

Thesis Outline

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Aim: To analyze the epistemologies implied in the construction of digital interfaces and to explore their construction as a critical means of manifesting alternative cosmological ¹realities.

Intro: An everyday computer can be thought of as consisting of three layers. On one end is situated the actual computational hardware: the underlying technicalities that store, process, and transfer information. At the other end we find the human subject. This is the terrain of subjectivities, understandings, emotions, ideologies, and the many other affects that inform our human experience.

In between these two worlds lies the interface: that which allows for their interrelation, which mediates the interactions the two may have with one another. When any of us use a computer, an act whose ubiquity is at this point trivial, we interact not with the actual computation underneath, but rather with the interface that lies above. It is another trivial statement to say that our use of computers has drastically altered our experiences and world views. Through computers we have come to build and disseminate narratives, defined cartographies, and enacted realities that have left the virtual and stepped into worlds of physical matter.

It is the aim of this thesis to show that the formation of digital interfaces is not neutral. It is inherently political. Through the construction of these interfaces, we do much more than simply enhance “user experience”. Rather, as mediators between ourselves and the mechanics of computation, the construction of digital interfaces comes to also construct the cosmologies we inhabit. Taking this as a starting point, this thesis first aims to examine the ways in which contemporary digital interfaces have come to inform contemporary cosmologies. Yet it is also my aim to present the construction of digital interfaces as a critical means by which to enact alternative relations to computational material, which could open up possibilities for new subjectivities and cosmologies.

Outline:

Part 1: A survey of relevant concepts that give background to my argument.

- Linguistics (signification, materials to concepts, networks)
- Ideology (*Envisioning Power*, relation between ideas and power, cosmologies)
- Agency/worldbuilding (Dorothy Holland, social construction of reality)

¹ I use cosmologies here as proposed by Eric R. Wolf in *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*. Wolf explores cosmologies as the ideological constructs which form our understandings of the temporal and logical nature of the world. In shaping these understandings, Wolf argues that cosmologies have far reaching implications on the perceived roles and relationships of human and non-human actors that inhabit said cosmologies.

Part 2: The political implications of contemporary digital interfaces.

- The stated aims of interface design and their hidden imperatives (Olia Lialina).
- Perspectives shaped through digital interfaces (Hito Steyerl, Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler)
- Implications in larger political context (Susan Sontag, Byung-Chul Han)

Part 3: The construction of digital interfaces as a means of manifesting cosmological alterities.

- Revisiting topics of agency, signifiers.
- Case studies which propose alternative relationships to the materialities of computation (Temple OS, Johanna Bruckner)
- Implications

Relationship to Graduation Project:

I would like to clarify the link between my graduation project and my thesis as at first glance they may appear quite distinct from one another. However, I see my thesis and graduation project as revolving around a common concern, where the graduation project is a wider survey of this theme and the thesis is an in-depth consideration of one case study related to it.

Both projects deal with topics of how materialities interact with human subjectivities to form cosmologies and systems of meaning. In my graduation project I aim to consider this topic in broad terms, looking at a set of narratives and placing them into conversation with the material landscapes they emerge from and are projected onto. In the thesis I would like to focus on examining this topic as it relates to contemporary life and as such explore the means by which digital interfaces largely predominate our current symbolic panoramas and form our cosmologies.

In negotiating the choice of medium with respect to the scope of these two projects, I believe that a film allows me to bring into adjacency a wider range of associations and imbue them with emotional relevance in a manner that would be difficult with an essay. With the thesis I find writing to be a productive medium in which to focus on a specific case and support its analysis with reference to a wider literature. In the thesis I would like to also incorporate a speculative element on the potentialities of interfaces in order to provoke the reader to consider alternative relationships to the materials that underlie our symbolic landscapes.

Bibliography:

- Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds, *Dorothy Holland*
- Polymorphic Possibilities and Molecular Sex, *Johanna Bruckner*
- Cyborg Manifesto, *Donna Haraway*
- The Medium is the Massage, *Marshall McLuhan*
- Typewriter, Film, Gramophone, *Friedrich Kittler*
- Envisioning Power, *Eric R. Wolf*
- In Free Fall, A Thought Experiment in Vertical Perspective, *Hito Steyerl*
- Once Again, The Doorknob, *Olia Lialina*

- Regarding the Pain of Others, *Susan Sontag*
- Psychopolitics, *Byung-Chul Han*