, because it moves beyond just reading. It's also interpretation—

Christian Ulrik Andersen: —the ability to actually create concepts—

Søren Bro Pold: You know one reaction to the way you're profiled on Spotify is "Oh, great, I don't have to develop my own taste anymore. It's all there for me, and here I am, somebody who likes this and that and these movies," you know? You could set up a whole machinery that delivers you shoes and stuff on the basis of this kind of profiling. And that's some kind of dream in the system. I'm not that pessimistic that it will actually work, but of course you see instances of it trying to get away with interpretation. Also Antoinette Rouvroy, this Belgian scholar of law, writes about datafication as a way of getting rid of interpretation, which is also an important concern in law, of course (Rouvroy, 2012). And you see it happening. They've developed systems that can judge, where you can have simple judgements from computers, like you can have a diagnosis from the doctor. And computers are in some ways better at this, in that they can have all the texts, and all information about all the diseases, and everything. But they of course lack the human art of interpretation.

Elisabeth Nesheim: And heuristics, empathy and heuristics.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: There's also a question as to whether these systems actually read. Perhaps it's an anthropomorphization in that sense, something we use to describe the activity, but actually something quite different from what it actually means to read.

Elisabeth Nesheim: At least, if we're using Dan Simmons again, it is definitely. So reading is a way of thinking, a way of connecting thoughts in a new way. It's not just mapping symbols to a certain task or possibility. It's more of a connective process.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: Even if it isn't reading, I think what you've described in the novel is a kind of speech act, staging it becomes a kind of reading that has an effect.

Elisabeth Nesheim: Also the fact that we're allowing ourselves to call it reading, and call machine vision seeing, and so forth, says that we're giving up some of our abilities, perhaps too easily.

Søren Bro Pold: We also work of course with John Cayley and Daniel Howe's works, such as *The Readers Project*, and one of the questions they also raise: we allow these systems to read us but we are not allowed to read them. You know, you don't have the right to read Google, or only in very limited ways, and they try to block you out. If you try to map Google, then you're blocked out. Even in art projects. In this way, their work becomes a way of reacting, or demonstrating the system. The fact, as you said, that Phone Story was kicked out for various reasons is a way of demonstrating the system.

Christian Ulrik Andersen: —the mechanisms of it.

Scott Rettberg: Thanks for a great presentation, and discussion, and an excellent book. I'm looking forward to seeing how *The Metainterface* gets out into the landscape of digital culture. I certainly think the book advances our understanding of interfaces and our relation to them, as well as developing new connections between the digital humanities and the environmental humanities.

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