

Memories of Invisibility: Mobile Computing and the Culture of Browsing

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Power is bound by its very visibility
-Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

I remember how invisibility used to be drawn in comics and cartoons. Both Wonder Woman's invisible jet, an early stealth fighter, and the invisible woman of the Fantastic Four were drawn with dotted outlines. By not inking in these figures, animators let these Superheroes blend into the background and sneak up on the bad guys.

And I remember how I used to realize my superpowers of invisibility. I can remember shopping with my mother. Tagging along in the department stores of shopping malls, I would wander around the jungles of clothes and household goods. From my miniature position, all the racks of products formed mazes. If given enough time, I could find the secret rooms hidden within the racks themselves. I would vanish into these interior spaces.

I played in the mass of the market. From this perspective, I discovered the secret treasures of new garments. Most formal dresses and suits are strung with hidden packets of extra buttons and matching threads. These supplies dangle like fruit from the racks of clothing. Taking advantage of my invisibility and the presumed innocence of youth, I stealthily collected these spare parts and carried them back to the secret treasure troves I stored under my bed and other such hidden places.

Walter Benjamin recognized such childish acts of collection as a model for cultural critique. He saw the cabinets of curiosity that children construct as the embodiment of an

intuitive approach to discarded material. He understood that, “drawers must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt”(Buck-Morss, 263). As part of a collection, the fragment becomes newly significant. This dialectical position is the critical aspect of Benjamin’s method of collecting.¹ The curiosity of the child and his or her sensitivity are an example of a self-constructed, a playful approach to things. So how do we now play with these buttons? The trick the button teaches us is one of a material connection. Woven into one set of material, it can then be used to slip into another material and secure a hold between them.

This instance of child’s play is an example of the intuitive approach that I continue to apply to the new markets of late capitalism in the remainder of this text. This approach entails lingering in places that are built for speed, loitering in the lobbies and checkout lines of the modern *supermarket*. Such action is not taken in the spirit of resistance; rather it is aimed at discovery. As with any archaeology, the excavation of layers of commercial and digital imagery does not yield a clear picture of the economy. What is discovered are the gaps in the rhetorics of global capitalism and the *phantasmagoria of progress*. It is in these gaps, these hidden rooms comprised of ladies outer garments, that we can find a way out of a world governed by only one fiction.²

You Break it , You Buy it

Discourses of discovery are often embodied in shopping experiences. Advertising campaigns for malls and shopping centers invite customers to, “come and *discover* the Shady Pine Mall.” This pursuit of material encourages a tactile approach to commodities. Shirts are placed on racks that require rummaging. Knick-knacks are arranged on shelves stacked high with other options. This right to touch is only re-enforced with the occasional reminder, “You break it, you buy it.” This code of consumer responsibility for products is held up until the moment of purchase. At the checkout counter, the

cashier takes over responsibility for the goods, if only for an instance. This change of hands is the official gifting of the commodity to the consumer. This is when the product is wrapped, in “paper or plastic”, and given back to the consumer.

In exchange, the customer fills out a check, scans his or her credit card, or hands over the appropriate number of paper bills and coinage. While all of these actions may be equal monetarily speaking, they are certainly not the same physically. This movement of money as matter is often glossed over in abstract discussions of the flows of international capital. But this is not just nickels and dimes. The trickles of cash from credit cards and back pockets comprise an important part of the market economy.

At the checkout counter, the public was introduced to one of the earliest apparatuses of digital exchange: that between the register and credit card. This perverse coupling offers an entry into encrypted economies of desire that now include online shopping and “pay-at-the-pump” privileges. The credit card is most often imaged as a non-entity. It is purchasing power embodied. Its thin plastic form morphs instantly into the products of consumption. This commercial image of credit is interlaced with the new data streams of inter-networked computing. In this way, one’s unique credit card number forms part of the binary infinity of data. The new economy promises inclusion and non-work. Labor has van-

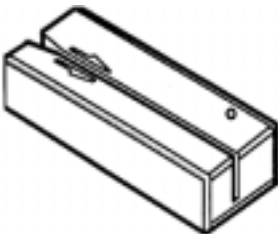


Figure 1: magnetic card scanner

ished behind the currency of exchange and the elaborate forms of commodity fetishism. But this image of effortlessly joining with the current is momentarily disrupted by the printed marks of the bill and receipt. These still statements are the remainder. They remind one of the finite nature of matter.

The task of scanning one's card has gradually migrated from the cashier to the consumer. Whether this move is towards a new sort of transparency of process or a step towards eliminating the cashier, i.e. labor, is unknown. What is important, here, is the physical action of scanning. The moments of rupture, when a card "doesn't want to read" are of particular interest. In these instances, the act of purchase is problematized. One is reminded that it is hard to give. The rush of purchase has been halted, stuttered. In the stillness, the cultural theorist Nadia Seremetakis recognizes a "moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen" (Seremetakis, 12). This gives us a moment to catch our breath.

Window Shopping

Now we can see the oft-ignored material form of data. The shape of early card readers is a forgotten moment in the history of technology. It is only with the complications of the 2000 presidential election that the public was reminded that computers began their lives as card readers. The discarded piece of paper, "the chad", is another remainder, a material that is thought only significant in terms of its absence. Where is this discarded matter to be found in the microscopic worlds of newer computers? The data is there, but it is hidden. Behind the friendly interfaces of online shopping malls, data lies in weight within an architecture of coding. This structure is invisible, insignificant, and incomprehensible to all but the expert. Nevertheless there are moments when the computer "crashes" and the screen "freezes". These are the instances of rupture, when the computer becomes mass and the hand is raised against it. These moments of stillness, just as with the demagnetized credit card, make us small before technology. Feeling small, we feel the materiality of what had passed as transparent operations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the frequent wait for data to download from networked computers.

In this most turn of the millenium phenomenon, the percentage-loaded bar fills to the steady rhythm of the heart beat. This animated graphic is the sign of a becoming. Slowly but steadily filled, it marks the arrival of data. The pleasure of reception is imminent no matter what the content. With online porn, this correlation of arrival with desire is the most explicitly narrated. Sites advertise themselves in terms of a speed/size ratio, e.g. 1000mb/1 min. What would you do with a gigabyte of porn? This mass of imagined flesh is unwieldy. Its sheer quantity trumps whatever its qualities.

The problem of grasping the significance of these matters arises as the part vanishes behind the whole. The singular file, whether photo, text, or whatever content is irrelevant as it stands in for the whole. This is witnessed in the iconography of desktops that has migrated into the computer monitor. Files and folders comprise the bureaucratic order. But these little bitmaps hide more than they reveal. "Windows" open only to disappear. So it is that we must find our way with other senses, feeling our way past the obstacles of the image.

So let us not look for a clear path, but rather feel our way into the screen performing a superficial excavation. The tactility of the mouse as instrument is our guide. The shuttling and clicking of this device entails a movement through digital space. The nature of the Internet enables a sort of random wandering; although it is in fact hard to avoid one's own well-worn paths and the logic of consumerism. While this tactile maneuvering is not normally divorced from vision, it can be. Blind navigation of online sites yields new directions. Rather than following the routinized paths of "bookmarks", we can follow blind links into Benjamin's "unexpected fields of action." Navigating blind is an act of critical ignorance. It is wandering in an online space meant for browsing.

Both supermarkets and online shopping sites sell their customers the paired set of infinite selection and absolute efficiency. The freedom to browse and the right to speedy service are the mottoes of the modern market place. I have shown how both real and virtual marketplaces de-emphasize

their very materiality through various rhetorics of efficiency and the implementation of digital technologies. In closing, I will show how these material and digital contradictions converge in the promise of mobile computing.



Figure 2: advertisement for microsoft software and compaq computers



Figure 3: advertisement for memory enhancement tapes

The *freedom* of mobile computing is not an escape from the confines of the home and office. It is in fact a collapsing of the home, office, and marketplace into the body of the citizen/worker. The ability to browse online anywhere is not the ability to go anywhere. The business traveler is confined to the hull of the airplane and the major metropolitan hubs, Chicago-LAX-JFK.

Here it is interesting to compare advertisements from two magazines for travelers. The first example comes from the May 2001 issue of *American Way: Trends for the Modern Traveler* published by American Airlines. The advertisement (Fig. 2) shows a late twentish man in a suit against a flat orange background with a text stating simply that he is his office. The tagline, “Get a more mobile notebook and get a more mobile you”, clarifies the basic equation, you are your computer.

The second advertisement comes from the June 1973 edition of *Holiday Inn Magazine for Travelers*, and sells the promise of perfect retention and automatic recall. The large font shouts, “NOW! Automatic Learning With: ‘THE INFORMATION MACHINE’ Yes, the world’s greatest minds-

coupled with the most powerful information scanning system ever devised by the mind of man-can help turn you into a walking encyclopedia!"(Fig. 3). Now the question that remains: what would you rather be, an office or a walking encyclopedia?

At this point a micro-history of the computer's introduction to the home is necessary in order to appreciate further the relationship between mobility, consumption, and digital devices. First it is helpful to remember how the television set was originally smuggled into the living room hidden with the frame of furniture. Cabinets couched the cathode ray tube in the warmth of wooden texture. This natural material has remained a sort of second skin for television sets. Long after the bulk of the television necessitated a wooden encasement, plastics still mimic the patterns of wood. By contrast, I have never seen a fake wood computer.

Computers originally occupied entire rooms. These machines were offices. They formed walls of data. Gradually, with the shrinkage of the microprocessor and memory, these computers became small enough to make their way into the home. These early models resembled the square containers of the offices from which they sprang. Since then, the molded plastics of monitors and the computer's other dangling parts have begun to morph outside these early beige boxes. The neutrality of beige has given way to the authority of black. And in their most recent transformation, computers have become encased in translucent bubbles.¹ This is the material equivalent of transparent software. Similarly, the thinning of monitors is part of a movement to disappear the object. The flat screen is the machine as window.

Through time the computer is vanishing before our very eyes. The realization of a complete disappearance is now billed as the prospect of mobile computing. The miniature computer, the laptop, and the handheld "palm-pilot" are the first signs of this escape. But how are we to visualize this vanishing. If advertising is again our guide, the future of computing can be seen in data-streams and a new geometry of

omnipresent information.² These economic flows form channels that promise to flood the entire globe with data. Rather than get lost in the endless abstractions of this global imagery, let us return to the matters at hand. The vanishing traces of televisions and computers have left us nowhere to go but into the screen. The pixel is literally the square root of this digital imagery. It is the part that forms the whole. As such, it is often ignored, left invisible within the image it constructs. When the pixel does appear it is read as the sign of artificiality. When this is unintended, as in online videos, the pixel is a marker of poor quality. Its visibility clouds the representational imagery. For this reason much of the work of laborers within imagery industries (e.g. film, television, print) is spent manipulating pixels to the point of invisibility. The tools these workers employ allow a microscopic penetration of the image. The pixel's disappearance is a process of miniaturization.

Likewise, blue and green occupy a favored place on the color wheel of digital imagery. These two colors, in their artificially pure forms, are easily eliminated. For this quality, they are the favored backdrops for filming scenes that are to be later digitally decontextualized. These techniques of vanishing are the backstage labor hidden behind dominant image regimes. So it is that a blue-green pixel is the perfect emblem of the disappeared, a new digital aura. The aura that Benjamin so prized and feared lost. It is the sure sign of an absent presence, an invisible field of vision, and a forgotten memory.

And at the end, we discover like Hansel and Gretel that the traces back to the beginning have vanished. In telling these stories of material at the turn of the millenium, I have sought to locate a set of new postures and positions. These occupy ruptures in the narratives of capitalism; they are the gaps in the story line, when one can feel the weight of the world around him or her. With time, these instances collect, piling up somewhere between memory and a cabinet of curiosity. There, the pixel, receipt, file, and button mingle. This collection of spare parts, of remainders reminds us of the material secrets hidden by dominant discourses and imagery. A sensitive, intuitive

method gives us access to the forgotten, the invisible. These invisibilities and forgotten memories are our secret weapons. They are the materials with which we can combat the powers that see.

NOTES

1. This method is most excessively displayed in the posthumously published *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's collection of quotes and research regarding the culture of *fin de siècle* Paris.
2. This fiction is the fiction of a post-Cold War world order, in which the logic of Capital is free to order the world efficiently and rationally.
3. The design of Apple's I-Mac line of personal computers utilizes translucent and florescent plastics to at once make the internal hardware visible and to de-emphasize its bulk.
4. The affinity for using the stock market ticker tape to represent this information is suggestive of the manner in which the economy has become a fixture of the advertising image regime. In other words, the rise and fall of stock options is no longer just an economic indicator. The stock market is a billboard for industry. It is the a-spatial home of global capital.

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