Mind and Body Expanded:
The Aesthetic Paradigms of Video Games

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1. What is Media Aesthetics?

Within the history of philosophy several attempts have been made to establish the discipline of aesthetics. – At least two central approaches are still prevailing today: One approach in aesthetics is the question of a qualitative determination of the aesthetic object, namely in the sense of 'beauty' or 'sublimity'. On the other hand there are approaches, namely by Aristotle in *De Anima* and (again) by Kant in his 'Transcendental Aesthetics' within the *Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781, that do understand aesthetics in the literal sense as something that is concerned with the senses, hence: perception (gr. *aisthesis*).

The 'aisthetic' approach in philosophical aesthetics focusses on the modes, in which objects are perceived. For example, according to Kant's transcendental aesthetic there are only the two distinct perceptual modes of 'time' and 'space', which are the conditions of any object to appear (expanded in space and persisting in time). On the contrary, to Aristotle, any of the senses through which living beings perceive the world conditions the way things appear: the ear perceives the sound of objects through the air, the eye perceives the colours of objects through light etc. What enables perception Aristotle called *metaxy*; literally meaning: that what lies 'in between' and let things appear the way they do.

In early 20th century, at the dawn of modern 'media-philosophy', the Austrian Gestalt-Psychologist Fritz Heider (2005 [1926]) in his essay on *Thing and Medium* argues in line with Aristotle that objects never approach the recipient as such but only as 'false entities' transmitted by a (natural) medium and its 'loose elements' that do mediate the 'form' (or 'Gestalt') of a thing. Thus, like the *metaxy* to Aristotle a *medium* to Heider is never appears itself, but only in the way it does allow for the object to be perceived in the particular way the senses are equipped (sound-wise, light-wise, touch-wise etc.).

Heider's understanding of a medium is crucial when it comes to the question what the particular aesthetics is – not only of media like air and light, but especially of technical media that are capable of replicating the way in which objects to appear naturally. These first and foremost are media of tone and vision, hence recordings of sound and captured images. Those media (like gramophone or tape and photography or film) not only allow for the objects to appear in the way the (technical) medium addresses a particular sense, but also enable the

distribution of particular (in)form(ation) across time and space or even its storage for future reception.

However, it was not until the publications of the Canadian literature scholar Marshall McLuhan that philosophical thinking about media in the terms of Aristotle and Heider became popular: Up to McLuhan the field of media studies first and foremost was related to quantitative aspects of mass-media and the content, which were communicated by them. With the proposition that the 'medium' itself 'is the message' (McLuhan/Fiore 2001 [1967]), McLuhan turned away from the content and started looking at the particular form, in which it was mediated. By this he not only inherited the Aristotelian understanding of media, but also began to rethink the capacities of the human body.

Another important precursor for McLuhan's approach is the Hegelian philosopher Ernst Kapp (1877) with the *Principles of a Philosophy of Technology*, in which he suggests that every technology is a 'projection' of a human organ, hence: a tool. A hammer, for instance, is a projection of the hand, and the telegraph-network is a projection of the nerve-system. Without referring to Kapp explicitly McLuhan (1994 [1964]) in *Understanding Media* already in the subtitle addresses (electronic) media as 'extensions of men', insinuating that any technological device is only improving one of the senses: Thus, the telephone and radio are improving hearing, just as film and television are improving sight, since the range of listening and seeing now can potentially cover the whole world. If in the light of media aesthetics now McLuhan's two major claims – 'the medium is the message' and 'media are extensions of men' – are combined, the result is an original approach to the way in which mediated elements do appear: They are not only perceived due to the restrictions of a particular medium, but their foremost 'message' is the very aspect in which the respective medium does 'extend' (the capacities of) the human body.

In consequence the message of a medium is the bodily aspect that has been expanded by it. – At some instances in everyday-life those aspects are becoming noticeable: For instance, when people are wondering about the way in which a known noise sound different via telephone or when the dialogue partner tell each other via mobile phone where they are right now. In any of those cases the otherwise implicit effect of the medium on the body is becoming explicit. In difference to those accidental occasions the approach of philosophical media aesthetics as it can be derived from McLuhan and his precursors always look explicitly for those aspects in which the medium reveals its very structures that are typical for enhancing the human senses. As such McLuhan defined the message of the television-medium as 'being with it', that is: the impression of viewers in in live transmissions to actually be the witness of an event.

Furthermore, with the 'logic of difference' as it was proposed in the publication *The Laws of Form* by the mathematician George Spencer Brown (1979 [1969]) those effects that media aesthetics look for can be attributed specifically as 're-entries' of the very form (of a medium). Taking McLuhan's approach seriously, there is no content (or 'message') of a

medium other than the particular way in which the medium extends the body. While (as Heider argued) a medium cannot be observed directly, what media philosophy can only reflect are the 'forms' in which a certain medium can be used in order to communicate. At this point the form of the medium is becoming its content and, according to Spencer Brown, a re-entry of the form takes place. – To sum up: Media aesthetics can therefore be understood as *the task to focus on the re-entries of medial forms within a given medium, which does expand the senses or capabilities of the human body*.

2. Somatic Philosophy of Film

So far no attempts can be found, in which a philosophy of computer games or contributions to game studies have tried to apply such kind of media aesthetics onto digital games in a methodological way. – However, there are numerous hints on the self-reflexiveness of the medium of the computer game that can be read as an attempt to approach the re-entries of the medial form. Examples are various discussions about in-game hints on the game itself, like the beginning of ZORK (1980), in which the first found text-item claims that "[n]o computer should be without one!"; or noclip-bugs by which parts of the avatar's body do immerse into game-space elements (like Lara Croft into a wall in TOMB RAIDER), understood as the re-entry of the immersiveness of the game itself. Also the 'four moments' of gaming identified by Alexander Galloway (2006: 1-38) can be read as an approach to an aesthetics focussing on the re-entries of the medial form of computer games. A crucial example are the so-called 'diegetic machine-acts' or 'ambient acts' through which, according to Galloway, the game communicates that it is still processing information and that the game is not pausing, and furthermore: that is an interactive medium, which message might be: 'it's your turn'.

The situation within the philosophy of film is different: Here the 'somatic turn' of film studies (Hockley 2014) caused a new approach that allowed for a systematic view on the re-entries of the medial form of the cinematographic medium. It nevertheless has to be acknowledged that theories of film have a much older history then the studies of digital games and many theoretical approaches have been applied onto moving images. – Two of the most prominent ones are on the one hand the (neo-)formalistic approach as it was coined by the 'Wisconsin School' with David Boardwell and Kristin Thompson since the late 1970ies, who – generally speaking – (like the Russian formalism with Sergei Eisenstein before them) focus on the montage of time and space in film, by which a plot constitutes a story (Boardwell et al. 2002 [1985]); on the other hand and contrary to that approach there was a focus on the medial situation given in the cinema as a so-called 'dispositive' (literally: as an 'order'). Namely Jean-Louis Baudry (1986 [1970]) and Laura Mulvey (1999 [1975]) have applied the Psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan onto film, who speculated about the mechanisms that allow for the constitution of the subject: The situation of watching a movie in the cinema metaphorically 'ties' the spectators to the chairs in the darkness of the theatre like slaves in Plato's cave (being the films 'unconscious' setting), adopting the perspective of the protagonists captured by the camera and provided by a projector (being the films 'Super-Ego').

Taking both approaches into account and likewise overcoming them, the US-American scholar Vivian Sobchack (1992) – being the main advocate of the somatic turn in film philosophy – admits that the concrete situation in the cinema is important to be considered, just as is the way in which the film presents its material, namely though the way of perception provided by the camera. Sobchack nevertheless proposes to take into consideration the very experience of the recipients, and thus the bodies of the audience. In order to do so, she refers to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]) and his *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which the perceptual capacities of the human body are taken as the transcendental condition of perception (which equals the move from a Kantian to an Aristotelian aesthetics). She argues that all the human senses are implied when watching a movie. To her this is not only true for hearing and seeing, but also to touch, as she shows in her Article on *What My Fingers Knew*, where Sobchack (2004 [2000]) describes her experience in watching opening-scene of *The Piano* (Jane Campion, NZ 1993). The protagonist hands are touching the camera and there is hardly anything to see for the eyes. But Sobchack argues, that her fingers could feel touching a face, even before she realized cognitively that what she can see on the screen are hands.

Sobchack's descriptions might be a dramatization of the actual experience, but together with approaches to film-genres usually neglected by film theory – like melodrama, horror or even porn (Williams 1989) – thy gave rise to a philosophical awareness of the sensual implications of the filmic medium: namely with the German film historians Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010 [2008]) in their seminal introduction to a film theory 'through the senses'. The authors deliberately conceive of the cinema as expanding the perception and experience of the viewer(s). This aesthetic expansion in most cases affects the outer senses, predominantly such as vision, hearing and touch, but also the inner senses, to which Elsaesser and Hagener also add the experience of time as memory.

Elsaesser and Hagener are in line with McLuhan's claim that the 'message' of a medium can thus not be found in its content, but rather in its form, by which the medium expresses its very 'essence'. However, due to this, media are not only 'extensions of men', but they reveal the respective way of mediation in terms of a continuous re-entry of the specific form. – The important shift in Elsaesser's and Hagener's approach now is the way they relate theory to film: In their understanding, by looking at the re-entries of the medial forms the medium itself becomes theory or is the mode in which a director communicates his general opinion about 'what film is'? – *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, USA 1982), for example, is not be considered a dystopian Science Fiction-film about a hard boiled-detective story in the first place, but rather through its aesthetical reflection as a film about the ocular-centrism of classical cinema, since in the film on various occasions eyes get hurt, are depicted in close-ups, or substituted by machines to improve vision, as well is voyeurism acted out on various occasions.

3. The Seven Aesthetic Paradigms

After having prepared the ground for an understanding of a decent approach in philosophical aesthetic to media, the final aim of this paper is to assess whether video games can be considered to share similar or different aesthetic paradigms in which re-entries of the medial form become obvious as it is the case with films. – The seven paradigms of film according to Elsaesser/Hagener are the 'window' (or the frame), the 'door' (or the threshold), the 'face' (or the mirror), the 'eye' (or the look), the 'skin' (or the touch), the 'ear' (or the acoustic), and the 'brain' (or the mind). Especially the last one seems to be a shared paradigm of films and video games since it enacts the possibility of traversing time or undoing the course of events. Gilles Deleuze (1989 [1985]) calls this the cinema as a 'time-image', which became the new form of montage in cinema after the Second World War. In difference to the pure 'movement-image' the sequences are edited in such an order that not only a spatial change is depicted, but also shifts in time.

The time-image is a way in which cinema becomes 'virtual' without necessarily being digital. Virtualisation thus is an approach to tell a story by suspending the reality of one version only an provide alternative realities, as it is the case in *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, JP 1950) or in *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, D 1998); whereby the latter itself is already inspired by the recurrence of possibly actualisations in coin-up machines. In regard to video games this virtualisation of the real can be found throughout almost all genres, especially when they offer the possibility of repeated attempts to succeed in fulfilling the task(s) of a particular game, by allowing the user to start the level again or from the last save-point. However, this means in turn, that the genre of 'simulation', in which games represent adequately the features of a certain vehicle – for example, like in FLIGHT SIMULATOR (1982) –, are not offering a virtualisation of the real through its suspense and variation, but rather pretend to be the reality of driving or flying.

Within the first four paradigms – that together constitute the visual –, the window, the door, the face and the look, the third one seems to be the only one not been shared by computer games originally, but to appear only in 'filmic sequences', that is, cut-scenes or tutorials. In contrast to this, the window is the original aesthetic form of the photorealistic style, shared by paintings from Renaissance to Impressionism, analogue and digital photography as well as film and video games, in which linear perspective is the basis of depicting space. This is the case in all first-person shooters like MAZE WAR (1972), BATTLEZONE (1980) or DOOM (1993), but also exploration-games like MYST (1993). The same applies to the paradigm of the door as a threshold, which is not only constitutive for storytelling in film, but also for video games (Aarseth 2007), especially in the genre of adventures, that use doors to separate rooms as realms of events from another. Here the finding of keys to open doors, like in THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986), can even be the central aim of quests in a particular game.

The look certainly is an aesthetic paradigm to be found in the medial form of first-person shooters, especially those, which exemplify a "through-the-gunsight perspective" (Jenkins/Squire 2002: 65) as in SILENT SCOPE (1999); and even in indie-games like THE

UNFINISHED SWAN (2012), in which users first of all have to establish the possibility of vision by aiming blindly at the monochrome white space, the paradigm of the eye is nevertheless at work. The sense of touch then is predominantly present as depictions of the hand or the body as such, like in MIRROR'S EDGE (2008), but also on occasions in which the interface allows for using the mouse pointer to select options in the menu or navigate via mini-maps, which both is the case in SIMCITY (1989), or to carry out direct actions like in graphic adventure games such as THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND (1990).

In regard to the acoustic paradigm of hearing or sound, different to film, the history of video games does not have a 'silent era' and therefore did not visualize acoustic incidents as much as early movies did – a famous examples would be the steam-blowing pipes at the beginning of *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, D 1927) –; nevertheless early video games sometimes rely on intertitles, as again ZORK (1980), which consists of text only, substituting the audio-visual as well as the interactive. Within the development of both media all the possibilities of acoustic space, as it was described comprehensively by Michel Chion (1990), are accounted for: This applies not only to extradiegetic score-music, but also to inner monologues, atmospheric sounds or autonomous audio-sources from the off screen, the so-called *acousmetre* (engl. sound-being), like the computer's voice in PORTAL (2007).

An expected result of the presentations is not only the comparison between the media of film and video game, but first of all a different understanding of the body in relation to video games: In aesthetic approaches to video games so far 'the body' has always only been understood as either the empirical entity of players and its representation on screen (Klevjer 2007) or as a transcendental schema of navigation (Fernández-Vara et al. 2005), but hardly ever as its medial extension reflected in the aesthetics of a particular video game.

Games

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