You Can't Always Get What You Want

Transparency And Deception On The Computer Fashion Scene

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"Technology is gradually becoming a second nature, a territory both external and internalized, and an object of desire. There is no need to make it transparent any longer, simply because it is not felt to be in contradiction to the 'authenticity' of the experience."
 -Erkki Huhtamo[1]

While Microsoft chose the Rolling Stones anthem "Start Me Up" to launch its ubiquitously accepted Windows 95 software, Apple settled on the Stones' more psychedelic "Like a Rainbow" to introduce the iMac. But music is not the only link between these two momentous ad campaigns; they share an essential strategy of Silicon Valley marketing-the need to make technology transparent to the user. In the attempt to make the desktop computer approachable and even "cool," the Windows 95 graphical interface distanced the user from the complexity of DOS code entry, and the iMac touted hardware that is transparently simple to set up. These changes brought with them a concerted estheticization of computer software (Windows 95 custom desktops, etc.) and hardware (the iMac as home decoration). The reasoning behind selecting Mick Jagger as a spokesperson for these products is far from transparent, but one thing is certain: as the desktop computer becomes more simple to use and more attractive to behold, the user is unwittingly faced with an increasing loss of power and control over the machine. As digital machines become transparent elements of personal style-voguish signifiers of well-being in an electronic culture-we are becoming increasingly ignorant of their actual mechanics and power to shape information and influence its delivery. If this trend continues unchecked, human identity will one day be determined by hardware and software aesthetics, and information will be controlled by the corporate fashion machines through which it is filtered. The computer fashion scene is the site of disempowerment, programmed ignorance, and packaged identity formation.

Fruit-Flavored Hardware Seduction

"She comes in colors everywhere. She combs her hair. She's like a rainbow." With this psychedelic refrain swirling through the air amidst a gaggle of iMacs, Apple launched its incredibly successful line of fruit-flavored computers. In 1998, Steve

Jobs introduced the commercial to a very enthusiastic audience at the MacWorld 3 Convention, and the rest is history. The big selling point was and is, of course, the color of these new iMac computers. But what is more fascinating is the transparent or perhaps, translucent, cases of these machines. This subtle marketing detail-a design concept as old as the glass music box-turns the iMac into a hypericon[2] of corporate computer marketing strategies. That is, a sophisticated corporate agenda of deception and programmed ignorance is written on the semi-transparent body of the iMac.

Who could resist the appeal of a yummy blueberry, grape, lime, tangerine or strawberry digital device? The fruity flavor in itself is irresistible, but when such cuteness is coupled with a titillating translucence, a candy-sweet digital striptease, the result is a lethal seduction machine. We see this recipe for seduction at play everywhere today, especially in Japanese culture, where the alchemical blend of cuteness and seduction has spawned a billion-dollar market for kiddy-porn anime and pink key-chain cell phones. This craze finds its way into our home offices. Browse through the pages of any computer magazine, and you will inevitably be assailed by a selection of colorfully translucent printers, keyboards, ZIP drives, and even cables. What is the point of all this transparency? You might as well ask the equally perplexing question, What is the point of bringing back chinos and Capri pants? Both would elicit the same answer: fashion has dictated these questionable visual cults. But you don't have to be a fashion critic to understand that such trends do not self-generate haphazardly, nor are they arrived at in a transparently innocent way.

It is no mystery that technology has developed its own, highly sophisticated fashion system. The reach of this system is extremely vast; we have "wearable computing" in Silicon Valley and status-marking cell phones with fashion faceplates in South Detroit. Some of these phones are, of course, translucent as well. We are witnessing a culture of digital peacocking: the more colorful circuits we have to display, the more wired and hip we appear to be. This makes the iMac the perfect home fashion accessory for any living room. From a consumer's perspective, the clear shell on a digital device simply looks "cool," it appeals to a post-Y2K, sci-fi sensibility that wants to demonstrate its digital savvy. Admittedly, the first time I saw the new iMac, I relished the thought that I was one layer closer to the circuits that channel my ideas. I was one layer closer to understanding the mechanics of the digital mediator of my thoughts. I had achieved a greater level of control over the enigmatic network of copper and silicon behind the screen. This, of course, is a fatal error. I had fallen prey to the greatest danger of this hardware trend: feigned transparency.

If you look closely into the translucent shell of an iMac, what do you see, really? A few circuits leading into a metallic box with air vents. In effect, all you can see beneath the translucent, plastic veil of the monitor is the real casing of the monitor. The colorful shell of an iMac should be considered as an additional layer between the

operator and the computer, the human and the machine. It is an illusion, a lie, a fashion effect designed to simulate the lifting of a veil. We should not confuse this effect with that achieved by the transparent cases of antique music boxes and pocket watches-these were created for instruction, not for fashion; they gave a full view of ticking gears and cogs in full motion, not an obscured view of immobile, inscrutable copper and silicon. The transparent hardware case instills us with a false confidence by transforming daunting technologies into familiar fashion. With this confidence in place, the user is free to forget about what the circuits and chips are actually doing beneath the polished, graphical user interface.

To summarize, the more aesthetically pleasing our hardware becomes-pleasing by means of transparency, that is-the more ignorant we become about what is actually making it tick. On the computer fashion scene, there is an obverse relationship between transparency and understanding. And this is the very equation that computer corporations, both Macintosh- and Windows-oriented, must uphold to insure their control of the market.

There Is No Transparent Software

The impetus behind Apple's colorful ad campaign should not be taken lightly. Apple was acting out of sheer necessity, out of a drive for survival. For over a decade, Apple had steadily been losing ground to the ravenous Microsoft Corporation; the iMac strategy was the perfect tactic to put them back in the running. If Microsoft was transforming the computing world with its Windows operating system-a software product-Apple would fight back with hardware. It's much easier to market a simple and elegant piece of hardware than it is to market a complex graphical user interface. And who cares about the interface anyway? As long as it hides those perplexing strings of code, the consumer will be satisfied. Apple has altered perhaps permanently the computer sales war, by changing the focus from software to hardware. Most importantly, focus of the consumer has changed as well. Whereas the hardware-oriented focus of computer purchasers-a focus limited to geeks who understand the meaning of RAM, MHz, MB, and SCSI-used to be on interior elements such as memory and performance, the focus is now on aesthetics, the exterior. Apple has changed the consumer's focus from software to hardware, from user-friendliness to fashion, from control and access to simplicity and cuteness. In short, they have changed the focus from interior to exterior, and the effectiveness of this shift is such that even the most die-hard, DOS-oriented PC owners are being tempted into purchasing a seductively sweet and simple iMac. Will they submit? Let's hope not. But what is the alternative?

The Apple vs. PC (Microsoft) war has been raging for two decades now. Historically, Apple users tout the simplicity and intuitiveness of the Apple operating system, especially when compared to DOS, which was the only alternative interface before the legendary birth of Windows. PC users on the other hand, argue that the Mac platform limits their level of control over files and hardware. The PC die-hards often describe the Mac OS (operating system) in demeaning terms-a delimiting force that insults their intelligence. Over the past decade however, the war has been folding in on itself. Microsoft's user interface has become more and more like the Mac interface through the replacement of text with pictures, code with icons. A Windows 98 user would have a very difficult time claiming that his or her user interface offers more flexibility, hardware control, or sophistication than the Mac user's interface-especially since Windows is fashioned on the original Mac OS in the first place, and both are committed to the principle of simplicity through pictorial representation.

The goal of this pictorialization, as Jay Bolter has pointed out in Remediation, is to achieve a certain representational transparency. According to Bolter,

Virtual Reality, three-dimensional graphics, and graphical interface design are all seeking to make digital technology "transparent." In this sense, a transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium.[3]

To begin with, transparent hardware would allow for a seamless transition between the real and virtual. This is the stuff of biotechnological implants, but is more readily apparent in the constant miniaturization of digital devices, which relentlessly pushes hardware toward the immaterial. All hardware is, in a sense, striving for invisibility or transparency. Of course, software strives for transparency as well. The ultimate user interface is one that doesn't get in the way of what you are trying to accomplish with your machine-it simply offers a direct, seemingly unmediated line between you and information or communication.[4] Pictures seem to accomplish this task more efficiently than words, so we have seen the replacement of command lines with icons that mimic everyday objects. The problem with this, as any translator, artist, or poststructuralist[5] understands, is that this replacement of text by pictures is not a transparent process. Something is lost en route. Traces of the transformation are left behind. In this case, what is lost is the user's level of access to hardware control. As Microsoft pushes the code further and further behind a "desktop" of icons, the user's command of the machine is increasingly compromised.

But then, who wants increased command, especially if it means tinkering with all that messy code? This is what the average consumer is likely to ask-Microsoft and Apple have built their empires on it. But what is at stake here is not just the ability to make

your printer or hard drive run exactly the way you would like them to run; what's at stake is the future of information management and control. This is why the translucency, or "feigned transparency," of the Apple iMac is a fortuitous development for critics of the hardware fashion scene. The translucent iMac creates a visual register of the industry's drive to veil computing processes from the user. The iMac is a hypericon of computer marketing strategies that are designed to reduce the consumer's level of control over information systems.

There Is No Software At All

Foreshadowing Apple's latest ad campaign, the media critic Friedrich Kittler paraphrased Mick Jagger in a 1990 essay when he suggested, "instead of what he wants, the user always only gets what he needs (according to the industry standard, that is)." In what Kittler calls a "system of secrecy," computer and software designers have intentionally "hidden" the technology from those who use the machines:

First, on an intentionally superficial level, perfect graphic user interfaces, since they dispense with writing itself, hid a whole machine from its users. Second, on the microscopic level of hardware, so-called protection software has been implemented in order to prevent "untrusted programs" or "untrusted users" from any access to the operating system's kernel and input/output channels.[6]

Tipping his hat to Marshal McLuhan, Kittler suggests that all these levels of secrecy are designed to prevent the operator from really understanding media. We might consider the design concept of the iMac as yet another level of secrecy-the translucent case is a red herring, a decoy, a distraction technique. The motto "Think Different" works in the same way by attempting to persuade Mac users that their computer will give them the wisdom to modify social power structures. What Apple is really trying to do, however, is to divert them from thinking about their technical ignorance. You may be able to launch a program on your computer, and you can even see inside its casing (to a certain extent), but do you really know what's going on inside? This ignorance, according to Kittler, leaves us open to manipulation of the highest order. And it is not exclusive to Mac users. The hardware and software that we use have the power to shape our relationship to information. And if this relationship is controlled by corporate interests, then we must consider the ramifications. In a worst case scenario, "one writes-the 'under' says it already-as a subject or underling of the Microsoft [or Apple] Corporation".[7]

The problem with developing a force of resistance against this "writing under" is that it is dependent upon the inscrutable complexity of computer hardware and software. Do people really want to know how their computers work? Do they want to know

how to assemble lines of code? If Kittler had his way, the average Liberal Arts student would be required to "at least know some arithmetic, the integral function, the sine function, . . .[and] at least two software languages."[8] But not all Liberal Arts students are tempted, as Kittler was, to "pick up the soldering iron and build circuits" in their free time.[9] Still, Kittler's rhetorical artillery can be translated into a plan of resistance against marketing strategies designed to delimit the power of a computer operator. One method of resistance would be to emulate Kittler and Foucault in their "attempt to construct sociology from the [computer] chip's architectures".[10] "It is a reasonable assumption," writes Kittler, "to analyze the privilege levels of a microprocessor as the reality of precisely that bureaucracy that ordered its design and called for its mass application."[11] Indeed, one might analyze the design of hardware components with the same skepticism. This is why I have designated the iMac as a hypericon: a visual embodiment of a corporate discourse network that advocates marketing strategies of feigned transparency and deception. The goal of this is to change the signification of the translucent shell from fashion statement to critical/political statement. Of course, this is only a singular, rhetorical method that can achieve only a limited effect, especially when confined to a research article.

Strategies Of Resistance: Electronic Critique

A more pervasive strategy of resistance is to integrate the concept of transparency into education about media. This can be done in a very literal way, by teaching students, in Kittlerian fashion, how to build circuits or wire a building for the Internet. For example, at the School of Information Science, Technology and Engineering at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Engineering students go to classes in a building where all the ducts, plumbing, Internet cables and hardware, are completely visible. This model has been seen before, of course, most famously at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. But in Nebraska, the goal is instructional rather than aesthetic. The very building in which students work becomes an object of study. Students even go so far as to "watch the electrical impulses flying over the wires" of the network, using particle analyzers.[12] In the words of Bing Chen, co-chairman of the Computers and Electronics Engineering Program, "I like students to track it down, almost to the electron level.... We aren't interested in black boxes, where it just goes out into the ether".[13] Of course, the university does not describe the program as a "strategy of resistance," but given the drive of computer manufacturers to "black-box" information systems, we might view the program in this way.

For a more self-consciously resistant program, we might turn to the University of Detroit Mercy, where I am the current director of Electronic Critique, or E-crit (www.e-crit.com). Students in this Liberal Arts program are educated in research and design strategies that can be used to resist corporate illusions of transparency, and to

dissect cultural artifacts-even iMac computers-in order to reveal the networks of social power that they conceal. Resistance, for students of E-crit, might be as simple as stressing the importance of learning HTML code before using a graphical Web page editor. But the program of resistance goes much deeper than this, as is evident in the philosophy of the program's founder, Professor Hugh Culik. Professor Culik developed the program out of a need for unrelenting skepticism about technology in the Liberal Arts. This metacritical stance is so rigorous that it borders on paranoia; when Culik found the university's computing policies unacceptable, he led Liberal Arts students in the set-up and maintenance of their own Web server. It is this type of hands-on problem solving and critical vigilance that led to the creation of the program in Electronic Critique. Students of E-crit are encouraged to apply their deconstructive methodologies in the creation of "real-world" projects designed to solve real problems, and to draw the students' communities into programs of resistance.

The reason for deploying a Liberal Arts program against the political forces behind technology development and marketing is well articulated by Professor Culik in the program's initial proposal document: "With our tradition of critique, we can articulate the nature of these new forces, de-mystify their assumptions, and then deploy them as adjuncts for the committed critical thinking that extend our mission into the real world".[14] Students of Electronic Critique demystify corporate marketing tactics, and apply their knowledge of such tactics in the creation of software and Web projects that encourage others to resist the temptation of feigned transparency. In other words, it would not be unusual for an e-crit student to use iMac design strategies in the creation of a Web site that ironically demystifies such strategies.

Call this a postmodern methodology of irony if you will, but we might say the same about the most successful advertising campaigns that assail us on television, in magazines, and on the Web on a daily basis. It is time to put those powerful communicative strategies into the hands of social-minded individuals. What if it were possible to teach critical thinking skills as effectively as advertisers educate us in their product lines? This objective might be far-fetched, but what I am calling for here is a widespread program of resistance that fights fire with fire; a program that, for example, demystifies the tactics of persuasion and deception that circulate on the computer fashion scene.

Notes

[1.] Huhtamo, Erkki. "Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion." Critical Issues in Electronic Media. Ed. Simon Penney. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, p.171.

2.In Picture Theory, W.J.T. Mitchell defines the hypericon as "a kind of summary image [that] ... encapsulates an entire episteme, a theory of knowledge" (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994, p.49). I have extended the meaning of the term here and in other essays to include not only self-referential pictures (metapictures), but any artifacts produced in and for a visual culture, a culture that, in Mitchell's terms, has undergone a Pictorial Turn. The goal of this methodology is to mobilize the hypericon as a tool for generating, organizing, and disseminating knowledge about cultural processes and systems of power.

3. Jay Bolter, Remediation: Understanding New Media, Boston: MIT Press, 2000, p.23-24.

4. It could be posited that the entire Microsoft antitrust case is rooted in Microsoft's attempt to make the Windows interface more transparent by turning it into a portal for the Web.

5. The illusion of a transparent representation is, of course, central to the poststructuralist understanding of writing, which, in the words of Gayatri Spivak "is always impure and, as such, challenges the notion of identity, and ultimately the notion of the origin as 'simple'. It is neither entirely present nor absent, but is the trace resulting from its own erasure in the drive towards transparency" ("Translator's Preface," Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, p.xvi). In short, there is no such thing as transparent communication, not even in computer-mediated communication. Graphical user interfaces reveal traces of the culture and industry that created them. On the most superficial level, program icons present us with graphical cultural biases. More substantially, the iMac's translucent shell presents us with the entire industry's strategy of false transparency, which leads us to believe that we are in control while in truth our freedom is being compromised.

6. Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," Literature, media, information systems: essays, Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1997, p.150.

7. Kittler, 156.

8. Matthew Griffin and Susanne Herrmann. "Technologies of Writing: Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler. New Literary History 27.4 (1996): 731-742, p.740.

9. Griffin, p.731.

10. Kittler, p.162.

11. Kittler, p.162.

12. Lisa Guernsey, "Nebraska Students Get a Look at the Innards of the Internet," New York Times, 5 August, 1999, natl. ed., D7.

13. Guernsey, 7.

14. Culik, Hugh, "Proposal for the Institute for the Study of Electronic Culture," Detroit: 1999.

Marcel O'Gorman is Director of the new Electronic Critique Program at the University of Detroit Mercy. His essays and hypertext projects trace the discourse networks that flow through the circuits of media theory. Somewhere between the imagetexts of William Blake and Friedrich Kittler's media scenes, O'Gorman hopes to discover a mode of scholarly discourse more suitable to a digital/visual culture.