The following is the first in a series of essays Metahaven will publish in e-flux journal.

Nearly every day words disappear, because they are forbidden.
– Jean-Luc Godard, *Alphaville*, 1967

The linguist and philologist Victor Klemperer once noted that words can be “like tiny doses of arsenic” that are “swallowed unnoticed.”¹ Klemperer, who was Jewish, hinted at his own, unwitting adoption of Nazi jargon, which was apparent in terms such as “extermination” and “work deployment,” and collectivities such as “the Russian” or “the Jew.” In his seminal 1947 book, *Language of the Third Reich*, Klemperer recorded changes in everyday language during the Weimar Republic, the Nazi era, and the ensuing German Democratic Republic. A professor of French literature at the University of Dresden living through the seismic shifts of the first half of the twentieth century, Klemperer in the beginning tried to hold on to his existence by strictly clinging to his academic work. “I buried myself in my profession,” he confessed. “I tried to cut myself off from the present entirely.” But it would become impossible to maintain any distance. He was barred from his job, prohibited from using the library, deported from his home, and deployed into factory labor. It was thanks to his marriage to a German woman, and later, to a coincidence involving a misspelling of his Jewish last name (a doctor’s handwriting on a medicine bottle reading “Kleinpeter” instead of “Klemperer”) that he survived the Nazi regime.

Klemperer resorts to arts of noticing and literary erudition to examine the ways in which certain words, phrases, syntax, and semiotics permeated — and so created — a language of the Third Reich. Most of Klemperer’s encounters weren’t with fanatical party ideologues, but with everyday people. Often they were his half-friends and acquaintances. Their unwitting usage of Nazi phraseology demonstrates the power that these linguistic motifs possessed (and continue to possess) to emanate and sustain a politics, even and especially when the subjects at hand would deny that the power exists. A series of awkward gaffes that runs through the book demonstrates this. For example, Klemperer works in a factory that produces envelopes. He befriends a coworker, Frieda, who helps him with his envelope machine, and even sometimes talks to him, which is prohibited. At some point, Klemperer confides to Frieda that his wife is sick.

The next morning, he writes,

I found a big apple in the middle of my machine. I looked over to Frieda’s
Interface and metaphor: conference of the Internet Party of Ukraine, which, in 2015, had a person dressed as Darth Vader run for office and made international headlines with it. See http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/42/pastiche-of-ghosts
The pleasure in the apple was gone,” notes Klemperer. “This Sancta-Simplicitas soul, whose feelings were entirely un-Nazi and humane, had been infected by the most fundamental ingredient of National Socialist poison.”³ Indeed, the notion that a “proper” German must be Aryan was a fundamentalism and essentialism that permeated Nazi ideology. But it could only be installed and maintained through persuasive rhetorical performance. Though Klemperer does not point this out explicitly, many of the predominant motifs of Nazi rhetoric engendered metaphors, metonyms, and allegories to construct, naturalize, and maintain its political grip on reality – or rather, its grip on the extent to which reality itself could be encountered and experienced. In line with Klemperer’s research, we surmise that the workings of rhetorics have become something larger than mere figures of speech (or rather, figures of “free speech”). We suspect that they have come to function as interfaces with reality – understood narrowly, in Lev Manovich’s technical terms, as “ways to represent ... and control the signal,” but also more broadly, as ways to format and constrain a public’s encounter with realities that are, at the same time as being represented, obscured.⁴

This series of essays is, first of all, concerned with conceptual, visual, and cognitive metaphor, metonymy, and allegory. More broadly, it is also concerned with our (mistaken) reliance on constative and performative speech acts as approximations of the truth. In a conversation last year, the poet and translator Eugene Ostashevsky said something apparently straightforward in response to a question of ours on absurdist poetry: “People don’t say things because they believe them, they believe them because they say them.”⁵

Indeed, one of the things that “absurdism” did was to undermine the expediency of all language that was meant to be believed simply because it was uttered. This is still unwelcome politically. Whether it was the “realism” of official Soviet aesthetics, or the “organic truth” of Nazi ideologists like Alfred Rosenberg, or whether, today, it is the memes, metaphors, and allegories of the far and populist right that freely borrow from their predecessors: all of these doctrines and “interfacial regimes” rely on believing their own performative phraseology. This is true whether such regimes are messy or systematic, whether centrally imposed or adopted as part of news cycles, or employ troll and bot attacks, hashtags, likes, and retweets. Klemperer writes that the Third Reich, with its permanent accumulation of “historic” events and “momentous” ceremonies, was “mortally ill from a lack of the everyday.”⁶ Something similar seems to be the case with far-right leaders in Europe, whose speeches, whether delivered half-shouting or not, are swollen with rhetorical pomp that attempts to install in the audience an idea of membership in some enormously important historical shift of tides. One way in which these speeches achieve their sense of inflated importance is by their heavy usage of metaphor.

The cognitive scientist George Lakoff once explained that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”⁷ Fredric Jameson has written about allegory in a similar manner, explaining that in it “the features of a primary narrative are selected ... and correlated with features of a second one that then becomes the ‘meaning’ of the first.”⁸ Indeed, conceptual substitutions of one thing for another thing can overwrite, and thereby erase, the possibility of an encounter with the first. We consider metaphors, metonyms, and allegories forms that, today, far exceed their oratory and rhetorical origins. Rather than being instances of clever wordplay to entertain or convince some Greek polis, they have become scalable political technologies obfuscating, undermining, and instrumentalizing the realities they represent. Of course, the political expedience of metaphors has been well documented. Kateryna Pilyarchuk and Alexander Onysko assert that conceptual metaphors “help [political actors] to both direct and constrain the audience’s understanding by drawing on certain metaphorical themes.”⁹ Others have noted “the incredible potential of metaphor as a political tool.”¹⁰ But all this, while correct, is still understating what such linguistic operations comprise cognitively, and collectively, when supercharged on the amplification of digital platforms. Rather than merely shifting a narrative frame, they tend to become the narrative.

Let us for the time being resort to an example from the Dutch far-right. In the right-wing media space of Dutch news outlets, resentment about Islam is often expressed by the same audience that also “object[s] to climate hysteria,” which is what was formerly called climate-change denial. As a matter of ideological consistency, the same Twitter accounts that share Italian far-right demagogue Matteo Salvini’s beach selfies are also apt at hating the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. The activities of trolls and bots aside, Islamophobic resentment in the Netherlands takes place with
little to no actual knowledge about Islam or its practitioners; the same can probably be said about the level of knowledge regarding climate science. For a convincing assessment of the ways in which Dutch mainstream culture processes Islam’s otherness, Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* is invaluable – especially so the lengthy sequence devoted to the former politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Interested as Wekker is in “the self that constructs these hysterical, excessive, repressed projections,” we are interested in the self that creates (equally hysterical and excessive) cross-domain ideological consistency through metaphor.11 The mainstream Dutch right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf* – notorious for its collaborative stance with the Nazis during World War II – recently soldered anti-Islamic resentment and climate-change denial together when, in its official reporting, it began to refer to windmills as *klimaatminaretten* (“climate minarets”).

An expression like “climate minarets,” collapsing metaphor and metonymy to describe devices that collect and convert wind energy into electricity, typifies a linguistic and cognitive short-circuiting that is as interfacially fundamentalist as it is rhetorically expedient for the demographic that likes its climate-change denial Nespresso with a touch of lactose-free Islamophobia. Tellingly, its far-reaching stupidity may belong to a backlash against the deafeningly idiotic technology lingo of “smart cities.” Yet under the aegis of free speech, phantasmatic concepts like “climate minarets” are exactly the *ignes fatui*, or “will-o’-the-wisp,” that Thomas Hobbes warned of when he discussed the danger of metaphors.12 Klemperer describes a factory foreman who had been a doctor and, while thrown out of his former job, has “appropriated all of the Nazis’ anti-Jewish expressions, and especially those of Hitler, and uttered them so incessantly that he himself could probably no longer judge to what extent he was ridiculing either the Führer or himself.” The foreman allows some members of his work group to use the tram, while others have to travel on foot, giving rise to the foreman’s distinction between “Fahrjuden (travel Jews) and Laufjuden (foot Jews).”13 A similar word construction can be detected in the vocabulary of the columnist-turned-politician Annabel Nanninga, a representative for the far-right Dutch Forum for Democracy party (FvD). Nanninga referred to refugees crossing the Mediterranean by boat as *dobbernegers* (float ni**ers). In a tweet posted on April 14, 2015, and since deleted, Nanninga

*The performative speech gesture of the “promise” is, structurally, among those heavily ridiculed by poetic absurdism.*
Interfacial regime: Campaign image for the Dutch far-right conservative leader Thierry Baudet’s European campaign and his European chief, Derk Jan Eppink, pose covered by badly photoshopped Aurora Borealis.
A trash can on the streets of Hamburg, Germany, 2019, printed with a text balloon exclaiming “Your papers, please!” This example demonstrates likely unwittingly a reproduction of the coercive language of the State in an unrelated context, in a way not dissimilar to many examples in Klemperer’s book.

Photo: Metahaven.

wrote: “Illegalen en dobbernegers: we zijn te beschaafd dus ze blijven komen” (“Illegals and float ni**ers: we are too civilized, so they keep on coming”). Rather than performing on the level of expressing “opinion,” provoking “debate,” or enacting “free speech” — the levels at which a liberal politics conventionally assesses and classifies expressions such as this — the dobbernegers metaphor functions more like an interface. While its author (Nanninga) is absolved from any direct responsibility with regard to its ethics (because free speech, etc.), the word operates in a transformative relationship to the underlying epistemic reality. Just like in klimaatminaretten, for the recipient the vacant space of knowledge, curiosity, or sensing is occupied with “ideas,” indeed heavily “interfacing” the now-overwritten, obscured epistemic reality with a particular “meaning.”

The political effect of a term like dobbernegers is heavily predicated on its viral distribution through digital platforms and so, in a sense, it appears as if it has been designed and tailored to interface reality in combination with a specific panel of instruments that users have when using a platform such as Twitter. We will refer to this as an “interfacial regime” — a term coined by Benjamin H. Bratton in his 2016 book The Stack. On Software and Sovereignty. We use the term “interface” here in the same way as one would think of a software navigation panel or a dashboard, and for that matter, a radio host or AI persona that takes the place of a visual interface in the aural spectrum of interaction with computers. The idea that interfaces “have” “neutrality” is ludicrous, as any fan of Dieter Rams-designed radio sets will readily acknowledge as will anyone who has rated Spike Jonze’s 2013 film Her above-average. What happens in interfaces though, with their buttons and controls and their logistics, or their Elizas or Siris or Alexas, is perhaps the last form of direct causation that users will see happening in their lifetimes. While generally unable to control income stability, pensions, state of mind and state of being, the climate, wars, economic recessions, asteroids hitting objects in space including Earth, the world resetting to its post-Permian state, tank battles, and many other things, our interactions with interfaces can cause digital objects and their “underlying” realities to be liked and disliked, blocked, muted, seen and unseen, ordered, eaten, ridden, unpacked, had, discovered, found, traced, wanted ...

George Lakoff singled out, in a short 2016
assessment of metaphors during the US presidential elections, then-candidate Donald J. Trump’s preference for “direct causation” over “systemic causation.” There is a key parallel with the workings of the interface here. The comparatively more nuanced model of “systemic causation” recognizes chains of direct causes, interacting direct causes, feedback loops, and probabilistic causes contributing to a given situation. Acknowledging systemic causation or complexity does not give users the same primary satisfaction as having ordered an Uber, booked a flight, received a “like,” or received a new vacuum cleaner from Amazon. While systemic causation can explain things, it cannot create the same endorphin shots. According to Lakoff: “Systemic causation in global warming explains why global warming over the Pacific can produce huge snowstorms in Washington DC: masses of highly energized water molecules evaporate over the Pacific, blow to the Northeast and over the North Pole and come down in winter over the East coast and parts of the Midwest as masses of snow.” He continues, “many of Trump’s policy proposals are framed in terms of direct causation.” Indeed, here, in the logic of direct causation, “[t]he cure for gun violence is to have a gun ready to directly shoot the shooter. To stop jobs from going to Asia where labor costs are lower and cheaper goods flood the market here, the solution is direct: put a huge tariff on those goods so they are more expensive than goods made here.”

Actions facilitated by interfaces, such as driving cars, ordering cab rides, paying for food, liking and disliking pictures and people and stories, voting (when it happens on a computer), and many more such actions, can only be done in tandem with processes of reduction. We suggest that in metaphor, metonym, and allegory, reality is not merely expediently manipulated to make a rhetorical point, but somehow, also, really lost. Klemperer noticed that during the Nazi era, there was an exponential growth of “technical expressions being applied to non-technical areas, in which they then function as a means of bringing about mechanization. In the German language this was only very rarely the case before 1933.” He asks,

Should it really be considered Romantic when Goebbels misrepresents a trip to the bombed cities in the west by claiming that he who had originally intended to instill courage in the victims had in the end himself been “recharged (neu aufgeladen)”
by their unshakeable heroism?\textsuperscript{17}

The ideology “inside” such language has become entirely commonplace to us. At every airport, we encounter curvilinear-shaped booths where we can “reboost” (sic) ourselves. The ideas of “recharging” or “resetting” our skin, of “recharging” our energies or youthful appearances— all of it is a long-lasting new normal to us. But we may well think of this as belonging to the longue durée of interfacial regimes. Summarizing the proliferation of metaphorical mechanical and technical terms instrumentalizing their underlying realities, Klemperer writes: “You can see and hear the button at work ...,” that is, the interface.\textsuperscript{18}

Bratton coins the term “interfacial regime” to denote a variety of ways in which interfaces constitute a political and ideological apparatus striving for consistency. While “[t]he Interface layer describes the projective, perceptual cinematic, semiotic layer on a given instrumental landscape, including the frames, subtitles, navigable maps, pixelated hallucinations, and augmented realities through which local signification and significance are programmed,”\textsuperscript{19} its “power (and danger) is [the] remaking of the world through instrumentalized images of totality; it is what gives any interfacial regime even a politico-theological coherency and appeal.”\textsuperscript{20} This seems very much the case for the different computational platform ecologies “within which” information is deemed to be true or significant. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube are each explicitly associated and involved with processes of political and ideological cognitive short-circuiting; for example, through disinformation campaigns, hypertargeted ads, trolls and bots, algorithmic suggestion and autoplay, as well as resultant “filter bubbles.” As such, they act as interfacial windows in which that which is visible passes for “the world.” And, according to Bratton, “[a]s multiple interfaces congeal or are deployed as strategically particular interfacial regimes, they push toward naming everything that is visible to its scope.”\textsuperscript{21} In other words, some of the inhabitant objects of the interface are not so much its buttons and controls, nor its corporate colors and modes of display and interaction, but rather materials in them that bear on the interface’s potentials at amplification and distribution. Materials, such as low-res image hoaxes, former forms of satire,” remnants of archaic pasts, deepfakes, Salvini selfies, or Trump’s hair, or clouds of words that settle in our collective memory only to erode it from inside. All of these, and all of them together, constitute a memetic-cognitive interfacial complex that deters users to further examine the hard-to-reach “underlying” materials. Hence, the subjects of our investigation, and participating factors in interfacial regimes, are not only words, but also word-pictures, image macros, subtitled images, subtitles and closed captions themselves, and even words and images or their combinations as featured on the metaphorical “buttons” of apps and software platforms— thus, a field crossing from metaphor to meme to allegory to user interface.

A further parallel can be drawn between interfaces as technological products using language, and techno-financial products whose operations are so unclear, yet complex, that they appear to “run away” with their creators’ abilities to control them.

The media scholar Arjun Appadurai identifies the 2008 financial crash with the derailment of the “promise” at the heart of most gift rituals. Since this promise is a performative speech act and a key component of contracts and contract law, the reality of the promise— its keeping— is made “real” or actual by the performance. Appadurai’s assessment of the financial crisis is that of a “failure of language” — the language through which the promise is enacted. Appadurai sees the promise as an “illocutionary speech act that creates the reality it refers to by its very utterance.”\textsuperscript{22} By commanding the reality that it proclaims to exist, the promise becomes a precondition for further promises, in which dividuation (the separation of the whole into parts) plays a key role. Through partitioning and re-bundling, derivative financial products were promises chained to prior promises. Exactly, Appadurai illustrates his claims by showing that the failure of language in the derivative mainly lay not in each individual promise made for a specific financial product, but rather in the chain of contracts that followed, in which there was increasing distance between initial contracts and derivatives built from it. Appadurai asserts that “any sequence of ritual action acquires its reverberative, amplificatory, and rippling effect on ordinary life by building on a series of links between things that resemble one another and things that are actually connected (as parts, components, or extensions) to one another.” He continues: “It is [the] dynamic replication through metaphor and metonym that may be the most important way in which also achieves its amplificatory effects.”\textsuperscript{23}

Just what if (political) language itself, supercharged via its social media amplifiers, is going the way of the credit default swap that, as Appadurai claims, brought the economy down in 2008 by failure of its internal metaphors? As we will see in Part 2 of this series, for Eugene Ostashevsky, and the Russian poetry
predecessors of OBERIU (the Union for Real Art), there could not have been a “true” or “real” promise at all. Strikingly, at moments of structural political change, and in the historical context of seismic ideological and political shifts, artists as well as scholars have aimed to question language itself and hence its relationship to reality, ridiculing the performance of rhetorical gesturing to then have one’s telos and eat it — and in the processes of lyrical ridicule and negation, ending up, paradoxically, in premodern philosophical territory. Whether documentary, absurdist, or lyrical in approach, what holds these practices together are acts of disbelief in the stated constative and performative functions of concepts and words.

Klemperer wrote his *Language of the Third Reich* in an involuntary banishment from society. Indeed, he made his most striking observations only after the Second World War, when, resuming his teaching job, he met many young people in his classroom who wanted to get away from Nazism, but were unable to do so as their language was still imbued with its expressions. Thus, the language of the Nazis was prolonged long after the regime was supposedly over and done with. Today, there is ample proof that it never went away.

The *Language of the Third Reich*’s very partial systematicity is also its undeniable strength. A diary — the blueprint for the book — would become its writer’s lifeline, indeed showing how in a situation of utter despair, nothing could stop him from beginning again and taking in all that was necessary to document and remember during the moment itself. The diary, a balancing pole … without which I would have fallen down a hundred times. In times of disgust and despondency, in the dreary monotony of endless routine factory work, at the bedside of the sick and the dying, at grave-sides, at times when I myself was in dire straits and when my heart was literally breaking — at all these times I was invariably helped by the demand that I had made on myself: observe, study and memorize what is going on — by tomorrow everything will already look different, by tomorrow everything will already feel different; keep hold of how things reveal themselves at this very moment and what the effects are.

The term “arts of noticing” appears in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* as a way to describe the perception of the environment under precarious circumstances. It perfectly applies to Klemperer’s methods of observing and subsisting amid the Nazi context. No longer able to carry out knowledge-gathering and knowledge-production from a position of privilege (such as an academic position), Klemperer’s mode of observing and writing is fundamentally touched by precarity and scarcity, as is the necessity to maintain brittle bonds with others whose political beliefs are sometimes all but certain.


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3 Klemperer, *Language of the Third Reich*, 98.


7 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.


12 Indeed, “Metaphors, Tropes, and other Rhetorical figures” may be “lawfull to say,” yet “in