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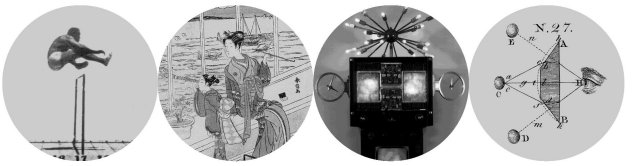

Communication as Interface or Information Exchange? A Reply to Richard Rushton

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I want to thank Richard Rushton for his carefully considered and respectful critical response to my article. Because it has allowed me to (re)read it from a new perspective, Rushton's intervention has helped trigger certain clarifications in my argument concerning the crucial difference between interface and communication – clarifications that are (in a manner I hope will become clear) first and foremost self-clarifications. For that, I am grateful to him.

Let me begin by stressing what Rushton and I share in common. Behind Rushton's concrete criticisms lies a concern with the very issue that motivated my article in the first place: namely, the goal of clarifying the aims of cultural theory in the face of what Deleuze and Guattari have dubbed the 'facializing machine' of contemporary capitalist institutions. Although Rushton and I apparently disagree about how radical a critique of capitalism can be in today's technosphere, we do agree that cultural theory should aim to discover and facilitate experimentation beyond the circumscribed bounds of the actual. That we part company in our respective efforts to account for such experimentation is, in an important sense that I would urge us not to forget, secondary to this general agreement.

That said, I do think that Rushton misunderstands certain parts of my theoretical commitments. Precisely because these misunderstandings license him to *invert* the aim of my argument – to render me an instrumentalist about communication – I should like to take issue directly with both of his basic lines of criticism. As Rushton sees it, I am guilty of two 'misguided generalizations', both of which stem directly from my attempt to transformatively appropriate the work of Gilles Deleuze. On the one hand, my conception of the 'digital-facial-image' (DFI) allegedly advances an 'idealized goal of communication' (p. 353) between humans and computers; and on the other hand, my conception of virtualization allegedly reduces the body, and specifically the body's affectivity, to 'bits of exchangeable, communicable information' (p. 357). Given what I myself perceived my aim to be in thinking

journal of visual culture

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through and writing my article, these conclusions cannot but startle. Having set out to develop an alternate account of faciality and affectivity, can it be that I could have produced a mere variant of the capitalist move to subordinate the latter to the former, precisely what I sought to criticize as the dominant motif of the contemporary human–computer interface?

Having reflected on this question, I believe the answer can only be a resolute 'no'. Far from resolving the issue, however, this answer opens another question: how is it that Rushton and I can have such divergent valuations of what I am up to? Here, the terms in which Rushton poses his criticism are, I think, quite revealing: 'what most clearly signals what is wrong with Hansen's claims,' he states on p. 354, 'is the way in which he sets his claims against those of Gilles Deleuze.' To a very great extent, I think, Rushton's criticism of my argument boils down to the claim that I have failed to remain faithful to Deleuze's concepts. Now, given that a large part of my aim in this article (and in the larger project to which it belongs – Hansen, 2004a) was precisely to extend Deleuze's conception of framing and his appropriation of Bergson beyond, and sometimes against, the trajectory of his thinking, an attempt such as Rushton's to safeguard the orthodoxy of what we might be tempted to call 'Deleuzism' would necessarily fail to engage my argument where in fact it becomes most interesting.

One particularly striking example comes via my invocation of the work of Gilbert Simondon, a philosopher who was, after all, a mentor of sorts for Deleuze himself. As I am interpreting Simondon's work, the concept of individuation is correlated with the category of affectivity: precisely because individuation embraces the metastable domain of the pre-individual (roughly analogous to the Deleuzean 'virtual', except as constrained by the specific kind of individuation at issue), it harbors the potential for experimentations (or becomings) of the human that are not bound by the actual. Rushton is flat wrong, then, when he correlates my validation of the virtualization of the body – as the potential for 'production of new individuations beyond our contracted perceptual habits' (p. 216, cited in Rushton, p. 356) – with the category of fully-realized subjectivity. He concludes:

> In other words, the virtualization of the body can open us up to new experiences, but these experiences are not contextualized or in any way related to a structuring process except that of the individuations of a wholly subjectivized bodily experience. (p. 356)

Rushton is flat wrong here because individuation is precisely *not* reducible to fully-realized subjectivity, because individuation is in fact what prevents subjectivity from ever being fully-realized, what prevents the body from ever being 'wholly subjectivized'. The important point here is not that Rushton does not know Simondon's work, but that his pious fidelity to Deleuze would hinder him from being able to appreciate its significance for thinking affectivity even if he did. Taken as the basis for a phenomenology of the living (human) being, individuation facilitates the production of new affects that are not experiences in the sense Rushton invokes when he contrasts my

purported view of the virtual against Deleuze's claim that 'the virtual is a structure' (p. 356): such new affects actually reconfigure the 'bounds of experience' in a manner broadly consonant with Deleuze's (1994) effort (in *Difference and Repetition*) to think a 'transcendental sensibility' beneath the Kantian forms of intuition. What individuation thereby introduces – against Deleuze's own appropriation of Simondon's concept in *Difference and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense* (1990) – is precisely a *structuring* role for embodied affectivity; which is to say, a conception of the virtual as constrained by the form of life that is the human: this is what Agamben calls 'potentiality' and it is what I develop in my article as the virtualization of the body.

I could certainly go on to repeat this analytic pattern for the psycho-developmental concept of affective attunement where a similar mistaken assimilation – this time, to 'personhood' (p. 356) – causes Rushton to overlook its potential contribution to an embodied understanding of affectivity. As I argue at greater length in my book (Hansen, 2004a, chapter 7) and in a recent article (Hansen, 2004b), affective attunement works through what Daniel Stern (1985) calls 'vitality affects' – the general and diverse feelings of being alive that occur inbetween the zones/states designated by the categorial affects identified by researchers from Darwin to Paul Ekman. Such vitality affects have nothing whatsoever to do with personhood, but are in a literal sense *pre-personal*: they constitute a common medium for a primitive form of emotional connection (one that – not without significance here – Stern takes pains to distinguish from communication proper).

But let me now turn away from the concrete contestation of Rushton's claims so that we can grasp the larger stakes of my argument precisely where it comes to the 'consequences' of Deleuze's move to liberate affect from the body. Rushton accuses me of failing to understand these consequences (p. 355), by which again he appears to mean that I have failed to remain faithful to Deleuzean orthodoxy. Rather than quibbling over the concept of fidelity, let me simply redirect this same criticism against Rushton's own recent effort to mobilize Deleuze's concept of faciality against the concept of communication (Rushton, 2002). Asking the altogether Deleuzean question, 'what can a face do?', Rushton positions the face as the very condition of possibility, the transcendental basis, for communication itself:

> Rather than being held to determinations of cause and effect, the face is a link between a destination and an origin; the face arrives from somewhere and is on its way to somewhere else. As such, it is the phase of *communicability* between a here and a there. Rather than being the matter of communication – the *what* that is thought, said, or felt – the face establishes the prior level of communicability, the 'is it possible?' that precedes the *what* of thinking, saying, feeling. The face, therefore, sets in play the process of communication; it is the encounter prior to communication, but it is not communication as such. (2002: 225, original emphasis)

Let me say right away that I agree entirely with this assessment of the face: I

too believe that it is not the *matter* of communication so much as the *prior condition* that makes communication possible. (As we will see shortly, this account of the quasi-transcendental or infra-empirical function of the face perfectly describes my argument concerning the face as an interface between the human and the digital.) Yet from my perspective, it is important, indeed requisite, to pose a further question to or about the face: how exactly does the face establish this 'prior level of communicability'? If, that is, the face does not constitute a message, does not express the meaning of a body, but exists as an autonomous expression, an 'expression in-itself' as Rushton puts it, how can it condition the process of communication?

Precisely because it is autonomous in the sense just described, the face can only condition communication through its relation with a body, although not with the body (of the character) whose face it 'is'. (In this respect, his own intentions notwithstanding, Rushton's work makes salient the need to distinguish between two bodies in Deleuze's work on the close-up: the body that would be part of the image, were it not dissolved by the autonomy of the face; and the body of the spectator outside the image.) The face functions by triggering a dynamic process within the body *of the spectator* such that the latter, without receiving any information from the face (which, remember, is not in-itself a message or content), undergoes a process of 'cognitive' reorganization (cognitive here understood in the broadest of senses) in which the difference of its new configuration just is the meaning of the autonomous expression in-itself of the face. Whether we want to call this 'communication' or not (and this remains a contested question in the contemporary context), the face in-itself cannot be decoupled from the bodily processing in the spectator that comprises its dynamic (temporal) correlate. Another, perhaps simpler way to express this point is to say that the meaning of the autonomous facial expression is dissolved of any relation with the body of the character to which it is attached in order to be freed to signify to and in conjunction with another body – the body of the spectator. Can it be incidental that this displacement is precisely what Rushton seems to describe, without quite realizing it, in his own gloss on Deleuze's concept?

> [I]f we take the facial expression in-itself, then instead of finding a face that stands in for something else ... we encounter a pure quality or affect ... This is Deleuze's move: the face is no longer to be perceived as an entity that expresses another feeling or idea. Rather the face incorporates as part of itself the very feeling or idea. (Rushton, 2002: 224)

From the very instant that we posit a 'we' who does the taking, encountering and perceiving here, we are, as it were, already operating within a 'hermeneutic circuit' coupling autonomous face and spectatorial body.

The correlation of the face (or the image) and the perceiving–cognizing–feeling body of the spectator is precisely the pay-off of my critical appropriation–extension of Deleuze's work on the cinema, and in particular, of my effort to 'rescue' Bergson's embodied notion of the center of indetermination from Deleuze's disembodying generalization of it as the abstract

operation of cinematic framing (see Hansen, 2004a, introduction and chapter 3). In my article (and in the larger project to which it belongs), I take pains to correlate this effort, or rather the necessity for such an effort, with the epochal shift in the materiality of communicability that follows in the wake of digitization. Faced with a massive dematerialization (or virtualization) of social life and a suspension of contact with our media technologies (consider the inhuman temporality of real-time computing), we cultural theorists of today are in a very different position from the one occupied by Deleuze in his time. Far from feeling the need to explode the humanist trappings of a dominant and historically-inherited phenomenology in the name of a radical and, in a certain sense, 'posthuman' experimentalism,[1] we are (or should be) motivated today by the pressing need to preserve some form of contact linking the kinds of embodied beings that we are ('wetware') to the increasingly autonomous technological domain (hardware and also software, to the extent that it is becoming ever more opaque to us, its users). This is precisely the ethical imperative of a thinking that takes human technogenesis – and the co-evolution of the human and technics that informs it – as a fundamental insight.

Now it is precisely this need for preserving contact – and for thinking the digital as a new phase of human technogenesis (rather than the inauguration of some radically new, posthuman future) – that informs my effort in *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004a) to retool Bergson's conception of embodied framing for today's infosphere: because perception today no longer selects from among *preconstituted* images (e.g. the cinema frame) but rather from unformed information (digital data) that is fully flexible as concerns output, the process of framing becomes less technical (in the sense of following technical specifications built into concrete apparatuses) and simultaneously *comes to encompass the entirety of the spectator-participant's embodied activity* as she seeks to negotiate the perceptual and sensorial challenges posed by new media environments. As I put it in my book, the spectator-participant acts as an embodied center of indetermination that *filters information in order to create images* (with image here understood in a broad, not strictly visible or technical, sense).

How, we can now ask, is this argument impacted by Rushton's allegation that I am, in effect, committed to an idealized model of communication? Aside from exposing my rather careless use of the term 'communication',[2] Rushton's criticism calls for a certain specification or rephrasing of the argument (one that actually gets worked-through across the seven chapters of my book), so that we must now say this: the spectator-participant acts as an embodied center of indetermination that *filters data in order to create information* (with information here understood as encompassing images in the above-defined sense). This rephrasing has the merit of bringing to the fore the claim that I put forth concerning the 'nature' of information itself (see Hansen, 2004a, chapter 2 and especially Hansen, 2002): with British cyberneticist Donald MacKay, who supplements Shannon's mathematical theory of communication with a theory of meaning, I contend that *information cannot be separated from meaning*. The crux of MacKay's analysis concerns

the function of what he calls 'Descriptive Information Content'. A complement to 'Selective Information Content', which correponds to Shannon's technical definition of information as the minimum number of binary steps by which a message may be selected, Descriptive Information Content has the role of defining the broader 'conditional–probability matrix' on which a message can be specified. More than just a metacommunication concerning how selective content should be rendered, descriptive content concerns the *extra-technical* context of any given message that comprises an integral part of its meaning.[3] What is most important about MacKay's analysis in the present context is that this conditional–probability matrix corresponds to the rich embodiment of the recipient of a technically-specified unit of information, such that the specifics of embodiment make a positive, singular and ineliminable *contribution* to the construction of that unit as information in the proper sense – that is, as information that is necessarily meaningful. As scholars from Francisco Varela (1991) to Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) have insisted, there simply is no such thing as information-in-itself; rather, there is only information for us, that is, as specified on a selectional matrix which includes, as its most important element, our constitutive embodiment as the living, psychic-social beings that we are.

Given that Rushton, no doubt because of his zeal to remain faithful to a Deleuzian orthodoxy, has no use for my historicist claim concerning technics and human technogenesis, it is hardly surprising that he misconstrues my contestation of the 'nature' of information. My claim for the fundamental correlation of information and (embodied) meaning is directed against the technicist tradition in information theory that runs from Shannon to Fredrich Kittler and that has informed the dominant conceptualization of communication (the sender–message–receiver model) and the human–computer interface from the advent of computing until today. Thus, in my conception of the DFI, there is no informational exchange at all; indeed the concept of the DFI was developed precisely to explain how we can maintain contact – or interface – with digital technologies in the absence of any informational exchange and in a way that eschews the technicist logic of information theory in favor of an embodied logic of meaning.

Let me close my reply by simply describing again what I think happens when we confront the DFI: in works such as Geisler's *Dream of Beauty 2.0* or Ken Feingold's *Sinking Feeling*, we encounter the autonomous face in itself as a radical and unsettling challenge to our embodied understanding, our very capacity to make meaning out of the information of the world. Because of the context of our encounter – our knowledge that we are (potentially) in contact with the digital – there is no pay-off in our affirming the autonomy of the face in Deleuze's sense (its radical detachment from any body to which it might belong); rather, this is a face that confronts us as 'originally' autonomous, as originally without any connection with the body and the logic of embodiment. As a result, our attention can and must focus on the relation of this autonomous facial image with *our* embodiment, such that what happens in the latter – that is, *in* and *as* the process whereby we transform data into information (or, alternatively, information into meaning)

– creates a *supplementary* analogical connection to the digital. This supplementary connection stands in for the 'originally missing' connection to a body that defines the DFI in its technical specificity. Without any information being exchanged, we thus undergo an embodied (self-) transformation that itself comprises the 'content' of the DFI as information, which is to say, *as information necessarily meaningful for us.*

Notes

1. For a critical analysis of the inhuman or posthuman agenda of Deleuze's and Deleuze and Guattari's experimentalism, particularly in the context of their critique of the organism as a biologically-rooted concept, see Hansen (2000).
2. 'Communication' is clearly a vexed term, designating everything from the sender–message–receiver model of classical information theory to Luhmann's functionalist account of the autopoiesis of social systems. While I have no stake whatsoever in defending the term, I would want to refrain from dismissing it too hastily – as does Deleuze and, following him, Rushton – as an instrumental account of sociality and language. I comment on Deleuze's remarks concerning information and the need to go 'beyond' information in Hansen (2002). It was precisely to avoid this vexed terrain surrounding the term 'communication' that I deployed the terms 'interface' and 'contact', and I only wish that I had done this with total consistency in the article.
3. It is hardly insignificant that, for MacKay, the selective function of descriptive content concerns the receiver's embodied being, understood in its most robust sense. MacKay (1969: 54) notes: 'The *meaning* [of a message] can be fully represented only in terms of the full basic-symbol complex defined by all the elementary responses evoked. These may include visceral responses and hormonal secretions.'

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