The logic of fact and the logic of fiction

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I begin with a statement: something has happened to ontology; ontology is not what it used to be. A dictionary definition is: ontology is the study of the fundamental foundations of being. Questioning ontologies in this framework meant positing a question about the essences of things, that is in itself a metaphysical gesture, and one that was recognised as repressive by the generation of the '68, philosophies of becoming and difference, feminist, postcolonial and other studies. Maybe that is why the generation of people who studied under postwar scholars seem to view posing questions about ontology with animosity. Developing philosophy of difference and becoming was indeed a political project of resistance and liberation.

When I pose a question about the ontology of the digital, or the ontology of the digital subject as what I am interested in, I don't intend to do away with such a history of thought. The ontology I am drawn to is an ontology created by cybernetics, as Halpern argues, an ontology which came to mean a variable category in computer science: "ontology [not] as a referent of an external reality and its transformation into a malleable category in computer science" (Halpern 2015, 77). The rise of such a meaning of ontology today is a result of interdisciplinary encounters and the rising roles of computational models and infrastructures in the operation of life.

Another warning needs to come to separate these digital ontologies from recent feverish object-oriented philosophy enquiries into the ontology of the object, a return to the aporias of classical logic and a quest for enduring objects in a subjectless world (see Massumi's critique of OOP; Massumi 2014, 48). This is not my question either. Questioning ontology of the digital object is not a quest to establish an object in the real.

What I see in the question of digital ontologies is, first of all, a presumption of a variety of ontologies as structures of algorithmic logic. The question that querying digital ontology asks is how a digital subject or an object is made in computational infrastructures. The ontological question of "what it is" is the question of how it works as far as the digital and algorithmic is concerned. The question of digital ontology is a question of how something is made or emerges, which forces (models, frameworks, figures) of enactment it recruits or is forced to adopt in its becoming and what powers it exudes. Such a digital thing, subject or an object can be datasets and patterns, bots, collections of tweets, YouTube's BigTable and Youtube videos, a single point on a Google map, a virtual persona and so on. The ontologies within which these things arise can't get away from the variable ontologies of either computer science or humanities and social sciences.

The main question then is how to arrange the meeting points among these disciplinary forces that study and shape what contributes to the arrival of digital things: the forces of algorithms, libraries, abstractions as well as aesthetic, social, and political operations. It also holds that the former: code, operating systems,

databases, data and interfaces are and contribute to aesthetic, social and political operations, whereas the latter: cultural and socio-political workings become embodied, enacted in, but also enacting the computational material.

If this computational materiality is in part abstraction, as an abstraction in a computer programme, that acquires significant force that is fully material, then such an abstraction is questioned and understood in material terms (for work on abstraction, see for instance, Toscano 2008). Then the ontology within which this abstraction is formed, i.e. ontologies of formal logic, generalisation and modelling, cannot be deemed to have no specificity of their own. Luciana Parisi is one of the theorists that works on theorising such abstractions. The field of software studies has by now accumulated a range of enquiries into the specificity of the computational (Computational Culture: A Journal of Software Studies, Fuller 2008, Mackenzie 2006, Cox and McLean 2012, Manovich 2013).

Some of these questions may resemble those of STS, seen from a naive outsider's perspective, about what a physicist's formula or conclusions from the data gathered by scientists in the laboratory are. In a representationalist paradigm, such data, or theory is a representation of how the world really is. Interestingly, overcome as it seems to be in STS, this paradigm is often picked up by critical theory or humanities scholars today when they consider data gathered around a person's activity in the virtual and real life alike and acted upon to acquire concrescence in the operations of Five Eyes or digital advertisement or ....as a "data double" (Raley 2013). A data double can be seen a shadow, a representation.

Yet, such a data double must be pulled together by forces that are outside of data ("indexicality comes from elsewhere"), different to those of the laboratory practice - it is not subjected to scientific regime of objectivity (Rouvroy 2013); and such a double is performative and enactive. Questions about fact-evidence-document-information-data (Day 2014) and the history of this strand in philosophy of science, STS and information science are valid here, as are questions of what and how models are used to analyse data, predict future patterns, enacting socio-cultural worlds, but also as are the questions about the logic of fiction pertaining to the world of culture and art becoming digital and algorithmic (Rancière 2009).

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