Media Exhausts Hardware



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Eli Kerr

Sunday, July 2nd 1978 was the last day that the New York Times printed the news with hot metal linotype machines before introducing digital production into printing presses.

Through around-the-clock editorial and production schedules, the news was made character by character and line by line. Individual metal letter forms were assembled into slugs of text that would be methodically arranged before being reproduced as curved page plates. Cast from molten lead, the page plates would cool before being loaded on rotary presses as the printing stage of the process would begin. After each production day the lead page plates of yesterday's news would be set aside and prepared to re-enter the smelter, where they would once more be reduced to molten lead awaiting to be summoned again, casted into tomorrow's news.[1]

The lead smelter in the hot underbelly of the Times building had cycled media in an endless loop before television. Yet in the same year that digital production would revolutionize print media Ted Turner began his plans to launch CNN: the first 24 hour news channel would also be the first television channel dedicated exclusively to news.

It is as if media had jumped out of one overheated body and into another. As the circulation of media intensifies it demands new technologies that both expedite its production and the death of its hosting format. The self-replenishing and cyclical nature of media and its movement from one format to another conjures a metallic image. A molten morphology, whereby malleable properties can be heated to a liquid abstraction before cooling to a legible solid, only to heat to liquid once more.

It is both a mundane fact as well as an interesting biographical side note to mention that Chris Dorland's birth was within days of the New York Times abandonment of analog printing to make way for new digital process'. That the artist's birth year also ushered in the beginnings of the 24 hour non-stop news cycle is further reminder of the critical changes in media history that began in the late 1970s; changes that would fundamentally reformat an unprecedented recalibration of our understanding of time and space in ways we are still struggling to make sense of.

Media exhausts hardware. As it gains velocity, range and dynamism, it exerts control over memory, leaving a trail of obsolescence and nostalgia in its path. The deceptive and strange power in media's movement is that it is also multidirectional: just as engineers develop new hardware to contain the performance thresholds of media, archivists are also busy with an endless migration process moving old media such as photographic prints, film, vinyl and tape off obsolete storage formats onto current ones. Like the pistons of a paradox pumping in an asynchronous sequence, media's movement resurrects the past while simultaneously paving the present; the moving contradiction of media retains its stability through always being in motion.

Dorland's work reveals the complications that arise through this lack of synchronization. Images are collected and archived and subsequently filtered through a variety of outdated scanners and printers creating new versions of themselves with every output. Newer machines such as drones and hand scanners are also deployed at the service of gathering and restructuring visual information. Outnumbered by the various machines in his studio, Dorland orchestrates something akin to a prediction, or a dangerous experiment with the internet of things. Channeling a pre-archaic artificial intelligence that connects machines together in collaboration, albeit with human management at the center.

Like the New York Times moving away from hot metal type, what is unfolding in Dorland's studio is an inevitable step in the logic of automation. Just as a generation of human printers, blue collar trade workers on the Times staff, would either retire or retrain as technicians, questions of craft and the artist's own agency arise in Dorland's studio as he navigates the implications of a process-based practice increasingly contingent on what machines want.

As early as 1858, Marx foresaw the possibility of autonomous machines and the subsequent ramifications innovation had in store by inevitably positioning machines at the center and for humans to be working in their service. A passage from Fragment on Machines from his unfinished Grundrisse writings states:

> *Once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the… automatic system of machinery… set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.*[2]

Marx's notion of 'conscious linkages' not only anticipates an idea of artificial intelligence as a stage in automation's end game, it aptly describes the relationship of a crude paranoiac telepathy between humans and intelligent machines, the shared knowing of the other's predictive behaviour. The conscious linkage also details the cognitive and emotional retraining humans undergo through by interacting with these emergent forces, which like us, learn from observation. With the tools for scanning and tracking built in, surveillance becomes an integral feature to how intelligent machines strengthen; gathering intelligence is simply the means of gaining intelligence.

As an anthropological record, media is rich in information pertaining to human behaviour, and thus becomes of great interest to thinking machines who are programmed to find out more about us. One such area where this is being aggressively applied is the tracking of media performance; knowing which content resonates with a target group becomes a form of raw material that once gathered, proceeds to inform production decisions for new content.

As "conscious linkages" we begin to drive the production of media through our very consumption of it. Similarly our relationship with intelligent machines is a symbiotic process in motion where we become more like one another towards an uncanny replication.

Media as a buffer in this relationship behaves in many ways like the T-1000; the poly-alloy machine from the Terminator film franchise. Sent from the future with the ability to imitate anything metal or human it touches, T-1000 personifies media's shapeshifting behaviour. Personification was in fact the T-1000's main ruse. As a more advanced machine than its predecessor, it did not rely on brute force to exert power but rather used persuasive human traits and cunning trickery to gain trust as a means of gathering intel from unassuming victims, whose likeness would be copied and stored capable of being simulated at a moment's will. T1000's adaptive properties and ability of near perfect mimicry enabled it stalk bloodlessly, devouring content and form as it moved through space.

Perpetually in motion, media's impulse is to migrate, target, scan, track and replicate itself, ex-

hausts its host bodies and while exposing its parasitic traits in the process. Dorland's work embodies this alienated and predatory abstraction: reification of media as form. Functioning like a site of reproduction, where the migration of inputs reenacts a mediatic violence that exposes the agony of images in motion momentarily rendered still.

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1 Dunlap, David W. (1978) 'Farewell, Etaoin Shrdlu'." The New York Times, The New York Times, 13 Nov. 2014, www.nytimes.com/times-insider/2014/11/13/1978-farewell-etaoin-shrdlu/.

Of interest to this article is that through the Times-Machine, 40 years after the introduction of digital processed into printing, all New York Times Articles dating from 1851 - 2002 have been scanned and have been made digitally available online to subscribers.

2 Marx, K. (1973). Grundrisse, etc. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, p.693.

Eli Kerr (1988) is a curator and writer based in Montréal, Canada, He is focused on artistic practices that consider the implications of technological histories within unfolding social modalities. Beyond his own research interests, Kerr's exhibition and writing activity is prompted through a constant dialog and commitment to artist's ideas. In 2016 he co-founded VIE D'ANGE with Daphné Boxer. The project exists as a broad framework for curatorial activities which both emanate from, and extend beyond an old auto body garage, that serves more as an apparatus than a site for their initiatives. With a focus on supporting new, intimate and experimental artist's projects, their exhibition programme exists as an episodic series of sequential, yet nonlinear narratives. Recent exhibitions include Emily Jones 'Folk Hall for a Village', Abbas Akhavan 'Folly', Carlos Reyes 'Wst Sd Clb' and 'Title II' curated with Daphné Boxer and Christopher Kulendran Thomas at Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran (all 2018 in Montréal). Kerr has been awarded curatorial residencies at International Studio and Curatorial Program (New York; 2017) and at Rupert (Vilnius, Lithuania; 2018). He is the recipient of the 2019 Hnatyshyn Foundation award for Canadian curators under 30 and will be in residence at Fogo Islands Arts (Newfoundland, Canada) this fall.