

Editorial: “Navigation Beyond Vision”

01/02

Today one may complain that life has been reduced to points in a matrix of relations – cities, territories, and historical narratives prematurely refined into categories of known and unknown, real and virtual, concrete and abstract space. And yet, when we need to locate a crucial resource (or ourselves, for that matter) who can afford not to search the grid for what everybody knows to be there? – the Italian restaurant, the emergency room, the ancestor, the terrorist. This is not simply about seeing; by definition, navigation organizes timescales and orders of magnitude that cannot be visualized simultaneously. Furthermore, in attempting to map and record various terrains and domains, contemporary navigators are themselves mapped and recorded at the same time. Supermodernity’s expansive enclosures of global infrastructure, time-zone logistics, and data behaviorism become external abstractions as much as computational and territorial facts.

“A computer animation is less a reproduction and more a production ... or creation of a model world,” said Harun Farocki in a lecture only a few weeks prior to his untimely death in 2014. In this lecture, titled “Computer Animation Rules,” Farocki seemed to suggest that navigation poses a contemporary challenge to montage – the editing of distinct sections of film into a continuous sequence – as the dominant paradigm of techno-political visuality. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to underestimate the influence of cinema on the televisual imagination of twentieth-century spatial-political life. If montage is the core formal device for concatenating space and time into a continuous causal sequence, then for Farocki, the computer-animated, navigable images that constitute the twenty-first century’s “ruling class of images” call for new tools of analysis. Drawing on Alexander Galloway’s concept of “actionable objects” in gamespace, Farocki began to ask: How does the shift from montage to navigation alter the way images – and art – operate as models of political action and modes of political intervention?

If Google Maps seeks to map urban environments, and global finance seeks to map affective responses to possible events, Farocki appears to have employed the question of navigation to ask: What are the interfaces of navigation that transcend the realm of the purely technical, even as a form of visualization that paradoxically supersedes the spatial and temporal constraints of images completely? How do navigational paradigms in virtual and offline environments increasingly inform the politics of the image? If navigation puts ontological pressure on the static frame of a photographic or cinematic image, then how are our concepts of

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Rather than finding orientation by way of images in the real world, today images may mutate into a sort of interface – an operational tool reaching beyond visual-cognitive persuasions, beyond representation, beyond “the image” itself, enabling seemingly boundless and borderless mobility between spaces, scales, temporalities. Navigation now begins where the map becomes invisible or indecipherable, operating on a plane of immanence in perpetual motion. Navigation, instead of framing or representing the world, continuously updates and adjusts multiple frames from viewpoints within the world. Navigation in the digital realm is the modeling and mapping of an elusive environment – in the service of orientation, play, immersion, control, and survival.

The ensuing existential condition or *technè* could be named “navigational.” As a techno-ontological predicament, the navigational is operative in virtual and offline environments, as well as in the deep-layered relations of power and desire inherent to orientation and movement. Consider, for example, people who visit distant “home countries” based on DNA test results, just as many in those countries, moved by hope or violence, flee to foreign lands. Thus the “navigational” condition implicates metaphysical as well as political, economic, ecological, cultural, and legal mobilities. Freedom-of-movement rights, land and trespassing restrictions, immigration laws, GPS regulations, international trade protocols: they all codify and enforce (and constantly transform) the navigational condition, which in turn informs this emergent politics of the image.

If navigation puts ontological pressure on the static frame of a photographic or cinematic image, then how are inherited concepts of political action, visual literacy, and collective intervention also pressured to surpass or outperform model worlds? How does the operative and performative character of immersion in computational environments – navigating with and within images – impact the function and the status of the visual as such? Has navigation ever been a visual technology at all, or has it always compounded cosmological, mathematical, conceptual, and sensorial orders of magnitude into aggregate spatial orders that surpass the visual entirely?

Don’t get us wrong – it is through navigation that we are also misled, often to terrifying degrees. The promise of pathfinding implied in the invocation of navigation may suddenly become a reality of catastrophic disorientation. Any knowledge that is operative in navigational

measurement and movement is prone to be radically limited by culture, history, politics, and technology. The more a navigational attitude becomes structurally inevitable in digital oceania, the deeper a belief in mobility and progress will install itself, all the while dulling the ability to come to terms with the stasis and regression that accompanies it. Against the backdrop of platforms that swell into worlds, disorientation may have become much more than a structural liability or security threat. It may instead be an ethical resource that we are only beginning to explore.

In oscillating between technical, ontological, political, and metaphorical senses of “navigation,” our shifting uses of the term could already be disorienting. Hopefully, this sense of obfuscation nevertheless originates in strategic theorization: from principle to paradigm, from description to definition, navigation is mobilized to serve different causes and ends in each contribution to this issue. Clarity of vision and reliability of data become delusional once navigation is rigorously dislocated by agents breaking away from secure pathways of movement and exploration. Perhaps stressing the insecurity and indeterminacy of navigation – particularly in a technological environment saturated with artificial intelligence – can provide alter-navigational practices and epistemologies to those otherwise vulnerable to navigational rule.

This issue represents the first continuation of the conference “Navigation Beyond Vision,” organized by the Harun Farocki Institut (HaFI) and e-flux, and held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin on April 5–6, 2019. Participants included Ramon Amaro, James Bridle, Kaye Cain-Nielsen, Maité Chénier, Kodwo Eshun, Anselm Franke, Jennifer Gabrys, Charles Heller, Tom Holert, Inhabitants, Doreen Mende, Matteo Pasquinelli, Laura Lo Presti, Patricia Reed, Nikolay Smirnov, Hito Steyerl, Oraib Toukan, Ben Vickers, and Brian Kuan Wood. A second part of the issue is forthcoming.

– Tom Holert, Doreen Mende, and the Editors

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