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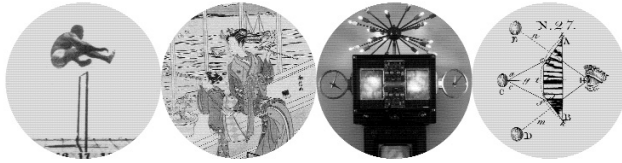
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# journal of visual culture



## Language Wants To Be Overlooked: On Software and Ideology

Alexander R. Galloway

### Abstract

This article is a theoretical response to the observation from Wendy Hui Kyong Chun that 'software is a functional analog to ideology'. Several principles of software design support this claim, the first being the principles of reflection and obfuscation evident in all types of code. At the same time, in contrast to natural language, code is both scriptural and executable, indicating the functional quality of software. In simulating the ideological model, software is an example of technical transcoding without figuration that nevertheless coexists with an exceedingly high level of ideological fetishism and misrecognition.

### Keywords

allegory • code • function • ideology • language • obfuscation • reflection • software

Provides classes and interfaces for obtaining reflective information about classes and objects.

(Description of the Java programming package 'java.lang.reflect', Sun Microsystems, 2004)

## An Analog . . .

This article begins from another: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's fascinating 'On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge' (2004), in which the claim is made, among other things, that 'software is a functional analog to ideology' (p. 43).<sup>1</sup> As brief as it is, this claim nevertheless brings out a rich set of discussions, least of which are the theory and history of both software

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and ideology, the question of *functionality*, and also the way in which something might be an analog for something else. Further, this last matter, the analog, is particularly apropos for an exploration of the process of interpretation and how cultural objects deploy modes of figuration such as allegory (an issue that will become important at the end). While the question of functionality will occupy the second half of this article, it is worth defining now: I adopt the usage from computer science where a function is any subroutine or isolated block of code, but further from mathematics where a function is any expressive entity able to translate a set of inputs into a set of outputs. One of the first claims extracted from Chun is that there is a similarity, which we may call a formal similarity, between the structure of ideology and the structure of software. Conveniently, the desire to make such a claim can be folded into the quality of software itself: it is a technology of simulation and thus has as a core asset the ability to 'take shape' in various ways. In other words, software is by definition formal (as symbolic or abstract mathematical and logical code), and thus it acclimates well to structural comparisons – even better than, one might argue, its cousins the visual image or verbal narrative. The analogical or 'expressive' theory of ideology is also not unfamiliar, as in the work of Louis Althusser where the structure of ideology resembles, more or less, an architectural drawing of a house, with the material base of society down below and the cultural or superstructural layer up above. Ideology emerges not strictly as the house itself, but as a figurative projection of one layer onto the other. It is thus a stand-in for what the Marxists call simply *history*, or in crass terms the ongoing reification of social relations and processes, and further the problem of being able to represent these details from the past in the present. If software is less a vehicle for ideology and more its simulation or model, it is no doubt because of these formal qualities of software which, combined with software's importance as so many cultural and historical artifacts, are so well suited for precise mathematical modeling of real world phenomena – in functionality, in spatial projection, in sight and sound – but in a manner in which the very material distance or empirical falsity of that simulation is at once foregrounded as a fatal flaw and then resolved as insignificant. 'Ideology' is one name that may be used for things that act this way. And with this an intense mimetic thicket emerges: software as mimetic technology; ideology as projection across the 'gap' between individuals and their real conditions of existence; and the startling claim, from Chun, that software could conceivably be a continuously variable copy (i.e. an analog) of ideology.

It would be logical to begin such a discussion by revisiting the classical theories of ideology, and so we must, ignoring for a moment that ideology and its own conceptualization in theoretical discourse seem to be at odds, for the power of ideology (if it has any at all) is the high level of constraint it puts on discourse itself, aiming for a system of total or 'smooth' thought. Ideology was always about two things at the same time: the representation of one's lived social relation (following Althusser's definition), but simultaneously ideology is implicitly a matter of *critique*, for as Fredric Jameson said once about capitalism, simply to utter the word 'ideology'

seems to indicate one's disdain for it. In discourse on the subject, a first motif, that of *scientific thought*, suggests that ideology is always set up in distinction to other styles of thinking, only here the history of the concept takes a bend, for whereas Destutt de Tracy, who coined the term in the 1790s, championed his new science of ideology as an antidote to philosophy and metaphysics (and later was famously lambasted by Napoleon for caring little about the 'knowledge of the human heart' and 'the lessons of history'), nevertheless the sophistry narrative is reversed in Althusser, who put forth Marxist critique as scientific and ideology as the threat to such clear thinking. Second, and perhaps as influential as the scientific narrative, is the *narrative of political failure* one finds coincident with many writings on ideology. Here, ideology serves as a sort of anthropological 'explanation' for all sorts of alienation, exploitation, and false consciousness existing in society, along the lines of the doctrine of original sin or the great theological arguments for the existence of evil as explanation for why the here and now is so inferior to the hereafter. This is an essentially strategic theory of ideology, evident in Gramsci and others, that serves as theoretical proof for the nonexistence of the revolution, despite the perception that all the necessary real-world phenomena are in place for it to arrive at any moment. (This same political messianism is addressed quite compellingly in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, 1994[1993].) These two are synthesized into a third motif, ideology's *determinism narrative* in which one examines how a system of total thought may or may not determine things like human subjects. Here one may include the work of the Frankfurt School, or again Althusser, with the key issue being the industrialization of the body and mind into ever more insidious modes of efficiency and instrumentality. But also one must return to Marx and Engels, particularly the so-called 'dominant ideology thesis' extracted from passages in the *Communist Manifesto* and likewise certain references to the determination of consciousness in *The German Ideology*. But at the same time the theory of ideology was recuperated in the later part of the 20th century by what might be thought of as the *synthetic narrative*: ideology is not a one-way street, but is always meted out at the intersection of cultural production and cultural consumption. In this context, ideology follows a more dialectical logic, as with Jameson's two terms 'reification and utopia' (a formulation from *Signatures of the Visible*, the terms of which shift slightly to the 'utopia and ideology' of *The Political Unconscious*), or with Stuart Hall's well-known theory of 'articulation', or indeed earlier with Gramsci's notion of hegemony in which political or cultural dominance is always the result of active negotiation and production.

Even with all these various and sometimes conflicting themes from the many theories of ideology, it would be shortsighted to write off the concept as some sort of cognitive delusion, a fog of false consciousness afflicting the minds of those it touches. Ideology is not something that can be solved like a puzzle, or cured like a disease. Instead, ideology is better understood as a problematic, that is to say a site in which theoretical problems arise and are generated and sustained precisely as problems in themselves. Following Chun's lead, it appears that software too must be understood not as a given

social and technical object, but as a problematic site – indeed, one that is continuously in the process of producing its own status as social and technical. (In this sense ‘problem’ is a synonym for ‘machine’, which is itself a stand-in candidate for ‘software’.)

For this reason, the concept of software cannot be used, I would assert, without a significant amount of back-peddling at the outset. The first difficulty is that software, in different ways and in different amounts, customarily stands in opposition to the notion of the qualitative or the continuous, often summed up as the ‘realm of the analog’ (the term analog is so often misused it should be uttered with extreme care). While this analog–digital polarity is thorny in itself, one must be particularly attentive given the current discussion, as the topic of the analogical has already been broached in Chun’s description of the internal modeling of software as something like ideology-in-code. Second, software relies on the assumption that there is something like a programmer and something like a user. This also presents a special set of problems, the most important of which is the status of the actor versus the acted-upon (the aforementioned determinism narrative), and under what circumstances which is which. Today the ‘culture industry’ takes on a whole new meaning, for inside software the ‘cultural’ and the ‘industrial’ are coterminous (which is why it is tautological to speak today of a cultural logic of informatics). The detailed forms of algorithmic interaction and play required today of the computer-using public is, in my mind, so exactly akin to writing code that the division between the two must certainly be ascribed to other ends. Perhaps it has to do with the creation and maintenance of another class of priest-like specialists striving to decode software just as the critic longs to ‘reverse engineer’ ideology, or perhaps it is best to contextualize it within the long-standing debates around groups of producers and groups of consumers, and the implicit power dynamics haunting their mutual distinction. A third difficulty is the notion that, in using the concept of software, one is somehow excluding hardware. This flows from a long-standing assumption that data are fundamentally immaterial or ethereal and that, conversely, machines are the stuff of material cogs and levers. It is a foundational claim stemming from the very first informatic machines. But as Chun and others have pointed out, ‘programming’ a computer originally meant patching circuits together using cables or connectors and thus ‘software’ began historically not as executable software applications as we know them today but as any sort of service labor performed in or on informatic machines; even video was once known as ‘software’, to distinguish it from ‘hard’ playback decks and cameras. Thus what is in operation today is a segregation effect whereby data are relegated to the realm of ideas and machines to the realm of technology. The result of this is a presentism, admittedly parroted by me later, where software is understood only in its late 20th-century definition as a symbolic machine language and not in an earlier definition in which software might rightly be understood as pre- or non-linguistic.

These are some of the problems addressed in the work of Friedrich Kittler, particularly his essay ‘There is No Software’ (1995), a clever if sometimes

casual unpacking of the strict division placed between code and machines. The conceit of the essay's title is that, indeed, software is merely a human-friendly category extracted from what is always an operation of hardware. Logic gates are electronic machines; they are physical devices through and through. Voltages in electronic circuits are material, not immaterial (whatever that may be). As it was in Parmenides: what is not, cannot be. So one must assume that the 'soft' comes from the informatic fluidity of these devices, from what Turing meant when he called his machine 'universal' rather than 'discrete'. When basic logic gate functionality is abstracted and strung together into machine commands, translated into assembly op-codes, and then later articulated in a higher-level computer language such as C, the argument from Kittler is that one should never understand this 'higher' symbolic machine as anything empirically different from the 'lower' symbolic interactions of voltages through logic gates. They are complex aggregates yes, but it is foolish to think that writing an 'if/then' control structure in eight lines of assembly code is any more or less machinic than doing it in one line of C, just as the same quadratic equation may swell with any number of multipliers and still remain balanced. The relationship between the two is *technical*.

This of course does not excuse it from being *interesting*, particularly on the question of ideology. What I shall propose here is that *software is an example of technical transcoding without figuration that nevertheless coexists with an exceedingly high level of ideological fetishism and misrecognition*. (Is this not, after all, the very definition of technology?) Chun (2004) makes this connection explicitly: 'Software is based on a fetishistic logic. Users know very well that their folders and desktops are not really folders and desktops, but they treat them as if they were – by referring to them as folders and desktops' (p. 43). Whether this is truly a fetishistic logic, or an allegory for one, remains to be determined. In Marx, fetishism comes from the expressive and figurative logic of representation – how value appears in the form of something that it isn't – a fact no doubt that allowed a Marxist methodology to translate easily to other intellectual fields also dealing with the problem of representation (semiotics, art history, literary criticism, theories of race, and so on). But of course the strength of Marx's analysis in *Capital* is that he derived fetishism from a fundamentally empirical, or 'technical', set of relations (the rule of market exchange, the standardization of labor power, the sciences of productivity and efficiency, the operation of machines, and so on). Thus a dialectic of technical transcoding and fetishistic abstraction exists from the start. This is why I will suggest at the end that the relationship between software and ideology is best understood as an allegorical one: software is not merely a vehicle for ideology; instead, the ideological contradictions of technical transcoding and fetishistic abstraction are enacted and 'resolved' within the very form of software itself.

The power of Chun's essay is found in a symptom, an idea that appears in the title but then hides itself during most of her essay just as fiercely as it proclaims itself at the start. For Chun (2004), the relationship between software and ideology (for it is a relationship not a homology after all) is a

throwback: it is *visual* knowledge that persists inside software, and thus we are to assume that it is the visual quality of knowledge that is the key to the software/ideology puzzle. 'The computer', she writes, 'that most nonvisual and nontransparent device – has paradoxically fostered "visual culture" and "transparency"' (p. 27). Software purists will doubtless be put off by this, as will those more familiar with the intellectual terrain of visual culture, within which the present journal certainly plays a part and to which the topics of my article, admittedly, are only related through a sort of counterintuitive leap. If I may read between the lines of Chun's essay, it is not exactly the discipline of visual culture that provides a backdrop for her project, despite the use of the term 'visual' and despite indications made in her book *Control and Freedom* (2006). And here things start to get thorny, for one must make a distinction between the 'visible', which is typically understood as specific to the faculty of optical sight, and the 'visual', which might be understood in broader, more figurative strokes as an epistemic process of cognitive understanding and conceptualization: one may speak of mental 'insight' with or without the optical faculty, just as one might 'see' an image inside of a dream. This results in the sorts of claims, astounding at first blush, made by W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) most recently in *What Do Pictures Want?* that the core, genetic formation of culture is not the text or even the idea, but the *image*. Of course, to read Mitchell (or Chun) sympathetically would not be to assume he believes that the world is made up exclusively of television screens, advertisements, paintings, film reels, and corporate logos, what Vilém Flusser referred to as 'significant surfaces' – no, these are not the 'images' he means, at least not only. Instead, the 'visual' might better be understood as referring to any likeness or motif that fixes some grouping of elements, such that one might 'see' these elements both as a relational whole (as a memory, refrain, gesture, raster, etc.) and also in terms of their constituent parts (phoneme, texture, color, pitch, pixel, etc.). This is not such a dramatic claim, however, and it is certainly one that runs parallel with Western philosophy and aesthetics from the get go.

Thus, the enlightenment episteme, which unites (some might say collapses) knowledge and the visual in various technologies of representational transparency and communicability, persists in software, argues Chun, not only because of the conceptualizations and 'sightings' just mentioned, but also to the extent that it promotes a depth model of representation between sources and surfaces, scripts and screens, the code and the user. But the enlightenment model has also provoked a whole flock of criticism, rightly, around the impossibility of such transparent representation. Thus we arrive at a paradox: any mediating technology is obliged to erase itself to the highest degree possible in the name of unfettered communication, but in so doing it proves its own virtuosic presence as technology, thereby undoing the original erasure. 'What is software', Chun (2004) writes, 'if not the very effort of making something explicit, or making something intangible visible, while at the same time rendering the visible (such as the machine) invisible?' (p. 44). Language wants to be overlooked. But it wants to be overlooked precisely so that it can more effectively 'over look', that is, so that it can better



function as a syntactic and semantic system designed to specify and articulate while remaining detached from the very processes of specificity and articulation. This is one sense in which language, which itself is not necessarily connected to optical sight, can nevertheless be 'visual'. Chun's suggestion is that to understand software we must return to this discussion of the visual and the ideology problems contained therein, not skip forward to some purely machinic, and hence chiefly nonvisual, aesthetic realm. This is good advice, but the appeal to visual knowledge must still be understood in a figurative, not literal (i.e. optical), sense, for as I will argue later it is more valuable to separate rather than collapse software's visual and machinic aspects in mutually distinct struggle, for this separation simulates the same struggle writ large in the sociopolitical arena between an informatic or machinic model of organization and a slightly older one which takes as its prized aesthetic forms the verbal narrative and the visible image. In other words, the separation between the visual and the machinic in software is important because it is an allegory of the social. Chun's 'persistence of visual knowledge' signifies the double bind of what some optimistically call the information age: it underscores the fact that software is rooted in symbolic logic not optical vision, and thus cannot fully leverage the dominant form existing even now in the spectacle society, yet at the same time gains inroads precisely at the expense of that social form that it so effectively simulates.

Visuality and computing have a complicated history. It is certainly incorrect to divorce one from the other, as authors like Lev Manovich have rightly pointed out (see in particular his essay 'The Automation of Sight', 1996). Indeed any understanding of contemporary visual mediation that ignores software does so at its own peril, in an age when cinema has become synonymous with Final Cut Pro, photography with Photoshop, writing with Microsoft Word, and on and on. The history of the pixel is instructive in this capacity: at its invention in the middle 20th century the electronic pixel was essentially the same thing as the binary bit, one existing in the modality of visible light and the other existing in the modality of mathematical value. But at the same time I am sympathetic to a certain minoritarian refrain running through recent media theory on the specificity of computers as non-optical if not altogether non-visual media, for anyone wishing to cram computers into the framework of 'visual culture' is certainly suffering from an unfortunate fetishization of the interface, as if the computer monitor were an adequate substitute for the medium as a whole, which, in addition to screens of various shapes and sizes, consists of any number of other technologies: nonoptical interfaces (keyboard, mouse, controller, sensor); data in memory and data on disk; executable algorithms; networking technologies and protocols; and the list continues. The fields of computer vision and computer graphics are also but a fraction of computer science as a whole which occupies almost all of its time with algorithms, data structures, cryptography, robotics, bioinformatics, networking, machine learning, and other nonvisual applications of symbolic systems.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving this discussion of the visual somewhat unresolved, I continue by offering the first of two general observations on software and ideology.



Software operates through a technological model that places a great premium on meticulous symbolic declarations and descriptions, yet at the same time requires concealment, encapsulation and obfuscation of large portions of code. Formulated as an assertion, *software requires both reflection and obfuscation*. If indeed it is an allegorical analog to ideology, it should come as no surprise that software functions in such a dialectical fashion. The critics of ideology have often described it in synthetic terms (Jameson, Hall, Gramsci, et al.). But software has its own technologies of reflection and obfuscation. Reflection is nearly axiomatic: the complete syntactic and semantic rules of a computer language must be defined and written into any environment designed to interpret, parse, or execute it. (As an aside: in the so-called natural languages this is never the case, despite style guides and dictionaries, as unforeseen 'inductive' uses of language may be stumbled upon or invented without the blessing of provenance, whereas with software the unforeseen articulations of language are essentially dismissed out of hand as errors or 'exceptions'. Of course, this does not foreclose on the possibility, nay necessity, for hacks and other software exploits to pop up in the complexity of the software network, exploits which can never be predicted, as the computer scientists would say, 'statically'. The difference is that exploits operate *intensively* within and through the rules of the symbolic system, while natural languages operate *extensively* as a result of a combinatorial discursive logic ever intent on probing the boundaries of allowable style.) Reflective sandboxing of software code within a machine built to parse it is seen in the case of a computer language like Java which must be compiled and then run as bytecode inside a special runtime environment, or, as with the language C, compiled and then run as 'native' machine instructions, or with a simple mark-up language like HTML the specifications for which must be entirely designed into any browser destined to interpret and display it, or also with other interpreted code such as a three-dimensional model whose mathematical values for vertices and textures must be transcoded according to the rules of a given data format and a given style of visual projection. This existential, or meta-medial reflection is further illustrated in the 'system' or 'global' paratextual variables existent in many languages (Perl's implementation is particularly dazzling: \$\$ for the process number, \$! for the last system call error, \$0 for the program name, and so on), or in a language like Java that includes special 'meta' objects such as the package `java.lang.reflect` and the class `java.lang.class` that are designed to obtain information about classes and objects.<sup>3</sup> These meta objects are used to write reflexive software such as debuggers or interpreters, or to declare new objects dynamically during runtime. Indeed ontology itself, formerly a branch of philosophy, is now also a branch of computer science appearing perhaps most visibly in Web ontology standards such as OWL (Web Ontology Language).

The second term, obfuscation, is also foundational to how software is designed at the level of both the source code and the executable. While the principle permeates software, it is perhaps best understood through two basic varieties, technical transcoding and encapsulation. The principle of

transcoding, which I am adopting from Manovich, states that new media objects may be converted digitally from one data structure to another, but further that there are entire media formats based entirely on such conversions and nothing more. Thus an application like BIND (Berkeley Internet Name Domain), a leading domain name resolver, exists so that IP addresses can be masked by more human-legible domain names. The netmask is similar: in binary math, a bit within a binary number can be extracted using a special masking number and an 'and' bitwise operation; likewise in network addressing, subnets are defined using a special number called a netmask that specifies a section of the network address for the subnet itself and then 'masks' or obfuscates the rest to be used by the hosts residing on the subnet. In a bitmap image numerical values are used to represent color intensities in a pixel grid. Yet they are never represented as such, but instead are converted into data signals and sent to the display adapter which then converts these values into voltages that appear as light on a screen (the aforementioned modal transformation from bit to pixel). So in this case 'conversion' is a certain conjunction between 'physical' signal and 'abstract' number where one is hidden at the expense of the other. Even the HTML example referenced previously uses the same principle of data hiding: HTML is never shown in the browser window, it is always parsed and converted from ASCII text into a graphical layout (which may or may not also include ASCII text). These are only a few examples of what is a large trend in software design to hide numerical encoding of data behind more privileged 'semantic' formats such as natural language or graphics. Numbers essentially follow an occult logic: they are hidden at exactly the moment when they express themselves. It is what Chun (2004) calls 'the nonreflection of changeable facts in software' (p. 37). The second variety, encapsulation, is more dominant in the area of code authorship and compilation. The most fundamental design principle for object-oriented computer languages is the combination of variables and operations on variables (methods) into something called a class. Classes can be instantiated as objects and these objects interact through the ability to send messages to other objects via object interfaces. This is where encapsulation comes in: the details of how an object implements any given operation are deliberately kept hidden from any other object making requests of it. For example, a method's input and output might be visible but how it processes the input into the output is kept hidden. In order to implement the technologies of encapsulation, a system of visibility modifiers are employed, as in the case of Java whereby classes, methods, or variables may be deemed 'public', 'private', or 'protected', each designation helping to determine if the class, method, or variable is visible to the rest of the code.

Obfuscation, or 'information hiding', is employed in order to make code more modular and abstract and thus easier to maintain. A class's method can be updated and, as long as it continues to fit its public interface 'signature', one may be reasonably assured the code will continue to run. The following text articulates the rationale for obfuscation from the perspective of computer science.

A major challenge – perhaps *the* major challenge – in the construction of any large body of software is how to divide the effort among programmers in such a way that work can proceed on multiple fronts simultaneously. This modularization of efforts depends critically on the notion of *information hiding*, which makes objects and algorithms invisible, whenever possible, to portions of the system that do not need them. Properly modularized code reduces the ‘cognitive load’ on the programmer by minimizing the amount of information required to understand any given portion of the system. In a well-designed program the interfaces between modules are as ‘narrow’ (i.e., simple) as possible, and any design decision that is likely to change is hidden inside a single module. This latter point is crucial, since maintenance (bug fixes and enhancement) consumes many more programmer years than does initial construction for most commercial software.

In addition to reducing cognitive load, information hiding has several more pedestrian benefits. First, it reduces the risk of name conflicts: with fewer visible names, there is less chance that a newly introduced name will be the same as one already in use. Second, it safeguards the integrity of data abstractions: any attempt to access objects outside of the subroutine(s) to which they belong will cause the compiler to issue an ‘undefined symbol’ error message. Third, it helps to compartmentalize run-time errors: if a variable takes on an unexpected value, we can generally be sure that the code that modified it is in the variable’s scope. (Scott, 2000: 122)

At the risk of being overly literal, it is worth spelling out the significant similarity between such a description of the labor process and that same description offered by Marx and his progeny in the ideology discussion. In both cases we have an ‘object’ imbued with a complex machinery for hiding things, be it the commodity object (or as Guy Debord maniacally demonstrated, the commodity as image) and its ability to mask its own history of production and the social division of labor that generated it, or be it the Java object and its ability to cordon off various functionality into this or that site of inscription and execution, which is no doubt an abstraction or *mapping* of the actual division of labor globally in the dot-com firm producing it, where one part of the code might spring from a desk in Redmond and another part from a desk in Bangalore without anyone being the wiser. The structure of software facilitates this larger social reality. This is not to promote some sort of conspiracy theory for the new economy, simply to note the significant formal similarities between the structure of software as a media technology and the structure of ideology – with the commodity as a waypoint between the two (the commodity and ideology in Debord, or Jean-Joseph Goux, or Roland Barthes, we should remember, are nearly synonymous).

It should also be pointed out that ‘reflection’ and ‘obfuscation’ have nothing to do with the debate around open source versus proprietary software. They

have nothing to do with ‘good’ uses of code versus ‘bad’ uses. Open source software follows the principle of source concealment, just as proprietary software does. Hence it is not the ability to view the source that is at question, but whether or not the source is put front and center as the medium itself. And in nearly all software systems it is not (perhaps special allowances would have to be made for media like disassemblers, hex editors, and software development kits). This is not ungermane to the fields of poetics or hermeneutics which often must deal with models of expression wherein the kernel of the work is relegated to the place of the ineffable, as in the ‘suggestion’ or articulable ‘silence’ of Symbolism or the masochistic disavowal of the cinema which can never truly recreate its subject, action through time and space, only depict it happening. This is the fundamental contradiction of software: what you see is not what you get. Code is the medium that is not a medium. It is never viewed as it is, but instead is compiled, interpreted, parsed, and otherwise driven into hiding by still larger globs of code. Hence the principle of *obfuscation*. But at the same time it is the exceedingly high degree of declarative reflexivity in software that allows it to operate so effectively as source or algorithmic essence – the stating of variables at the outset, the declarations of methods, all before the real ‘language’ takes place – within a larger software environment always already predestined to parse and execute it. And hence the principle of *reflection*.

### . . . That Is Functional

Let us return to Chun’s (2004) claim that ‘software is a functional analog to ideology’ (p. 43). This indicates not only that software is an analog to ideology, but a much more fundamental claim, that software is *functional* in nature, and therefore suggesting that ideology might be too. Or, in other words: software is ideology turned machinic. This notion was hinted at earlier with reference to ideology’s ‘determinism narrative’. The discussion of the determinism narrative was meant to highlight the aspect of ideology that is oriented toward changing and inflecting the material world, the primary example of which would be the discussion of interpellation and subject formation in Althusser. In contrast, many have argued – Foucault famously – that it is really the reverse: ideology is not a prime mover that casts subjects in its image, but that real social and technical apparatuses discipline and inflect the material resources immanent to them, be they human bodies or otherwise. The pattern of proscriptive constraints may not be new, but what is crucial in software is the translation of ideological force into data structures and symbolic logic, a process no doubt coterminous with the evolution of language itself. Software is algorithmically affective in ways that ideology never was. This is best understood not as evidence of a schism between software and ideology, but as the very consummation of the deterministic, expedient narratives of both.

One might sum up the functional nature of software with the following slogan: code is the only language that is executable. This is quite similar to

speech act theory and the notion of an illocutionary speech act, defined as a verbal expression that when uttered changes some state of affairs in the world. Here is Katherine Hayles (2005) on the illocutionary quality of all code:

Code has become arguably as important as natural language because it causes things to happen, which requires that it be executed as commands the machine can run.

Code that runs on a machine is performative in a much stronger sense than that attributed to language. When language is said to be performative, the kinds of actions it 'performs' happen in the minds of humans, as when someone says 'I declare this legislative session open' or 'I pronounce you husband and wife'. Granted, these changes in minds can and do result in behavioral effects, but the performative force of language is nonetheless tied to the external changes through complex chains of mediation. By contrast, code running in a digital computer causes changes in machine behavior and, through networked ports and other interfaces, may initiate other changes, all implemented through transmission and execution of code. (pp. 49–50)

Opponents of the claim that all code is illocutionary point out that computer languages and natural languages are not different on the question of execution. They argue that illocutionary speech acts in natural languages require a general social understanding between groups of people in order for their performative quality to be effective – a pronouncement of marriage from the mouth of a priest creates a change in the world, but from an actor in a theater the same utterance exacts no such change – and likewise computer code requires a general infrastructure, the hardware of the computer, in order to carry out its 'illocutionary' command. Yet I agree with Hayles: code is machinic first and linguistic second; an intersubjective infrastructure is not the same as a material one (even if making such a claim unfortunately splits these two symbolic systems into the 'soft' natural languages versus the 'hard' computer languages). To see code as subjectively performative or enunciative is to anthropomorphize it, to project it onto the rubric of psychology, rather than to understand it through its own logic of 'calculation' or 'command'. The material substrate of code, which must always exist as an amalgam of electrical signals and logical operations in silicon, however large or small, demonstrates that code exists first and foremost as commands issued to a machine. Code essentially has no other reason for being than instructing some machine in how to act. One cannot say the same for the natural languages. (Elsewhere Chun complicates this line of reasoning with her evocative argument that source code is only ever understood as source code *after the fact*.) Of course this is not to exclude the cultural or technical importance of any code that runs *counter* to the perceived mandates of machinic execution, such as the computer glitch or the software exploit, simply to highlight the fundamentally functional nature of all software (glitch and exploit included).

But we approach an impasse, for a tension exists between software, which I suggest is fundamentally a machine, and ideology, which is generally understood as a narrative of some sort or another. Espen Aarseth's (1997) heroic reworking of text and narrative into what he calls the 'traversal functions' of electronic texts is indicative of how narrative cannot exist in code as such, but must be simulated, either as a 'narrative' flow function governing specific semantic elements, or as an 'image' of elements in relation as in the case of an array or a database. Software is not primarily a verbal narrative or a visual image, even if certainly these latter forms can be remediated in software. The problem stems from the two basic understandings of software, one as computer language and the other as machine. As language, software is a symbolic system that can exist in different modes, often understood as linguistic or code 'layers' (the crux of Kittler's (1995) argument in 'There is No Software'). As I argued earlier in the context of transcoding, one of the outcomes of this perspective is that each layer is technologically related, if not entirely equivalent, to all the other layers. However, the linguistic layer model of software is most instructive for an altogether different claim it makes, this time about the fundamental incommensurability between any two points or thresholds on the continuum of layers, and therefore about the difficulty of achieving a collective or 'whole' experience. For these are not simply inert technical translations back and forth, there is a privileged moment in which the written becomes the purely machinic and back again. The operating system may exist as an executable on disk, but it also exists phenomenologically as a metaphoric, cybernetic interface: the 'desktop'. (Of course metaphor is entirely the wrong term for talking about figurative interactivity, but it will have to do for the moment; in the context of gaming I have proposed the term 'algorithim', but it too seems slightly awkward for the present discussion.)

All of this is what Aarseth (1997) calls the 'dual nature of the cybernetic sign'. As allegory, it is best understood in a larger social context where the forced divorcement between the poetic and the functional, or the private and the public, or process and stasis, is a projection of the agonizing scars of fragmentation and atomization in all layers of social life. The dialectical movement between fluidity and fixity, seen in the internal workings of software where states and state changes carry the day, is precisely the same political problem posed by ideology (the narratives of failure and determinism summarized at the start). Software might not be narrative in the strict sense of the word, but it still might have a beginning, middle, and end (to paraphrase Aristotle), even if those narrative moments are recast as mere variables inside the larger world of the software simulation, and thus too might ideology be recast in digital format.

So software is both language and machine, even if the machinic is primary. And, more importantly, there is a process of mystification or distancing at work which ensures that the linguistic and the machinic are most definitely not the same thing. Indeed, part of the ideological import of software is the creation and maintenance of such a distinction. This leads to my second general observation which has to do with the depth model of representation



(introduced earlier via Chun's 'persistence of visual knowledge'): *software is both scriptural and executable*. As already discussed these two modes are often splayed out into a hierarchical model of two or more layers of code: source code is 'prior to' a runtime executable; machine languages are 'underneath' programming languages; software applications 'drive' the user experience, and so on. The relevant section from Aarseth (1997) is worth quoting at length due to its clarity and depth.

The dual nature of the cybernetic sign processes can be described as follows: while some signification systems, such as painted pictures and printed books, exist on only one material level (i.e., the level of paint and canvas, or of ink and paper), others exist on two or more levels, as a book being read aloud (ink-paper *and* voice-soundwaves) or a moving picture being projected (the film strip *and* the image on the silver screen). In these latter cases, the relationship between the two levels may be termed *trivial*, as the transformation from one level to the other (what we might call the secondary sign production) will always be, if not deterministic, then at least dominated by the material authority of the first level. In the cybernetic sign transformation, however, the relationship might be termed *arbitrary*, because the internal, coded level can only be fully experienced by way of the external, expressive level. (When inactive, the program and data of the internal level can of course be studied and described as objects in their own right but not as ontological equivalents of their representations at the external level.) Furthermore, what goes on at the external level can be fully understood only in light of the internal. Both are equally intrinsic, as opposed to the extrinsic status of a performance of a play vis-à-vis the play script. To complicate matters, two different expression objects might result from the same code object under virtually identical circumstances. The possibilities for unique or unintentional sign behavior are endless, which must be bad news for the typologists. (p. 40)

The difference between 'trivial' and 'arbitrary' is essentially that between analog representation and digital representation. The analog is only deemed 'trivial' because of the perceived obviousness of mimetic congruence using a continuously variable material value (for example, the curvilinear representation of a sound wave). Likewise the digital is deemed 'arbitrary' because of the seeming disconnect between an empirical referent and the mathematical approximation of its form using discrete quanta. However both modes, the 'arbitrary' included, are governed by what was referred to previously as 'technical transcoding without figuration'. What makes Aarseth's claim provocative, and indeed what I hope to rearticulate in this article, is that the technical, or 'arbitrary', transcoding of symbolic systems is in no way whatsoever a theory of inert material determinism. In fact, it is the exact opposite: the fact that abstraction and figuration *do* exist in software (the interface metaphor of the 'desktop' as functional emanation of source code, or any number of examples cited previously) demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of a technological apparatus that is, admittedly, grounded in



rote, deterministic mathematical language. It is representation in form, but not in deed, and this is the paradox. It is representation as mathematical recoding, not as any socially or culturally significant process of figuration, yet at the end of the day what emerges is exactly that. This is what Aarseth means when he says that 'the possibilities for unique or unintentional sign behavior are endless'. Let me underscore that this needs to be understood not in the 'soft' anthropocentric sense of the varying interpretive and cognitive intangibles brought to the table by human agents, but in the 'hard' sense of complex material systems and the innumerable combinatorial (some would call emergent) possibilities that may arise from them. The fetish in Marx is never blamed on the shortcomings of the human mind, even if it follows a logic of misrecognition. One should not do the same with software.

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The discussion in this article is an attempt to analyze software using a very specific approach, one in which the political interpretation of cultural and technical objects is put forth not as one possible style of reading to be swapped in and out according to one's methodological preference, but instead that the political interpretation of cultural and technical objects is essentially synonymous with interpretation itself such that to do one is necessarily to do the other (and likewise to ignore the former is to perform the latter poorly). Software, in other words, asks a question to which the political interpretation of software is the only coherent answer. This is a different approach from those who seek to unmask how this or that piece of software might be a bearer of some political worldview. This is not a theory of *ideologies*, each paired up with an appropriately insightful critique crafted to debunk it. My task here is not to claim that software has a 'meaning', political or otherwise, that can be revealed through a convenient methodological scaffolding called the political interpretation, quite the opposite. A certain networked relation is at play: software, the social, and the act of interpretation combine in 'an intense mimetic thicket' and it is this thicket that, in its own elaboration, can be called the political.

Chun's (2004) claim made at the outset that 'software is a functional analog to ideology' (p. 43) contains all of the many strands of this emergent structure: (1) software and ideology are related in a fundamental way; (2) yet it is a relationship of figuration in which the complexities and contradictions of ideology, which itself contains both utopian and repressive instincts, are modeled and simulated out of the formal structure of software itself; (3) further, software is functional in nature and thereby exacerbates and ridicules the tension within itself between the narrative and machinic layers – the strictly functional transcodings of software, via a compiler or a script interpreter for example, fly in the face of the common sense fact that software has both an executable layer, which one assumes would obey the rules of a purely functional aspect of the code (similar to what Genette calls the 'paratextual' in literature), and a scriptural layer, which would obey the rules of semantics and expression (in Deleuze, one must remember, it is the *nonexpressive* that is the machinic).

The reader will no doubt have noticed that all this comes under a more common name: allegory. The point is not simply that software is functional, but that software's mock resolution of the tension between the machinic and the narrative, the functional and the disciplinary, the fluid and the fixed, the digital and the analog, is an allegorical figure for the way in which these same political and social realities are 'resolved' today: not through oppression or false consciousness, as in the orthodox ideological critique, but through the ruthless rule of code, which proposes that the analog should live on to the end, only to show that the analog never existed in the first place. And as writers like Fredric Jameson and Northrop Frye have pointed out, the act of interpretation is but another moment of allegorical structuring, as parallel or 'analog' discourses are extracted or, if you like, expressed through and within media technologies (or, formerly, within texts). From Plato onwards, such is the logic of ideology. To claim that it exists is to claim that political apathy and machinic canalization are here alongside the very possibility of their transcendence – otherwise it would not be ideology, but something like psychosis. So it is really desire that is the stuff of ideology. It is a desire not for the absence of ideology in something like the end of history, but for the very presence of ideology as a reminder for how the sacred 'end' must always already be contained in the profane present. This is a logic that shines through quite elegantly in the words of Ernst Bloch (2006[1910–29]), writing from an earlier moment in the machine age. 'Someone once said that people are in Heaven and don't know it; Heaven certainly still seems somewhat unclear. Leave everything from his statement but the *will* that it be true – then he was right' (p. 28).

## Notes

1. Portions of Chun's essay also reappear in her book-length examination of the topic (2006).
2. Here the discussion migrates into calls for the creation of a new intellectual field around what is known as 'software studies', 'software criticism', or 'critical internet studies'. See in particular the valuable work of Lev Manovich, Geert Lovink, Arjen Mulder, Tiziana Terranova, Florian Cramer, and Matthew Fuller.
3. For a founding document on the Java language that discusses this and other language design concepts see Gosling and McGilton (1996).

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