Susanna Lindberg

Transcendental illusions of the digital world

The aim of my paper is to present four transcendental illusions that support the experience of the digital world.

A transcendental illusion is not an error. For Kant, it is an illusion of reason that, in order to guarantee its own coherence, must project an idea that it knows to be unknowable. The transcendental illusions of the digital world do not concern reason but sense (in all senses of the word). In this paper, I will sort out four (quasi-)transcendental illusions of the digital world with the help of Jacques Derrida who does not have a full-fledged theory of digitality, but whose many concepts are useful in the understanding of the experience of the digital world.

1. The illusion of proximity. The word 'digital' comes from digitus, finger, and it still evokes having the world under your fingertip. Actually the digital world could not function without this illusion of touching and commanding even distant things as if they were right in front of you (this makes many things a lot easier during modern epidemics). In Le toucher – Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida retraces the history of touching, and shows that it has traditionally been the sense of proximity that gives direct contact to things, and therefore proves their concrete reality. However, questioning this 'haptocentric' illusion, he shows how distance is really at the heart of every touching and every contact. Derrida's idea is very well illustrated by the digital world, that he only hints at in his book. For we know that on a computer screen one precisely does not touch a concrete thing, one doesn't feel texture, warmth, elasticity, and the like. One touches glass or plastic, and through them the only thing one reaches is a symbol. Instead of touching, one manipulates, and instead of a sensitive fingertip, one uses a skillful hand. The digital world functions by touching, and it reveals that touching is not what we thought it would be: digitality makes obvious the distance and the separation that were always involved in touching and that, from minimal, have now become maximal.

2. The illusion of presence. The digital world has been constructed as an optical world in which you see what you touch, and without seeing you could not orientate yourself in the digital space. The digital world functions under this illusion of presence. However, by experience, we know that the instantaneity of messages and news, as well as the naturalness of images and video meetings, are just useful but deceptive illusions. Derrida has explained the illusions of presence since his earliest works, in which he criticises "metaphysics of presence," and especially in may later works where he explores the 'spectral' dimensions of any apparently present encounter. According to him the domain of the tele-technological is the domain par excellence of spectrality and hantise. I would like to underline, however, that the main reason of the disintegration of presence in the digital world is the fact that what we see is really writing, even when it looks like a vision. Digitality consists in writing, not only in digitalized texts that we read, but more importantly in the code that carries and produces all symbols brought to our screens. The real stakes of Derrida's criticism of the metaphysics of presence was a theory of writing, that explains many of the spectral effects of the digital reality. I will intensify his theory of writing by applying it further to the code and in general to the calculative downside behind the visible, understandable user interface.

3. The illusion of a complete memory. The digital archives that can be accessed via Internet are presented to their users as a total memory that covers everything and does not forget anything. A critical user soon sees that this is not the case: innumerable old books, sounds, images, living memories, intimate experiences are missing from digital archives, and even when such memories are digitized, they more often than not loose their sense. Derrida's book Archive fever shows why this is so: every memory archive is a finite set of traces, not a universal container of everything past. This is why every archive is a construction that is based on a selective decision to include this and to exclude that, to organise things in a certain way and leave other things non indexed. Every decision of the access and of the rationale of the archive is also a political one, even when it is taken in the name of the most universal principles. What Derrida could not know but what has become important for us is datamining where data searches are done by algorithms that are presented as capable of revealing unknown tendencies of the common unconsciousness of humanity. But these algorithms are not universal psychanalysts and sociologists, either, they are only reflections of the interests and competences of their programmers. They can process much bigger amounts of data than humans could, but this is also why information they gather cannot be verified by humans.

4. The illusion of worldwide scope. Digital tele-technologies are presented to their users as a world-wide network reaching and connecting all places of the world: they offer both universal communication and panoptic surveillance. This is also what Derrida says in Faith and Knowledge, as well as in his dialogue with Bernard Stiegler Echographies of Television, where the two authors pay attention to tele-

technologies as a vehicle of globalized capitalism, that Stiegler has continued to analyse as a serious threat to individual and collective individuation. It seems to me, however, that the spaces opened by digital technologies to the users are neither truly intimate nor truly worldwide. Digital tools displace us to to spaces that are far from our intimate physical place and that are shared by other similarly displaced persons. But these places are neither the physical places of anybody else nor of a truly universal scope: they are just "displaces," places made of pure transitivity, that only enable transit of information towards other displaces. The Internet is not a universal place, especially not a universal political space: it is a finite place of a common alienation.