



**The Return of
Technology as
the Other in
Visual Practices**

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Abstract

In this thesis I will ponder on the claims made by the protagonists of the contemporary philosophy movements Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. They are looking at (technological) objects to understand them better from themselves, without any human intervention. The New Aesthetic can be seen as the visual branch of this philosophy. The works collected under this name look at how computational devices perceive our world through their sensors and software. By aiming at understanding these things better in their being, they are positioning these objects away from us. The consequential divide that occurs between man and machine is what I will discuss by taking into account discourses within media studies which have had the fading of this dichotomy at its heart for the past decades. I will look into how academic media discourse can deconstruct the urge for realism on the one hand, and how the New Aesthetic can pose new questions for media studies on the other.

Key words

Other, performativity, The New Aesthetic, extension thesis, object/subject, deconstruction

Thanks to Sanne Koevoets for her professional guidance

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The Return of Technology as the Other in Visual Practices

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Introduction

“When you wish to discover the new unexpected actors that have more recently popped up and which are not yet bona fide members of ‘society’, you have to travel somewhere else and with very different kinds of gear”

- Bruno Latour in Reassembling the Social (2005)

During my studies on new media and digital culture, one of the central themes – in post-modern tradition – has been the loss of importance of dichotomies. Dichotomies between humans and technology, between technology and nature, the real and the virtual, mind and body, user and producer; all were being questioned and all were blurring in today's information society. Bruno Latour, Henry Jenkins, Adriana de Souza e Silva, Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway are some of the influential authors within new media studies who have been protagonists of these discourses since the dawn of information technologies. It took me by surprise then, that the object of research I had chosen for my internship and dissertation, was questioning important divides again, seemingly ignoring the academic media discourse of the past decades.

This subject is the 'New Aesthetic', a recent movement in visual culture strongly influenced by contemporary philosophical debates Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology (which I will reflect on later on in this thesis). The New Aesthetic is a movement that is interested in the surfacing of the digital in contemporary visual practices, a "grain of seeing/computation" that is left behind in images by their digital source (Jones 2011). Pictures that show us how computational devices view our world through their sensors, camera's and software are of primary interest to this trans-disciplinary group of philosophers, designers and artists. It has been related to the philosophical debates of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology in so far as that it seeks a better understanding of the objects in our midst through realism, which is the aim of these philosophical movements as well. In the case of the New Aesthetic movement, these objects are technological objects.

This is where the object/subject divide between man and technology comes into play, divides that media studies were seemingly done with. And still here they are again, in a full-blown philosophical movement and an online discussion concerning contemporary visual culture that crosses over more than a hundred websites¹. By looking at how 'they' (technology) are looking at 'us', it is posing a divide. This question of the subject/object divide and the Same and Other that are in this sense hidden away in the New Aesthetic debate was brought to my attention during the Q&A round of a symposium I organized in the Winter of 2012. I had invited several speakers to voice their ideas about the New Aesthetic from their various backgrounds (in design, art history and academics). Last of them was David M. Berry, who spoke about this new movement from his perspective as a media theorist interested in concepts such as 'the black box' and 'open source'. What the New Aesthetic does according to him, is foregrounding the background of technology, its inner workings, and making us aware of the daily functioning of ubiquitous technology in a visual way (Berry 2012). It does so by breaking it down, by giving us a glimpse of its insides through glitch, pixels, GPS, algorithmic imaging, etcetera.

Afterwards, a question was raised from the public: "but isn't it strange that we are looking upon technology as the Other again, after such a history of doing away with the

¹ This indication was made by myself while doing a discourse analysis into the New Aesthetic movement during my Master's internship. Seeing as the basis of the movement takes the form of a Tumblr page, the content published on there by founder James Bridle is more easily shared and spread on personal websites than the critical hand written reviews and reactions, of which I have come across at least fifty across the internet.

dichotomy?” This question kept swirling around my head for the next few weeks, and I knew I had to do something with it. Eventually it has now become the subject of my master thesis².

In this thesis, I will conduct research upon the role of technology as the Other in New Aesthetic pieces. I will do so by looking into several cases of digital visual practice that are labelled New Aesthetic to see what is going on in these images. Do they construct technology as an Other? And if so, how? Are we indeed going back to a more dualistic idea of our digital environment in order to deepen the understanding of computational devices? Or is there another significance to be found in the presentations of technology in New Aesthetic works? The main question that I seek to answer through this thesis is: How do visual practices within recent movements construct technology as the Other?

My theoretical framework is built up by, on the one hand protagonists of the New Aesthetic debate (James Bridle, Bruce Sterling, Matt Jones, David M. Berry and others), and the Speculative Realism debate (Graham Harman, Levi Bryant) and those of the branched-of debate of Object-Oriented Ontology (Ian Bogost, Robert Jackson), and on the other hand protagonists within media studies and philosophy of technology who have dealt in some extent with the subject/object divide and othering of technology (Katherine Hayles, Anna Munster, Mark Hansen, Michel Foucault, Marshall McLuhan, Judith Butler).

I have made this split because I want to question the assumptions made by the protagonists of recent movements Speculative Realism and the New Aesthetic by looking into more or less opposing ideas within recent media studies. I think it curious that around the same time, these two discourses have branched out in different directions instead of finding each other in the middle. From a media studies background, I hope to further the understanding of visual culture practices by adding media theory to the mix.

Similar to postmodern literary critic Katherine Hayles, I am not primarily interested in the intent of the artists or even in the aesthetics of the works discussed. I want to use them as case studies to question this shift in visual culture and to see if they point to a renewed contrast between human and technological entities by looking at them from a media studies background. My background is not with art history, but with media studies. I am therefore more interested in the role of technology within our society, and how this is represented within visual culture, than I am in the workings of technology itself.

My case studies are chosen, firstly because they are well represented within the discourse of the New Aesthetic. Protagonists of this debate have pointed to these works as being exemplary of this movement. Next to that, I have been able to talk with the artist behind *Perspective and Projection* and I have seen a piece from the *Digital Natives* series and seen people react and interact with it, as it was featured in the exposition³ on this subject I curated last year. In each case study I see a different way of presenting the technology in contrast to man.

² It is fitting to thank Ann-Sophie Lehmann here, associate professor at Universiteit Utrecht. By asking this critical question, she laid the fundamentals for this thesis.

³ In the Winter of 2012, I organized several events around the concept of the New Aesthetic as part of my internship at a local medialab in Utrecht, the Netherlands. These events included workshops, the exposition and the symposium.

Perspective and Projection by Bartholamäus Traubeck focuses on Global Positioning System (GPS) imagery. By picking interesting images from the vast database of Google Earth, Traubeck gives his viewer a look back onto their own Earth, by use of modern technology. He positions the technology literally far away; up in the sky. Through this distance and the gaze of the camera these works afford, I want to look at how they divide man from technology, the Same from the Other and object from subject. Although the second work, *DepthEditorDebug* also looks upon people through the ‘mechanical eye’ of technology, this work positions the technology as close by, embedded within our environment, thus provoking ideas about ubiquitous computing. My third choice is *Digital Natives* from Matthew Plummer-Fernandez. This work promotes the divide without use of camera technology, but by alienating us from technology in a more subtle way, by use of glitches and algorithms. This aspect of the New Aesthetic is just as prominent as the use of camera and detection software and is therefore to be covered in my analysis as well.

Through my case studies, I will look at the underlying relations and divides present. To let the case studies fall in line with my argumentation, I explicate the concepts I will be using as tools of analysis in my second chapter. In this second chapter, I start by noting the assumptions made by the protagonists of the New Aesthetic and Speculative Realism discourses. Afterwards, I look into discourses within media studies and how they have handled the divides that are of primary importance to these works, according to their ambassadors and myself. In post-modernity (and beyond), media scholars have come up with several concepts to deal with the divides between technology, nature and man. I will use these concepts to see how they are present within my chosen cases, or if they are not. I underpin my findings with other examples from visual culture.

In my conclusion, I state how we can further the analysis of New Aesthetic images from a media studies background. I am convinced that the two groups represented here can further each other’s arguments. As stated earlier, I will look at how divides and the Other are constructed within works of these recent movements. I conclude with what this shift in visual culture means for media studies. I am especially interested in the consequences for ideas about identity construction within an increasingly mediated society. This structure and method are best suited for answering my question, because I want to look at two different discourses, and how they relate. Because the first discourse – on the New Aesthetic and Speculative Realism – holds many referents to visual practices, I chose to concretize my arguments by looking into the three aforementioned case studies. In the conclusion I will be able to look at the relations between the two discourses and see how the New Aesthetic discourse and imagery may affect prominent ideas in media studies and vice versa.

_The New Aesthetic & Speculative Realism

*“A sincere New Aesthetic would be a valiant, comprehensive effort to truly and sincerely engage with machine-generated imagery — not as a freak-show, a metaphor or a stimulus to the imagination — but *as it exists.* The real deal, down to the scraped-metal chip surface, if necessary”.*

- Bruce Sterling in “An Essay on the New Aesthetic” (2012)

Since 2002, a renewed interest sparked amongst continental philosophers in realism. The publication of Quentin Meillassoux's "Après la Finitude" ("After Finitude") in 2006, is what truly pinpoints the start of the movement of Speculative Realism, so say Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek in their introduction to *The Speculative Turn* (2011). They see a great wrong in continental philosophy: it has always operated from a form of anthropocentrism and has always seen reality as being correlated with human thought. The reason why a change is needed in philosophy now, is because of "the looming ecological catastrophe" and "the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world" (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011, 3). The broad selection of philosophers that they group together in their book *The Speculative Turn* have, in some way or another, shifted their focus from texts and representations of reality towards the things itself, independent of human agency (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011, 3).

The authors are quick to assure their readers that 'Speculative' in this context does not mean that they are not critical or are philosophizing with no clear end in sight. It is a reference to early philosophy. They do see inherent limitations in the pre-critical belief in pure reason, but they lend the term from this era because of the then evident concern with the Absolute, which they are interested in as well. Ever since Kant, ["r]eality-in-itself is cordoned off, at least in its cognitive aspects" in philosophy (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011, 4). Harman and others want to bring attention back to the Absolute, and in particular to the thing, the object. We need to look past human finitude, which has been the obsession of continental philosophy for too long (Harman 2010). It is not strange then, that Harman admits to be influenced by phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger and his theory of 'tool-being', is not for the difference that for Harman "the tool isn't 'used,' it *is*" (Harman 2010, 7, italics in original). It is thus an autonomous entity, or as what Levi Bryant calls "a subjectless object" in his book *Democracy of Objects* (2011) that interests them. Which is another difference from Heidegger, who found that all that is "not nothing" was a thing, humans and animals included, were it not that he found no acceptance in this idea of equality (Heidegger 1950, 31). The idea behind Speculative Realism and the branched-off Object-Oriented Ontology is to evolve a better understanding of our surroundings by understanding the specific entities on-and-of themselves from which it is made up⁴.

Speculative Realism is known as a "return to the thing" (V2_ 2013). We can ask ourselves, from our own human perspective "what is there?", but, similar to the well-known ideas of Heidegger, we will never be able to fully understand the objects that surround us (Jackson 2013). A better understanding hereof would however enlighten our perspective of being in this world, so is the idea of followers of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. To try and understand these things, we need to understand how they relate to each other, how these objects – autonomously – understand the world and the things surrounding them (Jackson 2013).

⁴ Even though the followers of Speculative Realism position themselves as bringing to light a new philosophy, or at least one that is new since the lifetime of Kant, they are forgetting about Gilbert Simondon. In 1958 he already wrote his dissertation "Du mode d'existence des objets techniques" in which he aims to provoke an "awareness of the modes of existence of technical objects" (Simondon in Combes 2013, 58). He already looked into the origin of technical objects and thought this was more important than their usage as tool-being (Combes 2012).

The term Speculative Realism is quite interesting in itself, especially for the ‘speculative’ part. Where the authors say that they don’t mean it as ‘speculating’, because they are concerned with definite objects and their materialism and being, it does invoke ideas about speculum and specula, meaning mirror(ing) or to look at something. Actually this is exactly what I mean to do in my thesis; to speculate about the speculum of technology. To see if, through their renewed separation from us in these discourses, their alleged autonomy, they can function as a mirror.

The New Aesthetic is related to Speculative Realism because it similarly wants to broaden our understanding of our own world by understanding the objects in it better. The New Aesthetic has confined itself to digital artefacts, or computational devices. It shows the ideas of Object-Oriented Ontology in a visual way: what is it like, being a programmed digital thing? This question is often attempted to be answered by using the images that are captured through the sensorium of these technological artefacts; their camera’s, heat sensors, GPS trackers etcetera. I am very interested in the to-be-looked-at-ness (or: specula) that these New Aesthetic images afford.

The Object-Oriented Ontology branch of Speculative Realism is the one closest related to the New Aesthetic. Graham Harman is the founder of this phenomenon, although Levi Bryant and media and game scholar Ian Bogost have also invested in its research. Starting with so-called ‘computer-vision’ is a good first step, according to Ian Bogost, but the New Aesthetic should get “weirder” in order to truly enlighten its audience (Bogost 2011). It should look into the relations between objects to get to its being. Object-Oriented Ontology is a very Latourian idea, we might say, for in the Actor-Network-Theory, anthropologist Bruno Latour presses on how we should only define ‘actors’ - human and non-human – through their agency, which only occurs when they forge an interaction (Lister, et al. 2009). We can therefore not know things in their autonomy, as Graham and Bryant want. For Ian Bogost, Latour does not go far enough with this theorization. Where Latour focuses on the agency that for him finds its origin in the relation, Bogost sees the relation itself as the primary aspect worth investigating. He asks himself how we can strive to understand the relations and interactions between things when we are ourselves its sole purpose or beneficiary (Bogost 2012). We need to filter ourselves out of the equation. A thought very akin to that of Bryant and Harman, though attention has shifted to the relations between objects. Even though Bogost has written a whole book on his new philosophic ideal, he also sees the difficulties of his ‘alien phenomenology’: “When we ask what it means to be something, we pose a question that exceeds our own grasp of the being of the world (Bogost 2012). From a phenomenological standpoint, the being of others in our world is inherently unknowable. But this is exactly what makes them interesting specula to us.

Art critic Rahma Khazam notices how Speculative Realism poses challenging questions about ‘being’ of things and independence of subjects in a digital age. Levi Bryant and others are looking for what they call a “subjectless object”, things on and of itself. For visual artists these are intriguing ideas, she says: “Although [Speculative Realism]’s counter-intuitive theses and dismissive attitude towards humanity in general have their detractors, [...] the mental gymnastics it imposes are part of its appeal.” (Khazam, in V2_ 2012). The artists that ask these questions about liveless objects are sometimes referred to as visualizing Speculative Realism, but moreover artists are concerned with the technological objects in our society. Many are inspired by the “surfacing of the digital”, the digital being represented in glitches, pixelization or GPS images for example (Bridle

2011). These diverse works that come together under these denominators are labelled the New Aesthetic by the protagonists of this movement, and are mostly found online.

The New Aesthetic focuses on how computers understand and ‘see’ our world. It is not pan-psychism - assigning humanity and consciousness to things -, but trying to understand the thing from itself that informs these works, as academic and artist Curt Cloninger so explains (Cloninger, 2012). And that is exactly why it is connected to the mentioned philosophical movements. Designer and writer James Bridle has started this ‘movement’ by collecting a few images in a blogpost that talked about “a new aesthetic of the future” and was titled “The New Aesthetic”. The pictures were mostly of physical things inspired by a digital aesthetic of glitches, pixels and low-resolution imagery. A year later a discussion panel was held at SXSW (South by Southwest) 2011⁵. Here a trans-disciplinary group, consisting of technology writer Joanne McNeil, creative director of Government Digital Service Russel Davies, designer Benn Terrett, engineer with Flickr Aaron Straup Cope and originator James Bridle got together to discuss this new aesthetic turn involving computer vision, glitches and other digital artefacts. After that, others joined in on the discussion. The momentum built, partly thanks to Bruce Sterling, who wrote about the New Aesthetic on the Wired website, another leading platform in this field. Within the debate that followed, which confined itself online, different artists got the New Aesthetic label appointed to them as the phenomenon started to spread like a ‘meme’ on the internet in 2011 and 2012.

The New Aesthetic indicates an awareness of our daily practices with modern technology. The images ask us to reflect on their origin, how we use technology in everyday life and thus facilitate the ‘computer vision’ that is located at the basis of this New Aesthetic. Practices like using different swipes across your iPad in order to navigate, using the built-in GPS on your phone to track your running laps in the city or logging in to a local open Wi-Fi network. This awareness was seen with some of the visitors who took the time to take a look around the exposition ‘Coded Perception’ I set up around this theme in 2012. With use of satellite imagery, face recognition software, infra-red techniques, scanners etcetera the visitors got a brief look through the “eyes” of everyday technology and they gained an insight in how we ourselves facilitate this look or gaze. It puts the viewer in an investigative stance towards everyday yet alien technology.

There is something going on in these recent works that intrigues me. While we are looking at how the computer sees our world through all its sensors, I can’t help but think: we built these technologies, “we” even built these artworks. Are they then some sort of artistic McLuhanian extension of our reflexivity? More writers have difficulty getting a grasp on the New Aesthetic as it is emerging, and on what it is doing to our perception of ourselves. Curt Cloninger writes: “We recognise ourselves in NA images, but also something other than ourselves; or rather, still ourselves – but ourselves complicated, enmeshed, othered” (Cloninger 2012). It seems to be provoking a sort of reflexivity or speculum that only occurs in our relation with a technological environment.

⁵ An annual leading festival and conference focussing on film, music and technology in Texas, United States of America.

Chapter 3

Speculum of Technology

“The computer holds a mirror to us, the computer being that weird, smoking caterpillar on a mushroom that insistently asks us: “Who ARE you?””

- Elize de Mul in Down the Rabbit Hole, MA thesis (2012)

The question into the unknown, into entities that are other than us, yet strangely similar but unknowable, is what sets off an exploration into technology as the Other. As I stated before in regard to the Speculative Realism movement: from a phenomenological standpoint, the being of others, especially things, in our world is inherently unknowable. But this is exactly what makes them interesting specula to us. The Other has this unknowable but intriguing quality to us, for it is the opposite of what we know as our selves, the Same. “The other is someone we can recognize as enough like ourselves to warrant identification” (Bogost, 2012).

The question then arises within artworks that concern technology; who is the Other and to what Same does it position itself? The Other as a concept has a long and rich history, dating back at least from Plato’s *Sophist* (Van Pelt 2000). Since then, it has most notably been picked up by psycho analysts, feminists and post-colonialists. The ‘Other’ is half of a signifying binary, ‘Same’ or ‘Self’ being its other half. The Same being us, and our familiar grounds, and the Other a curiosity into something that is not familiar. Both terms always necessarily implicate each other. The psycho analysts, led by Jacques Lacan, have taken on the most deviating definition of Otherness; for them it is not necessarily found in others outside of ourselves in interpersonal relations, but rather within ourselves, an intrapsychic Otherness (Van Pelt 2000).

Lacan employs a symbolic, linguistic Other and an imaginary mirroring other. He differentiates between the two by altering in capitalization. The difference between his Other and other can be compared to the difference between Freud’s Subject and ego (Van Pelt 2000). Psycho-analysts use a concept of othering that sees the ‘self’ as split, because for its seeming consistency, it is always dependant on the other from which it differentiates (“I am me because I am not you”). The subject that rises in this process is paradoxically both separated from the Other, as well as intrinsically linked. The same and the Other can therefore act as each other’s mirror image, or ‘speculum’ as Luce Irigaray calls it (Irigaray 1974).

If we want to use technology as our imaginary Other, we should first take a detour through the animal kingdom. By emphasizing human beings as the self/Same, we exclude others, most notably animals and machines, from this process of identity construction (Gunkel 2007). David Gunkel gives a different reading of the famous *New York Times* cartoon from 1993 in which a dog communicates through computer mediated communication, and the caption reads ‘on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog’. This cartoon has often been used as a conversation starter about identity and anonymity on the web. But what Gunkel finds fascinating about this cartoon and its discourse, is the “unquestioned assumption that despite this anonymity, users assume that the other with whom they interact is another human” (Gunkel 2007). In these times, your conversation partner could just as well have been an algorithm that was designed to respond to your questions and phrases. Technological advances have made the idea of technology as our Other more likely than ever, and still it is not fully accepted as such.

To Gunkel, “the animal and machine share a common form of alterity that situates them as completely different from and distinctly other than human” (Gunkel 2007). Animals were never seen as a worthy Other because of their lack of reason. The tipping point that let animals in view was a work written in 1971 by three Oxford philosophers – Rosalind and Stanley Godlvitch and John Harris – “Animals, Men and Morals”. It introduced into

philosophy ‘the animal question’, or: why we should have ethical inquiry into the animal (Gunkel 2007). For the animal branch of this argument, cultural theorist Dominic Pettman refers Jacques Derrida, who makes a case for animal narcissism. For, how can we assume narcissism is only found in man? Pettman asks himself: should you be able to use an index finger to define otherness? -“auto-deixis being the assumed exclusive human capacity to turn the index finger toward the self and thus create the power of the “I” – cogito, ego sum”- (Pettman 2011, 106).

In a similar vein, philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued that the dichotomy between Self and Other can only be made within humanity itself (Olliver 2007, 2). Kelly Olliver, who has done extensive research in Agamben’s theories of othering, shows how in Agamben’s theories, humanity has used this divide to make up different human ‘types’, which could then become a justification for acts such as slavery and genocide (Olliver 2007). For Agamben, “man has no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself”, which makes him capable of making such harsh divides (Agamben in Pettman 2011, 9). The concept of othering also has a history within racial debates. ‘Other’ and ‘not-self’ have for example been used as common terms “for the white view of blacks and for the resulting black view of themselves” (Goldie in Van Pelt 2000). In colonialist fiction it was commonplace to present the racial Other as them with a lesser moral. This constituted a difference, and justified the self in their practice of slavery (Van Pelt 2000).

Gender studies have also contributed to the concept of othering. Within gender studies it is the women who are seen as colonized subjects, othered by “patriarchal domination” (Seklen in Van Pelt 2000). Simone de Beauvoir has written how Western thought about women as Other and as inferior finds its origin as far back as the Genesis story in the Bible. In this story, the woman (Eve) is not created from herself, but from the man, and is thus always relative to him (de Beauvoir in Van Pelt 2000). Luce Irigaray has also played a big part in getting gender theory to where it is today. In her book “Speculum of the Other Woman” (1974) she states how the woman has throughout Western philosophy always been put in the passive role, whereas men have been put in controlling, dominant positions. In Western philosophy, she sees men constructed as the ‘Same’ and women as the ‘Other’ (Irigaray 1974). A separation is made between the domains of the public sphere, the mind, and the ratio (male) and that of the private sphere, the physical, and the irrational (female). She takes a critical stance towards Sigmund Freud, who, in her eyes, has been too quick to judge on the inherent passivity of women which has influenced modern philosophy greatly.

Within the discourse of gender studies, ‘the male gaze’ is an important aspect. British film theorist Laura Mulvey is seen as the person who coined this term in 1975 in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. The concept is still mostly used in film theory, but has cross-overs in media theory as well, especially in fields such as media art which is discussed here, because of the use of camera footage. The original critique of the male gaze was foremost directed at Hollywood cinema, for it played into models of voyeurism and scopophilia (Sturken en Cartwright 2001, 76). Michel Foucault has also referred to the gaze as enhancing power relations. It pacifies the woman subjected to the gaze of the dominant male. Foucault sees subjects as socially constructed through power relations in society, to which I agree. Three main modes of objectification are to be isolated for Foucault, which may constitute a subject: objectification through ‘modes of inquiry’ (linguistics, the labouring subject), through ‘dividing practices’ (through discourse of othering), and through itself (sexuality) (Foucault 1982). The ‘male gaze’ could be seen as an example of

the second, a dividing practice. Another example of such a dividing practice constituted by watching is the panopticon. The concept of panopticon is based on a prison structure where a security tower is surrounded by prisoner cells; the tower has one-way mirrors that allow the guard to watch the inmates at all time without them knowing whether someone is actually in the tower or not. Because it creates a feeling of permanent visibility, the panopticon disciplines the inmates at all times, whether they are effectively being watched or not (Foucault 1995). The idea of panopticon has been applied to for example surveillance technology to emphasize its influence on power relations.

What happens with the male gaze, Sturken and Cartwright argue, is that when the camera puts the audience into the perspective of a heterosexual man, it emphasizes the female as inferior (Sturken en Cartwright 2001). Mulvey's essay also states that the female gaze is the same as the male gaze. This means that women look at themselves through the eyes of men (who directed the moving images), thus reinforcing the binary (Mulvey 1975).

In the 21st century, people started to find their companions to be of metal and steam more and more. According to Bill Nichols, monopoly capitalism is when we started to look to the machine world for our mirroring Other. Later on, in post-industrial capitalism, cybernetic systems became important others within society (Nichols 1988). Same as animals, machines took a long time to be recognized as possible Others. It is only in the 1990's and 2000's that philosophers started forming an ethics of machinery and computing (Pettman 2011).

Jacques Lacan, and in his wake Judith Butler, have dealt with the reciprocity of otherness. For there can never be an Other is there if not a Same or Self, and since the dichotomy is inherently relative, it is endlessly reversible: both terms necessarily implicate each other (Van Pelt 2000). In this thesis, I will be focussing on interpersonal Othering, but this too has its roots in psycho analysis. What we see in the discourses surrounding the New Aesthetic and Speculative Realism, is that machines and computers are seen as definitive separate from humans, thus reinforcing the binary. But there is a psycho-analytical ground here, which reminds of the separation Freud made between ego and id, where id is the place for fantasy and desire, and ego is the structured reason. Or: what we want to be versus what we are. The Other in this metaphor has the characteristics of the id; it is a place of desire, something that is not found in ourselves but is by this desire still linked to who we are: it is part of what defines us (Van Pelt 2000).

This duality reminds of 'machine ethics', as was debuted on the American Association for Artificial Intelligence's (AAAI) nineteenth national conference (Gunkel 2007). Machine ethics is an ethics that considers "the consequences of behaviour of machines toward human users and other machines" (Anderson et al. in Gunkel, 2007). When seeing technology as our Other, we study its consequences on our identity, but we also study them with a sense of wonder, since the Other is always opposite to the same and thus not fully knowable.

In my thesis I will focus on an interpersonal process of othering, rather than the intrapsychic Otherness brought up by psycho analysts. I wonder if by stretching up the gap between technology and human and thus between Same and Other, if we can – as followers of Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Ontology and New Aesthetic argue – get a better view upon the things on and of itself. If my case studies show a widening of this gap by

positing technology as the Other, is this done to get a better view upon the technological object? Or maybe to get a better view upon the subject? In the next chapter I will more thoroughly explicate the subject/other divide between human and machine in media studies discourse so as to be better equipped to analyse my case studies and answer these questions.

Chapter 4

Man and his Technologies

*“We need to radically question the birth of digital culture
as one that has been shaped largely via a binary logic”*

- Anna Munster in Materializing New Media (2006)

As I stated in my introduction, this chapter will cover recent discourses within media studies about the divide between human and machine, as implicated by Speculative Realism and the New Aesthetic. Post-modern media philosophers have internalized the technological Other that I set out in the previous chapter. By using concepts such as the ‘posthuman’, ‘cyborg’ or ‘cybernetics’, scholars like Katherin Hayles, Donna Haraway or Bill Nichols have been questioning the divides that have stood strong in continental (media) philosophy since the likes of Descartes. Not by looking into the “ontological orphans” on themselves, but rather through seeing these others as part of the same and ourselves (Pettman 2011). Before getting to these concrete topics, I will map the larger debate of media philosophy where these people have found themselves in and with whom this turn in discourse took place.

4.1 The subject/object dichotomy in media philosophy

Philosophers of technology, like Martin Heidegger and Albert Borgmann or philosophers of media, like Bruno Latour, Marshall McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard have laid out the fundamentals of what a mediated society means to our sense of being human. Both Martin Heidegger and Bruno Latour were concerned with the limiting object/subject distinction in the western metaphysical worldview, especially when it came to man and technology (Khong 2003). Both are more interested in the network of relations of things than in the influence of technology on humanity (or vice versa). It is interesting to look at this perspective to see if it can help our understanding of the obsession with realism as promoted by the protagonists of Speculative Realism and the New Aesthetic. For Latour and Heidegger, both in different ways, things only exist in relation to something else (Khong 2003). Herein their vision can be connected to that of cybernetics, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Bruno Latour’s most popular theory concerning the object/subject divide is without a doubt the Actor-Network-Theory, which he developed in 1993 as a reaction to the linguistic turn⁶ that had been very influential in media studies up to that point (Lister, et al. 2009). The origin of this theory is similar to that of Speculative Realism, which is the idea that humanism is reductive “because [it] seek[s] to attribute action to a small number of [human] powers leaving the rest of the world with nothing but simple mute forces” (Latour in Lister 2009, 326). With “the rest of the world” Latour aims at the material and technological world that he feels is largely ignored when looking at media as a representational medium. Latour does not as easily dismiss humanism as realism does though. Rather, he feels an addition is necessary. How we describe and understand things is not the only thing that makes up our surroundings. We have to take into account the network of things, people, discourses and institutions of which things are part (Latour 2005, 95). Each thing and each human have their network in any particular situation. It is in the interactions between the nodes (or ‘actors’ for Latour) within these network that agency exists: the power of performance, as Latour calls it (Latour 2005, 35). These interactions

⁶ “In [Bruno Latour’s] 1993 book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, he offers a diagnosis of modernity as a condition in which the humanities have become so embroiled in questions of the social, linguistic and discursive construction of meanings that we have forgotten how to ask questions about what things are” (Lister, et al. 2009, 326). The linguistic turn, which finds its roots in constructionism, differs greatly from the physicality that realism puts on the foreground.

can be stimulated by either man or non-man, which makes his theory somewhere in-between humanism and realism, for he does centralize humans in his theory by making it his goal to see how humans act and are acted upon by other entities such as technology (Khong 2003). In this respect, he is not from the start opposed to anthropocentrism as are the realists. Bruno Latour later concretized that “things do not exist without being full of people” and that “considering humans necessarily involves the consideration of things” (Brown 2009, 145). He does put importance to the binary to further his idea of networks and agency, but he sees both entities as reinforcing each other. One of Latour’s main concerns was to “liberate artifacts from the passivity that this dichotomy imposes on them” (Latour in Khong 2003). This statement reflects his disagreement with the Othering of technology. He finds it unnecessary to view technological artifacts as passive and to give humanity full control in his dominant position. To undermine this dichotomy, he strains the idea that agency is only found within interaction and there is no power inherently found in the actors which make up these momentary networks (Latour 2005).

Philosophers like Heidegger and Marshall McLuhan have been criticized as being too deterministic when it comes to technology (Khong, Lister et al.). According to Latour, for example, “Heidegger perceives technology to be a unique and superior monster, having as its sole aim the rationalization and stockpiling of nature” (Khong 2003). Lynette Khong, who has studied both philosophers, concludes that Latour is missing Heidegger’s point here: he misses the distinction Heidegger makes between our understanding of technology and technological artifacts themselves. The essence of technology is indeed beyond our control, but the artifacts which Latour aims at, are not (Khong 2003). Still, Latour aims at a more equal interpretation than Heidegger does. In a similar way, McLuhan has had accusations made about his ideas by media philosopher Raymond Williams. Their opposing ideas about technology and culture became one of the main debates within new media studies: Williams being (called) a social constructivist and McLuhan a technological determinist. As McLuhan’s three main theses mainly concern how our use of media change our perception of our world, Williams took this as a critique against humanism. Williams, coming from a Marxist and humanist background, saw McLuhan’s ideas as questionable for it made the possibility of regaining one’s total agency, as a human in a world that is increasingly populated by non-human actors, impossible (Lister, et al. 2009).

American media philosopher Marshall McLuhan had a conception of media that went beyond just means of communication. To him any “extension to ourselves” is a medium (McLuhan 1964). His ideas of media as extensions and his more famous ‘medium is the message’ thesis made him a popular yet broadly criticized figure in the sixties. McLuhan makes minimal distinctions between technology and media. This makes his idea about extensions equally widely applicable. A similar idea to McLuhan’s extension thesis is found in Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, where the philosopher notes that technology “reacts on the nature of the being that constructs it [...] being an artificial organ by which the natural organism is extended” (Bergson in Lister et al. 2009, 92). In most explanations of McLuhan’s thesis, it is said to be limited to extending the sensorium, focusing on his other ideas in which the book emphasizes the eye and radio emphasizes the ear. In the book *Medium is the Message* (1967) he calls media “extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical”. The extensions are not limited to the six human senses, but also applicable to psychic faculties. This is how, for example, our perception of space and time could be influenced by the train network (a medium as such to McLuhan). By arriving

quicker at a destination and seeing the landscape move by quicker while the distance remains the same, the train was seen as an extension of our eye (perception) and mind (our experience of space and time). When media technologies function as our extensions, they can change the order of importance of these different ‘faculties’ of our being and thus have implications for our (mental) functioning, leading to a “new outlook” (McLuhan 1964, 141). McLuhan argued about media as human extensions decades before the popularizing of the cyborg discourse of the late twentieth century, which I will dwell on further in paragraph 4.3. In his words: “With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself” (McLuhan 1964, 53). It was worrisome to him, that we outsourced vital functions our being to these technologies we had little or less control over. Something else that is important about this last remark is how he saw the capabilities of man as pried loose from its body and thereby from its control. Technology has distributed human functions across its environment, leaving the human behind with a profound loss in its own being. While post-modern philosophers have often took hold of McLuhan’s extension thesis, most have tried to re-unite these entities of human and technology that McLuhan saw as being detached in modern society.

As we can tell by looking briefly at several influential media philosophers, man and his technologies have had a tumultuous ontological history.

4.2 Cybernetics and ubiquitous computing

Sherry Turkle, American scholar of media and identity, finds machines and technology to “reside somewhere between human and non-human” (Turkle 2005, 6). And in this ‘uncanny valley’ we have trouble holding on to our own as subject. She sees media technologies not as our extensions, but on the contrary, as others that help us construct our identity. Curt Cloninger said about the New Aesthetic images that they gave us a sense of recognition, but still the image was “complicated, enmeshed, othered” (Cloninger 2012). Similarly, in her book *The Second Self* in 2005, Turkle explains how in identity construction, the machine may act as the specula as we discussed in the former chapter. “We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine” (Turkle 2005, 643). This would happen more and more as we develop more technologies and come to live in a world where computational devices are omnipresent.

There is a paradox to be found in the ideas of ubiquitous computing. If we take the ideas of othering to mind that were discussed in the previous chapter, ‘smart’ technology could qualify for an Other to which we measure ourselves. Because it reacts, responds to our input. Because it has been giving sensors, which could dub for senses. Because some even have something akin to artificial intelligence. At the same time as (smart) technology becomes an increasingly important aspect of our daily lives and surroundings, it also becomes less tangible. We are still not entirely in the ‘ubicomputing’ culture envisioned by the likes of computer scientist Mark Weiser (1996) and design scholar Donald Norman (1998), where all computing is invisibly done in the background, in the periphery, while we get on with our daily – technology aided – routines (Ekman 2013). I am not claiming we ever will arrive at such a stage, but we can for a fact say that our culture is digitizing. And with that our visual culture.

I do not consider digital visual culture as being restricted to digital media such as urban screens or smartphones. I also include ‘old’ media such as advertisements in newspapers,

posters for events in town or stickered buses if they are influenced by digital culture. Digital technology is not only seeping through in the lives of the viewers, but in everyone's lives⁷; also those of artists and designers, which makes for a whole new pallet of inspiration. Pixels, glitches, birds-eye views and stock filters are all immediately recognized digital artefacts for the average passer-by. This increasing digitization has become an important source of inspiration, which is one of the reasons for the increase in New Aesthetic imagery (Bridle, *Waving at the Machines* 2011). The New Aesthetic started posing questions when digital artefacts within digital visual culture became a norm, not – as its name suggests – when it was new. It's been said to be a reaction to our current culture in which computational devices are everywhere; a ubicomp culture (D. M. Berry 2012).

In 1991, Mark Weiser wrote his influential piece “The Computer for the 21st Century”. In Mark Weiser's view, ubiquitous computing (ubicomp) would be the future: “The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it” (Weiser 1991). Weiser saw ubicomp as a kind of antithesis to virtual reality, which had woven itself into popular utopic discourse in the early '90's. Virtual Reality he saw as concerning real-time interaction and databasing in closed-of computer environments, while ubiquitous computing would focus more on how virtuality took place within the physical world (Penny 2013). David M. Berry talks about the paradox of ubiquitous computing in the V2_ publication *New Aesthetic, New Anxieties*: “As the digital increasingly structures the contemporary world, curiously, it also withdraws; it becomes harder and harder for us to focus upon, as it becomes embedded, hidden, off-shored, or merely forgotten about” (Berry, et al. 2012, 44). This ‘embeddedness’ of ubicomp was one of the key features for Mark Weiser. This would be achieved with tiny processors and invisible data communication through infrared. Many of his ideas have taken place in today's culture, although critics emphasize that everyday technology such as smartphones, laptops and screens are still very visible today.

Katherine Hayles' three waves of cybernetics could be of help to nuance the transition that Mark Weiser sees between virtual reality and ubiquitous computing. Hayles argues that our culture chronologically went through three different periods of relating to technology which works towards a culture where technology is indeed more pervasive than ever. The first period, from 1945 to 1960, draws upon homeostasis as a central concept, the second period, from 1960 to 1980, draws upon reflexivity as the central concept and lastly the third period, from 1980 onwards, draws upon virtuality as its key concept. As media scholar and editor of *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing* Ulrik Ekman rightfully remarks, “[Hayles'] assessment moves things quite a bit too fast because a number of important efforts from both of the first two periods are still with us and quite decisively so” (Ekman 2013). Interesting to see is that in Hayles' three ‘waves’, virtuality is mentioned as the last one, while Mark Weiser insisted on ubiquitous computing being the future of virtuality. We have to notice here though, that the meaning and discourse surrounding the term virtuality has changed drastically around the turn of the century. At

⁷ I understand that I am not taking into account the digital divide here. Throughout this thesis I will focus on the situation as it is today in the Western world. I do this because most of my sources originate from this area and because the movements of Speculative Realism and the New Aesthetic have confined themselves within this area as well.

the time of Weiser's "The Computer for the 21st Century", virtual reality was associated with ideas of databasing, intensive computing and the first head mounted displays as developed by Ivan Sutherland and others (Lister, et al. 2009). In media studies today, in which Katherine Hayles finds herself, virtuality is thought of more and more as overlay of reality, or even as hybrid reality, in which virtuality and reality merge through pervasive computing, instead of a constructing a distinctive separate 'cyberspace' (de Souza e Silva 2009).

Both the idea of cybernetics and ubiquitous computing emphasize that humans and computers live together in one system or environment. Both find their roots in (post-)structuralism. Within these movements, the idea lives that this one system can encompass things as wide as an ecology (Pettman 2011). Norbert Wiener, a mathematician who worked on cybernetics as early as the 1940's, talks about forgetting about all boundaries between humans and non-human beings and focus on us being part of a bigger system. He summarises this in his theory of the 'cybernetic triangle', in which he described this all-encompassing system as a triangle. This triangle is made up out of three nodes: human, animal and machine. For too long have we put humanity on top, while in fact the nodes should be inseparable as they are each an evenly important part of the system. Wiener argues for a shift from this triangle which connects, but still differentiates, to his concept of the "humananimalmachine", in which all three nodes have been compressed to one single node (Wiener in Pettman 2011). It represses the similarities between us and our nonhuman neighbours, which is a sore point for proud men (Pettman 2011). It is no wonder then, according to Pettman, that "humans today are spending billions of dollars on isolating, securing, and fortifying the increasingly elusive "human element" (Pettman 2011, 6).

That cybernetics' biggest ambassador is Norbert Wiener, an American mathematician, shows that the beta sciences gave rise to the concept of cybernetics. Wiener's idea is based on abstract feedback loops. Cybernetics was foremost interested – as is the case with many new media technologies and theories – in their applicability in the military. For this goal, Norbert Wiener was working on trajectories of anti-aircraft guns. Classical cybernetics, which I am talking about here, is principally concerned with eliminating noise from communication channels (Lister, et al. 2009). Post-classical cybernetics later reacted to this by posing that the "perfect replication of a message (i.e. perfect information retrieval) amounted to zero learning, echoing the adage that 'one repays one's teachers badly by imitation'" (Lister, et al. 2009, 383). Post-classical cybernetics started focussing on positive feedback and artificial intelligence, trying to learn feedback to machines. Post-classical cybernetics can be seen as the 'third wave' of cybernetics that was described by Katherine Hayles.

After Wiener's first publications on the subject, it quickly became a trans-disciplinary approach to systems, circuits, feedback and structures. Since the rise of post-classical cybernetics, the social sciences have become a much bigger influence on the development of theories of artificial intelligence and cybernetics. The BBC documentary "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" (2011) shows a branch of cybernetics – mostly utopian silicon valley - even went as far as to believe government and politics could be overcome through cybernetic systems; "computer networks could create order in society without central control". The posthuman is the human subject as it is understood through the social sciences based on cybernetics. It can be understood as "a biological organism or a cyborg seamlessly joined with intelligent machines". By seeing the human as a node

within the cybernetic network, information and cognition are distributed over the network and do no longer necessarily originate from the biological human (Hayles 2002). In utopian discourse, the network would control and maintain itself so no outside power sources such as institutionalization would be needed.

For film critic Bill Nichols, humans are defined in relation to cybernetic systems: “a guarantee of identity based on what can never be made part of oneself.” (Nichols 1988) Nichols argues that in post-industrial society, simulation has taken the place of the Benjaminian mechanical reproduction. Nichols sees power relations arise within the cybernetic triangle, between its different nodes. He sees the different nodes as connected through power relations and not as being collapsed like in Wiener’s idealistic idea of the ‘humananimalmachine’. Following the utopian idea that such a structure would be self-maintaining, each node will react to any change within the triangle. As Nichols phrases it: as the Others [technology node] to which we measure ourselves keep on changing, so human identity [humanity node] remains at stake (Nichols 1988). As computing has evolved with each stage of cybernetics, our relation to it changes as well. So when entering a culture of pervasive and ubiquitous computing, our relation with technology necessarily changes again.

So far, Bill Nichols deciphers three stages of this process in our culture: three stages of construction of the Other in modern and post-modern society in relation to technology. The first being early capitalism where the human was defined in relation to an animal world (Kantian), secondly monopoly capitalism in which the human was defined in relation to a machine world (Benjaminian) and thirdly, post-industrial capitalism, where the human was/is defined in relation to cybernetic systems. The third stage is seen by Nichols as the same period as the third ‘wave’ of cybernetics as defined by Hayles; from the 1980’s onwards. This is also where my interest mostly lies; how in post-modern times (from 1980’s onwards), technology is constructed as the Other.

We may see ubiquitous computing in today’s visual culture as the next stage or wave of cybernetics. In the 90’s – when ubiquitous computing rose and when Mark Weiser wrote his influential article – the idea was widespread that with globalization and the internet, cybernetic systems would grow and grow, taking over from humans where possible; the power of the network would rise and become all-encompassing, so is the imaginaire of the 90’s as shown in BBC’s documentary on the power of the technological imaginaire. But seeing our identity as rising from relationality instead of from ourselves (as was the consensus in modernity) in a culture of ubiquitous computing, “implies a deep and dynamic connection between the evolutionary pathways of computers and humans, each influencing and helping to configure the other.” (Hayles 2002, 304) This poses a greater difficulty, for we can now not look for our other in definite, marked and singular objects, but we need to seek our identity instead in relation to “other cognizing agents embedded throughout the environment”, those embedded computational devices David M. Berry pointed out as being so hard to “focus upon” (Hayles 2002, Berry 2012). This points to a great difficulty that is posed in this possible next step in the evolution of technology as an entity we relate to as Others. In the next chapter I will look into the role New Aesthetic works can play in this matter.

4.3 Media studies and media art and the fading of the human/machine binary

Continental philosophy and media studies both have long histories in dealing with other – mediated – entities in our society and the effects on our identity construction. In Western philosophy, following the humanistic principles laid out by Descartes and Kant, our fellow humans, but also machines and animals are positioned as the Other. For a long time it seemed as something that was haunting Western philosophy, these divides between Same and Other, between mind and body, that could not be overcome. After all, if we cannot define them, then who are we? For Anna Munster and Katherine Hayles, both scholars in media studies and media art, this ‘binary logic’ is a very defining aspect of digital culture and thus of media studies. As Hayles describes it: “[dualistic thinking] is as difficult to avoid as the sticky clay that passes for topsoil where I live in Topanga Canyon” (Hayles 2002).

The discourse surrounding dichotomies has shifted in the last decade or so under the influence of digital pervasive technologies, a trend we saw started as soon as the fifties and sixties. To discuss being and experience in post-modern time, media scholars prefer other terms that do not cling to dualistic thinking as much, such as ‘hybrid space’, ‘hyperreality’ or ‘mindbody’ (de Souza e Silva, Baudrillard, Hayles). It should always be noted though, that these terms, in attempting to do away with dualities, cannot dismiss them. It is what they were meant to masque, but at the same time they bring new attention to them by encompassing opposing entities into one new term.

Many philosophers of technology and media scholars have – most notably since the seventies – tried to come to grips with the dichotomies that are inherently central to the field (Lister, et al. 2009). One of the most well-known media scholars who has tried to tackle this subject is Donna Haraway. In her work *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) she pleads for a hybrid discourse concerning the being of technology and man. Donna Haraway looks at the blurring boundary between man and machine, man and woman, nature and culture, technology and nature from a feminist perspective. She comes to the conclusion that “we are all cyborgs” and that the current “they” and “we” discourse is no longer relevant (Haraway 1991, 163). She indicates that she introduces the term cyborg with irony, but its theorization is based on the ‘lived reality’ of technology in our society. She sees the cyborg as a metaphor for the post-modernist. The cyborg, as a morphing of human, nature and technology, is not a utopian outcome for Haraway, for next to dissolving boundaries it is also a tool for control of world and discourse and for the elimination of (male/female) physicality (Haraway 1991).

It is this physicality and materiality that has been the concern of more media scholars in post-modernity and beyond⁸. They are arguing against the (post-)modern discourse of embedded, digital and pervasive technology by emphasizing on its materiality. Other scholars who have been influential in this field are Katherine Hayles (1999, 2002), Mark Hansen (2006) and Anna Munster (2006). Anna Munster says that “with our increasing

⁸ The overall consensus has been that post-modernity has started in the second half of the twentieth century, around the seventies or eighties. There has been named no period afterwards, still several scholars argue that there have been enough ruptures in discourse and society to herald the end of post-modernity.

fascination for the “biotechnological”, we have become accustomed to thinking of hybrids as entities that seamlessly graft machines and bodies together” (Munster 2006, 26). The merging of technology and flesh is no longer something of scientific dreams, or horrors for that matter. These two entities that used to be viewed upon as wholly different from each other, seem to be accepted as each other’s helpful additions in a mediated world, at least in academic media discourse (Munster 2006). Especially in the context of new media art, the ideas of posthumanism, cyborgs or the ‘mindbody’ seems to be alive and well. Munster, Hayles and Hansen all argue that cognition and even vision are things that are not restricted to the body. To them, they are constructed in the interaction with our surroundings, as is shown in their artwork case studies. As David Rokeby, a successful media artist points out: “Because the computer removes you from your body, the body should be strongly engaged” (Rokeby in Munster 2006, 1). Katherine Hayles talks about the ‘mindbody’, a term borrowed from Mark Hansen. She sees our cognition as working in collaboration with our “information-rich environments”: “Instead of the Cartesian subject who begins by cutting himself off from his environment and visualizing his thinking presence as the one thing he cannot doubt, the human who inhabits the information-rich environments of contemporary technological societies knows that the dynamic and fluctuating boundaries of her embodied cognitions develop in relation to other cognizing agents embedded throughout the environment, among which the most powerful are intelligent machines” (Hayles 2002, 303). She thus, like Haraway, tries to dissolve certain dichotomies which have been taken for granted.

These authors and others point to a recent trend within media and cultural studies: identity construction within mediated spaces in which we participate, where the line between body and virtuality loses its clarity. Authors such as Hayles and Munster have devoted work to the materiality of media art and virtual spaces in a goal to go beyond essentialism and look into the idea of embodiment in relation to interactive artworks. Others, most notably Adriana de Souza e Silva, have argued for a post-modern idea of space: hybrid reality, in which virtuality and reality blur (de Souza e Silva 2009). Hansen and Munster both discuss embodiment in relation to contemporary media art. Like Hayles, they argue that the idea of our body is a social construct, which partly dissolves when participating with interactive works. De Souza e Silva likewise argues that through location-based gaming and mobile digital devices, our reality blurs with the virtual data present, which she calls hybrid reality.

Mark Hansen takes an interesting stand on embodiment and digital art when he discusses sight and “the bodily basis of vision”. Interesting for my thesis, because I see the being-looked-upon-ness of the New Aesthetic works as a key factor in separating man from non-man. For Hansen, the virtual image has a disembodied characteristic of its own and which is synonymous to its dependence on the activity of the body-brain (Hansen 2004). At the heart of Hansen’s understanding of aesthetics is Bergson’s theory of perception. For Bergson, there can never be perception without affection. Affection being “that part or aspect of the inside of our body which we mix with the image of external bodies; it is what we must first of all subtract from perception to get the image in its purity” (Bergson in Hansen 2004, 99). Following this theory, machinic *perception* is impossible, for they are incapable of emotion and thus of affection. Hansen pleads for a differentiation of human perception which involves this process of affection from the more functional “processing of information” that occurs within hybrid human-machine assemblages (Hansen 2004, 100). He sees new media art as something that calls upon the body as a processor of information,

and while this usually results in seeing the body as a part of the artwork – the part in which meaning and experience is acquired through the physical interaction – he makes it clear that when it comes to perception, a human-machine binary will always exist (Hansen 2004).

These texts share a particular blind spot: the role of technology as the Other in non-interactive contemporary media art. Because of their pre-occupation with interactive media art and the dissolving dichotomies they bring forth, they miss out on many works that have technology and mediated culture as their main subject, but do not invite physical participation from their audience. Still, in modernity it was already well established within media studies that a viewer of a non-interactive media texts is never passive (Fiske 1989, Hall 1973). It should therefore not be forgotten to look at how contemporary non-interactive media art deals with the shaping of identity and the Other. Identity construction through emerging visual culture for me is as important as the construction of the body and embodiment through visual culture and the arts, still it is less studied, hence the importance of this thesis.

Case Studies

“I am kino-eye, I am mechanical eye, I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.... My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world I decipher in a new way - a world unknown to you.”

- Dziga Vertov in We: A version of a manifesto (1922)

5.1 Performativity

Performativity in non-interactive media art is less prominently present, but it should not be neglected. Most people agree that art does *something*. We can't really put our finger on it, but it demands our attention, slows us down, makes us think and feel. This power that resonates from the work may be called performativity (Hantelmann 2004).

In this thesis I use the term performativity in the way it was defined by Judith Butler in different publications by her hand in the 1990's. This is because she is concerned with the construction of subjects through language. Her theories on language can help me see how visual practices are also capable of objectification. Judith Butler comes from a gender studies background and has written her studies on performativity in the vein of philosophy of language. She is mostly concerned with how gestures and 'speech acts' constitute a subject (Butler 1990). She broke with the usual ideas about language. Up until then, it was commonplace to think of language as a representational medium. Butler instead argued that in addition to words representing our surroundings, language was also able to construct, for example through actions and repetitions (Butler 1990). It was no longer to be seen as 'just' a medium of representation, but also as one of performativity. The same can be said for art, because it not only represents that which is shown, it resonates a power that influences viewers on another level. It has two levels of meaning; one that shows us what is painted, photographed or otherwise portrayed and another meaning which is only uncovered by interacting with it. According to Heidegger, in seeing an artwork, (and only through art) a truth reveals itself (Heidegger 1950). "The work's exemplarity allows us to leap out of the everyday dominance of technology. It is this leap which puts us into a position where we can both grasp technology's essence, and confront it" (Kuhlken 2007, 21). Every work of art is performative in some way or another, but it is not as explicit in every work of art (Hantelmann 2004). Both aforementioned 'levels of meaning' will be discussed in the upcoming case studies.

Within the New Aesthetic and Speculative Realism movements, artists are keen on giving the viewer a peek into a computer's 'mind'. I think visual culture has equal power to influence our ideas and experiences about technology as technology itself does. We interact daily with pervasive and ubiquitous technologies without really questioning these relationships. It is therefore important and interesting that a shift in visual culture now does seem to address these relations and things that are overshadowed in day-to-day life. Following the ideas of Katherine Hayles, I argue that artwork does not only change our understanding of our relation to technology, but it actually changes our relation to technology due to its performative power (Hayles 2002).

5.2 *Perspective and Projection* by Bartholamäus Traubeck

In 1929, Dziga Vertov told us about his ideas of the new perception on the world that cameras could grant us. He was well ahead of its time if we look at the current obsession with ‘computer vision’. Although computer vision beholds more than what we see through a camera lens, Vertov denotes how this interest has followed man since the first rise of the film camera: “I am kino-eye, I am mechanical eye, I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.... My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you” he tells us as early as 1922 (Vertov, 1922). Some of these ideas were later actualized in his film *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929 (McNeil 2012).



Fig. 1: Bartholamäus Traubeck, *Perspective and Projection* – Mattawa, Washington State, 2009 - present. Satellite Footage, Lambda print on Forex, 75×38 cm. Galerie Pro Arte Hallein.

In the works that have so far been collected in the on-going project of *Perspective and Projection* by Bartholamäus Traubeck we see interesting cut-outs from satellite images. Since 2009 he has been busy searching through Google Earth’s database picking out aesthetically pleasing images. The pictures are made by stand-alone technological devices, but the aesthetical judgement still lies with the artist as is the case with all New Aesthetic work. The idea of looking into the object on- and off itself through visual practices is in that way already compromised before it reaches a viewer. So far the project consists of 41 pieces. The works are interesting insofar as they make us wonder if it are real depictions of our earth, a place that should be known to us, if to any being. While we are growing familiar with satellite images through their everyday use (weather reports, map applications), Traubeck purposely picks out unfamiliar images from these vast databases. The satellite images are taken from an angle that we are unable to see unmediated with our own eyes. The satellite’s ‘mechanical eye’ helps us out here, reminding us of Dziga Vertov almost a century ago. Even though the apparatus or technique of the camera showing us new perspectives and angles is not new, these images still astound us, they make us wonder for a split-second if they are actually real, if they are made of the world we live on. Their performative power makes us reflect on our own places of residence. These pictures change something familiar into something alien.

The focus within *Perspective and Projection* lies on the distinction and relation between representation and reality, says Traubeck when I interview him in a Viennese café in late 2012. It is about how technology is mapping our lands for us and how we are getting out of touch with the land we live on while we base our whereabouts on these images and ideas of our (techno-)world. One of his influences for the *Perspective and Projection* work was Alfred Korzybski, a Polish- American philosopher and scientist. One quote he is reminded of in our conversation is: “Two important characteristics of maps should be noticed. A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness”. These work are exactly about that: the blurring between representation and our projections and ideas on that representation (Traubeck 2012).

The New Aesthetic has picked up this work for similar reasons. First of all it stirs with the agency given to technology as we mediate our own world, making the origin of our perception vague. It also shows us computer perception, an important aspect of this movement. Seeing as the New Aesthetic is “an aesthetic born of the grain of seeing/computation”, using computer vision is a way for the movement to look into the being of objects through their digital sensorium (Jones 2011).

Traubeck has some trouble to fit himself into the New Aesthetic. He can see how he fits in aesthetically speaking, but he isn't that appreciative of the concept behind James Bridle's movement or the naming of it. For example, why say the “new” aesthetic when computer vision has already been changing our perception for decades? For example, “pictures taken from airplanes or space changed our perception on reality a lot, take for example the famous first picture of our own planet as this blue planet. The change today may be that the computer seems to take most of these pictures while not directly being controlled by a user” (Traubeck 2012). The user is positioned further away from the technology in these works. Instead of earlier works by Vertov or even Picasso (his many works in black and white and greyscale) or Duchamp (for example *Nude Descending a Staircase*), artists and designers are not that interested anymore in the (film)camera that is directly controlled by the maker or user, but are more inspired by stand-alone technology, and how they make up their own image of our world through their own logic. The technology that does our bodily work, but from a distance and removed from the body, as in McLuhan's extension thesis. The portrayed technologies “are no longer extensions or prostheses, [...] but separate extroversions of basic human functioning that tend to progressively become autonomous and self-operating” (Costa in Campanelli 2010, 226). This holds true for most New Aesthetic themes. It does not look at pictures being shot by someone through a digital camera for example, it gets interesting when we see what the computer sees on and of itself. It is not the humanist agency these artists are looking for, but the non-human agency performed by the technology. This is made apparent by GPS photography as used in Traubeck's work, or works inspired on face recognition software. They evoke an awareness of a certain technological Foucauldian panopticon.

Perspective and Projection offers us quite literally a different view upon our world. It shows images the satellite captures with as its only task to map our planet. It does not censor or ask questions; it will capture everything. Including things that we might not have thought of will be captured. It did not ask our permission for exhibiting us in a database, online, and now in galleries. These ‘new eyes’ seem to have their own rules and their own grain and aesthetic. As Bridle puts it: “For so long we've stared up at space in wonder, but

with cheap satellite imagery and cameras on kites and RC helicopters, we're looking at the ground with new eyes" (Bridle, *The New Aesthetic* 2011).

The involuntary images from the *Perspective and Projection* project remind me of the concept of the gaze as discussed in the third chapter. Becoming the object of the gaze as the viewer in these works, I argue, posits the technology as the subject rather than the object and in doing so, separates it distinctly from men, thus setting it apart as a mirroring Other. It distorts power relations, making the technology into the active viewer and humanity into the passive viewed.

5.3 *DepthEditorDebug* by James George and Alexander Porter

To get a better look at how the gaze is used within New Aesthetic/Speculative Realism works, I refer to *DepthEditorDebug* by James George and Alexander Porter. The project shows what happens when you map depth data (from a Kinect sensor) to a traditional Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) still frame – and then pivot and distort it in three dimensions (Armitage 2011). James George and Alexander Porter mock modern ubiquitous technology by letting users offer a certain power over the panopticon in which they involuntarily participate in public spaces, by making the typical one-way mirrors of the prison set-up into two-way mirrors: the viewers are now able to see their own captured images. The pictures are for most immediately recognizable as made with CCTV. People in Western urban society probably know they can be watched, but it's something that operates in the background of everyday existence. We do not watch the images ourselves. They are processed by intelligent software and then checked by security guards. Porter and George ask themselves: "*In a future of user-complicity in surveillance can we create a parallel narrative allowing those who are seen to abstract and enjoy their own image?*" (George 2011). Coincidence has it that they were initially inspired by a keynote speech from Bruce Sterling, a science (fiction) writer who played a big part in popularizing the New Aesthetic about two to three years later. He made the following statement about the future of imaging technology: "It simply absorbs every photon that touches it from any angle. And then in order to take a picture I simply tell the system to calculate what that picture would have looked like from that angle at that moment. I just send it as a computational problem out in to the cloud wirelessly" (Sterling in George 2011). This made them think about adding a third dimension to photographs, with *DepthEditorDebug* as a result. Sterling works for the magazine *Wired*, which is known for its technological utopianism. In this quote we again see his strong belief in the teleological progress of technology. It suggests even more power to ubiquitous technology than it has today, without stopping to think about the social resistance this may cause.

The images are captured by a camera, and later on modified by adding Kinect data from a hacked driver which tries to cut up the picture and add depth. This disfigures the image and leaves definite traces of digital manipulation. It shows us a glimpse of a robot-readable world, which is often associated with the New Aesthetic (Jones 2011).

All pictures in the series are candid, made of passers-by not expecting anything. This makes the loss of autonomy of the captured individual become more apparent. A viewer of these works gets the idea of technology invading our public spaces. Which it is, as I already argued in the fourth chapter by use of Mark Weiser's term ubiquitous computing. Works within these movements only make these ubiquitous 'mechanical eyes' more apparent. It seems to take artists to direct our view towards this increasing digitality of our culture. As Berry pointed out in *New Aesthetic New Anxieties*: as technology withdraws and becomes more embedded, it becomes harder to focus upon (Berry, et al. 2012). Most 'victims' of the *DepthEditorDebug* project do not seem to notice it as they are captured in a picture and subsequently in an art project. As Bruce Sterling tells it in his essay on the New Aesthetic: "it's rare for those people in these New Aesthetic images to show any visible awareness that an eruption has occurred. They are standing around in the eruption, and part of it, yet they're not witnesses to it – they don't perceive their situation with a New Aesthetic sensibility. [...] These dignitaries are not performing-freaks who are there to amuse us. They are fellow human beings just trying to get through their day" (Sterling 2012).



Fig. 2: James George and Alexander Porter, *DepthEditorDebug*. 2011. Print. Festival Enter, Prague.

The gaze aspect is apparent in more parts of today's visual culture. Think for example of the "CCTV walls" in American police offices, featured in crime series (and existing in real life) or the film poster for *Now You See Me*, now running in theatres (figure 3). On this poster we see the main characters viewed from above in about a 45 degree angle, which together with the title clearly indicates a reference to a security camera. Rachel Aima finds the true meaning of the New Aesthetic in this being-looked-at-ness: "The New Aesthetic is about being looked at by humans and by machines – by drones, surveillance cameras, people tagging you on Facebook – about being the object of the gaze. It's about looking through the eyes of a machine and seeing the machine turn its beady LEDs on you." By taking away the autonomy from the object of the gaze – the person in the streets – technology makes it passive. As discussed, this passivity is often associated with the female gender. Madeline Ashby is glad that this movement in visual culture is finally waking up men about what it is like to be seen as the passive one: "Apparently, it took the

preponderance of closed-circuit television cameras for some men to feel the intensity of the gaze that women have almost always been under... It took Facebook. It took geo-location. That spirit of performativity you have about your citizenship now? That sense that someone's peering over your shoulder, watching everything you do and say and think and choose? That feeling of being observed? It's not a new facet of life in the 21st century. It's what it feels like for a girl" (Ashby 2012). We can see then that by deploying the gaze, technology can still function as Other even when the technology which is used to do so – in this case CCTV – is an unquestionable part of our cybernetic culture. The idea that humans and (pervasive) technology form an all-encompassing system cannot be Others for they are one system is thereby rejected.



Fig. 3: Movie poster for 'Now You See Me'
(Summit Entertainment, 2013)

The (male) gaze that is depicted in the two works constructs technology as an Other. It is something that is definitely not us, which we can use to see ourselves as separately from technology and machinery, while it catches just enough similarity - by putting our senses to their sensors – to evoke questions on identity for its viewer. As Nichols argues in his article “The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems” (1988), we can still see humans and computational devices as definite others within a larger structure. When one of the nodes changes, for example the shift to ubiquitous technology, we need to reposition ourselves towards these new ratios.

5.4 *Digital Natives* by Matthew Plummer-Fernandez

In Matthew Plummer-Fernandez' *Digital Natives* series, the limits of computer vision as malleable are researched. In this series, “[e]veryday items such as toys and a watering can are 3D scanned using a digital camera and subjected to algorithms that distort, abstract and taint them into new primordial vessel forms” (Plummer-Fernandez 2012). Plummer-Fernandez leaves the colour and form of the final design to algorithms which are not fully knowable. He gives part of his agency as an artist to the computer, and lets it decide what the perfect colour or shape is for the particular work. Of course he has the final say in which design should be 3D printed, but the choices made by obscure algorithms take a big part of the design process in this series. As Wired journalist Flaherty says: “[he] fully embraces the serendipity of software glitches and fuzzy logic” (Flaherty 2013). In case of the teapot in figure 3, we can see the polygon’s and colour added by the algorithm to the 3D scan of a simple teapot. In other example’s, glitches are more apparent. For example a recolored Mickey Mouse with a hole in its head. Plummer-Fernandez left it this way to show what his art would look like if algorithms had the upper hand. He asks the viewer for an inspection into the power of technology: “I think it’s still met with fear, fear that art can be automated without the direct hand of the artist,” he says. “However, in art it’s often the discomforting, radical ideas that eventually achieve the most profound and lasting impact” (Plummer-Fernandez in Flaherty 2013).



Fig. 4: Matthew Plummer-Fernandez, *Digital Natives*, 2012. z-corp powder composite and z-corp tinted binder. Coded Perception.

In contrast to Traubeck, Plummer-Fernandez does see himself as part of the New Aesthetic. He thankfully uses the Tumblr platform and the discussions between artists, researchers and curators it has brought forth (Flaherty 2013). He sees the movement as having an important role in today’s culture: “It’s truthful about the state of emerging art studios being computer-centred, and it inherently communicates notions of automation, digitisation and network communication, all aspects of contemporary society that at least some art should reflect upon” (Flaherty 2013).

The New Aesthetic doesn't necessarily just comprise art pieces, it is about a shift in visual culture. Pictures made for advertising reasons or for use in manuals for example, have also become part of the discourse. Glitch and algorithms, themes used in Plummer Fernandez' work, have on a great scale been featured in other visual practices (even rapper Kanye West *glitched* an entire music video). Advertising is one of the major sources of New Aesthetic work featured on the semi-official website James Bridle is curating.



Fig.5: Examples of New Aesthetic themes in visual culture

These pieces, scattered throughout visual culture, all refer to technology as an alien and unknowable object. We are surrounded by it, but we still cannot fully fathom it. Glitch is often used as a tool to show the inner workings – and mishaps – of technology. It is an embracing of “the creative potential of the error” as curator and academic Vito Campanelli proposes. Media artists are starting to look into the fact that computers and software not always fully cooperate or give us an expected answer (Campanelli 2010). The aesthetic of glitch art has found its way to the public some years ago, but is interrogated anew within New Aesthetic and Speculative Realism debates. The ability of the technology making the wrong decisions and showing this process in media art, no longer limits them to being objects, it makes them into performing subjects, according to Campanelli (Campanelli 2010). This holds true for glitch projects and generated art alike. In these cases, I do not see the technology changing the present power relations. As long as glitches exist, the digital ubiquitous panopticon – or perfect cybernetic system – is yet to be founded. Moreover, computational devices may have a hand in the creative process, it is still the human

observer who makes the aesthetic decisions. These glitch works act less as a performative pieces than the works where camera's and gaze have the upper hand.

It seems to me these works do not only show us 'computer-vision', but they have a reflexive quality in them, they show us to what extend our experiences of this world are computer mediated. They play with our belief in the separation between real and virtual and ask us to what extent our daily lives are guided by algorithms and software.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

“The way the camera follows us in slo-mo

The way we look to us all

The way we look to a distant constellation

That's dying in a corner of the sky

These are the days of miracle and wonder”

- Paul Simon in The Boy in the Bubble (1986)

Art can teach us to understand our experiences in new ways and so can visual culture as a whole. Visual culture is as ubiquitous as computational devices are in these times, and as such visual culture depicting technology will sooner change our understanding than our interaction with specific technologies. The dream of what technology has or will become is fed through visual culture before widespread use or understanding of these technologies, hence the importance of the New Aesthetic.

For my case studies, I chose works that place emphasis on different modes of Othering of technology. As we have seen, the most prominent ways to separate human from non-human in these works is through the objectifying male gaze or through the alienation of unknowable technology and its algorithms. Little to no attention is served to the inherent connectivity of the two central entities – man and technology – within the New Aesthetic. Many of the recent central ideas within media studies are thus deconstructed within works such as *Perspective and Projection* and *Digital Natives*. As I stated in my analysis of *Perspective and Projection*: it is not the humanist agency artists are looking for, but the non-human agency performed by the technology. Although in *DepthEditorDebug*, the artists still have an eye for human agency, it is about the relation between the watcher and the watched. The artists Porter and George see their ‘victims’ as an evenly important part of their project as the technology with which they were captured. This work is more sympathetic to the idea of cybernetics and Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, though there are still traces of a hegemony actively constructed within the cybernetic system through the gaze that is performed in the work.

The case study of the *Digital Natives* series by Matthew Plummer-Fernandez shows that these works do not objectify the viewer through a gaze, but still posit technology as something other, something we may never truly know. It shows the ‘thingy’ essence that is central to Speculative Realism. In this series we are confronted with “mechanical products with inscrutable inner lives, unearthing artifacts and readymades from our present moment [...] othered things that are cautiously exotic to us, and our dubious relations with them” (Aima 2012). They are hard to know, because they are relatively new factors within our identity construction and our world view. They are pervasive and yet they are alien, they are things that are everywhere, yet ontologically hard to grasp. It are the objects which make up a ubiquitous computing culture in which the human element becomes more and more elusive. In the imagery of the New Aesthetic, these objects that are usually embedded and hidden, are shown and dissected⁹ to show us our technological Other.

Though the technologies represented in these works have something unknowable about them, it is exactly this mystique that only humans ‘get’ (Cloninger 2012). Picturing the “inscrutable inner lives” of alien technology, is something that can fascinate people, but only because it says something about their world, a part they interact with on a frequent basis. Ubiquitous technology is interesting exactly because it is embedded, hidden and at the same time omnipresent, it is what makes us curious. The objects of fascination for these artists are not the drill pipe systems that are somewhere out on the North Sea, which we only get a chance to see on the news broadcast. Instead they focus on ubiquitous

⁹ As David M. Berry said, they bring technology’s background to the fore, through giving us a glimpse into their algorithms, glitches and sensory processing (D. M. Berry 2012).

technologies that function in the very spaces we inhabit. Algorithms that try to detect your race and expression at the airport customs, GPS trackers in your phone that help you find recommended restaurants close-by, or CCTV in your local town hall used for security reasons. These increasingly ‘smart’ technologies are “somewhere between the living and non-living” and surround us daily, which is what makes them interesting for our identity construction (Turkle, 2005). By making the viewer aware of its technological surroundings, the works make us able to “leap out of the everyday dominance of technology” and grasp its essence and confront it as Kuhlken argued (Kuhlken 2007). It is thus foremost a tool to increase awareness.

The works within the *Perspective and Projection* and *DepthEditorDebug* series reminded of a gaze, “what it feels like for a girl”, as science fiction writer Madeline Ashby pointed out. The gaze constitutes a watching subject and a watched object, a definite separation between the two so as to make them - disfiguring - mirrors to each other. The works discussed tend to alienate, for the digital sensors with which the works are made, are quite different from our own biological senses. It is in this sense that these artworks perform something that goes beyond their representation. The technological gaze turned on the viewer, positions the viewer as its subject. The Other is in itself a construct, and is being constructed via the performative artworks that are mentioned in this thesis. New Aesthetic works make the technology into a seemingly conscious entity and us to the passive object of its vision. This puts its own power relations at work, which co-constructs the Other. It has been said that the New Aesthetic “reeks of power relations” (Ashby 2012). The computational devices used in the New Aesthetic debate are made to see, but also to watch. “The ability to watch someone is a form of power. It controls the flow of information” (Rothstein 2012). This argument by Rothstein (one of many bloggers who have reacted to Bridle and Sterling online) reminds me of ideas on objectification by Michel Foucault and the ‘male gaze’ by Laura Mulvey. The (feminine) passivity of the viewer is constructed through the idea of panopticon. The idea of panopticon is being portrayed in my first two case studies *Perspective and Projection* and *DepthEditorDebug*. It shows us a surveilling gaze that could be on us all the time in public, they show us our invisible technological panopticon.

Another thing I see in the New Aesthetic works I studied is a sense of self-reflection. I see the New Aesthetic works as a visual, aesthetic extension to the human ability of self-reflection. It is through these works that we are given a – in some instances, literally – new view upon our world, one of the functions of media as described by McLuhan in his extension thesis. I have pointed out in my case studies that although part of the creative process is outsourced in many works labelled the New Aesthetic, the aesthetic decisions remain with the human artist. This is one of the ways that stops us from looking directly at the technological *thing* through these works¹⁰. We cannot ignore the fact that human artists made these works and that art has the performative power to reflect. In Sterling’s words: “[o]ur human, aesthetic reaction to the imagery generated by our machines is our own human problem” (Sterling 2012). We should therefore go a step further than the

¹⁰ I acknowledge that here I am contradicting the arguments made by Martin Heidegger in his famous work “The origin of the work of art” in which he describes how things are to be known through art. I see his ideas as more applicable to ‘high-brow’ art instead of media art and visual culture though, and therefore dismiss this idea in relation to the works discussed in my thesis.

protagonists of Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Ontology and the New Aesthetic are doing right now. We are not just looking at the objects themselves with the goal of understanding our Other. To understand our Other is in this case a way to understand a part of our selves better. We cannot shake the anthropocentrism that clings to the subject/object divide that is presented at in these works. To follow McLuhan's metaphor, we are like narcissus: "[men] become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves" (McLuhan 1964, 41). In the end, "[w]e are both the watchers and the watched" (Rothstein 2012).

Furthermore, the paradox of ubiquitous computing (as it becomes a more important part of our culture, it also becomes increasingly hard to focus upon) as laid out in previous chapters, is what prevents realism from breaking through in media philosophy. Realism is looking for definite, marked and singular objects devoid of human agency, while media studies is busy looking into fading dichotomies and socio-cultural change. Moreover, many media scholars have been discussing the fading of dichotomies between human and machine, the real and the virtual. My idea is that both parties – Speculative Realism and media studies – could learn from each other. Media studies will have a whole new subject to unravel with these new ideas and this new visual culture, that show new ways of relating to technology, as I showed in this thesis. Speculative Realism will in its turn benefit from the academic discourse within media studies within the last decades.

To conclude, I do think that technology is constructed as the Other in these works, and that in this sense we can speak of a Return to the Other, because of its long absence in academic media discourse. However, this return is not for the sake of "understanding the thing from itself", but it is here to help us in our self-reflection. It is a form of mediated reflection upon our increasingly digital culture and can be seen as an aesthetic extension to the mind to amplify our ability for self-reflection. The result is that we are watching *them* looking at us, thus in the end we are looking at our own reflection which our current state of digital culture helped to facilitate.

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