Animalisation, subjectivity and the Internet

Digital and virtual forms of culture are intensely choice-based. In the absence of meta-narrative, we are constantly being solicited as an agent of choice, between alternatives, to follow links. To examine this most modern of issues Fabian Schäfer turns to the mature traditions of philosophy. Distinguishing Japanese cultural critic Azuma Hiroki's concept of human and animal action, and the influential German philosopher Martin Heidegger's authentic and fallen selves, in terms of the notions of choice and reversibility, he poses the question of whether the subject of virtual choice is best understood in one context or the other.

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Fig. 1
Salvador Dalí
(1930/31): 'Tactile
Cinema'. Illustration
in a letter to Louis
Buñuel. Reprinted
in: Augustin Sanchez
Vidal. 1988. Buñuel,
Lorca, Dalí. El enigma
sin fin. Barcelona:
Planeta.

IN THEIR AUGUST 2008 ISSUES, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* and the American journal *The Atlantic* published cover stories on the dangers of internet-based communication and knowledge. Both magazines posed the question, 'is Google or, more generally, the Internet making us stupid?' The discourse splits into two camps of critics and enthusiasts. On the one hand, it is emphasised that the Internet is leading to the occurrence of new simultaneous modes of perception, a democratisation of knowledge, and unprecedented creativity by its users; on the other hand, the loss of critical reason or the capacity for remembering, rising attention deficit, the loss of a common culture existing through the reading of books, and the intellectual passivity of internet users is harshly criticised. Moreover, the critical camp often psychopathologises the effects of the use of the Internet. Proponents of this faction agree that spending five to six hours on the Internet per day, searching through a cornucopia of texts, videos or music or writing emails and instant messages, can cause social behavioural disorders such as an anti-social attitude or an unwillingness to communicate.

Philosophical aspects of databases, the Internet and hypertext
It is the effects of the Internet on our cognitive abilities and reading capability that particularly unsettles the critics. In his editorial for the *The Atlantic,* American writer Nicholas Carr complains that persistent Internet use is influencing his capacity for concentration and contemplation. According to Carr, he was 'once (...) a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now [he] zip[s] along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.'[1] The reason for this effect upon our cognition is based on the most important feature of the Internet or electronic databases – the fact that they are based on interactivity or HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) in particular.

However, how the interactivity of hypertext affects its users, and in how far they are capable of handling the simultaneous existence and accessibility of documents or websites, remains questionable. Specifically, it is the inner restlessness that one feels when faced with the decision between two or more possibilities which complicates the absorption of knowledge by means of interactive media. Links can be compared to junctions or options, or, as Martin Heidegger once put it, to possibilities on which *Dasein* ('existence') can project itself onto. In this sense, the networked structure of the Internet or a database might be described as a miniature of the possibilities-for-Being (*Seinkönnen*) of *Dasein*. As in real life, deciding in favour of one possibility (namely a link) necessarily means to negate others.

'Distraction', 'squirreling' and 'fallen' uses of the Internet
However, it is only in what Heidegger called the 'authentic' (*eigentlich*) mode of Being (*Seinsweise*) that *Dasein* can ''choose' [or] win itself' and thereby 'be' itself (*Selbstsein, Being-one's-Self*) through an existential projection in the choice of 'its ownmost possibilities.'[2] Most times, Heidegger admits, the *Dasein* is determined by the possibilities given by the Man and is therefore not situated in the mode of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) but in one of 'fallenness' (*Verfallenheit*). Speaking in the words of Heidegger, the possibility of 'falling' seems to be relatively high in the case of the interlinked structure of the Internet or databases if compared to the reading of a linear-structured book.

'Surfing' the Internet or browsing through databases can be described as what Walter Benjamin termed 'reception in a state of distraction.' (*Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*).[3] This mode of perception, according to Benjamin, is based on the 'tactile quality' (*taktile Qualität*) of the object of perception – in Benjamin's case, movies and photographs.[4] This tactility of visual media Benjamin describes is even emphasised by the interactivity of the Internet or databases. As Nicholas Carr's editorial in *The Atlantic* rightly asserts, hyperlinks, '[u]nlike footnotes', 'don't merely point to related works; they propel you toward them.' The perception of the Internet is, in Benjamin's terms, one of 'tactile appropriation' that is based on 'habitualisation' rather than on 'attention.'[5] To Heidegger, who used the term '*Zerstreuung*' (distraction) in a comparable way, distraction is based on 'curiosity' (*Neugier*), a mode of fallenness. Other than *Verstehen* (understanding) as the self-projection of the being on its ownmost possibilities, curiosity is merely based on 'seeing' (*Sehen*). In this mode of being, 'Dasein seeks what is far away simply in order to bring it close to itself in the way it looks. Dasein lets itself to be taken along (*mitnehmen*) solely by the looks of the world.'[6]

The dangers of 'fallen' or 'distracted' Internet use are substantiated by the findings of a recent study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London (UCL).[7] As part of a five-year programme, researchers analysed the behaviour of visitors to two popular research sites, one operated by the British Library and one by a UK educational consortium, that provides access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information. The results showed that people using the sites exhibited 'a form of skimming activity,' hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they had already visited. They typically read one or two pages of an article or book before jumping to another site. Sometimes they saved a long article, but there's no evidence that they ever went back and actually read it. Apparently, many Internet users seem to react to links as 'possibilities' in Heidegger's sense or the flood of information provided by the Internet with an individual 'databasification' of information retrieved from larger databases – a behaviour that the scholars of UCL called 'squirreling.'

Internet, databases and animalisation
In a series of lectures held in 1929-30, Heidegger distinguished between animal and man by describing the animal's mode of being as one of 'poverty in world' (*Weltarmut*) and that of man as 'world-forming' (*weltbildend*). Accordingly, one might argue that the *Weltarmut* of the animal (i.e. its 'captivation' (*Benommenheit*) and 'absorption' (*Eingenommenheit*) by its environment) bears parallels to the curiosity and fallenness of *Dasein* that is, as already mentioned, taken along [*mitnehmen*] solely by the looks of the world.[8]

With regard to the 'animalisation' or 'fallenness' of *Dasein* to a tactile and habitualised information seeking behaviour in the digital age, it is valuable to take into account the contemporary philosophical discourse on the phenomenon of *otaku* culture in Japan, since much of the public debate on the positive and negative sides of the Internet parallels the discourse on *otaku* culture in Japan. *Otaku* is a Japanese term that refers to people with obsessive interests in various Japanese subcultures, particularly manga, anime, science fiction, or computer games. The *otaku* are often psychopathologised as being anti-social, uncommunicative, and self-absorbed. Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki, however, saw value in analysing the *otaku* from the perspective of their pioneering role in the 'information society'.

In his book *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai* (2001, Animalising Postmodern: Japanese Society as Seen from the Perspective of Otaku), Azuma considers the *otaku* phenomenon not as particularly Japanese, but as an inflection 'of the global trend of postmodernization'.[9] With regard to French philosopher Alexandre Kojève's neo-Hegelian distinction between two forms of 'post-historical existence' – the 'animalisation' of American society based on consumerism and the highly formalised and aesthetised 'snobbism' of the Japanese – , Azuma asserts that *otaku* culture consists of a 'two-tiered mode of consumption' that reflects the two-layered structure of the postmodern itself[10] (See figs. 3 & 4). Other than the two layers of the modern world-image – the 'depth' of 'grand narratives' (namely ideals, ideology) and a 'surface' of many 'small narratives' – Azuma claims that, with reference to Loytard's notion of the end of grand narratives, the latter were replaced by a 'grand database' in the postmodern world-image (*sekaizō*).

Fig. 2

Illustration from a 13th century Hebrew Bible, Ambrosian Library, Milan. According to Giorgio Agamben, the attributing of an animal head to the remnant of Isreal in this scene, which represents the messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day and thus the end of humanity, suggests 'that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature.' The Open: Man and Animal. Transl. Giorgio Agamben, Kevin Attell. Stanford University Press 2004.
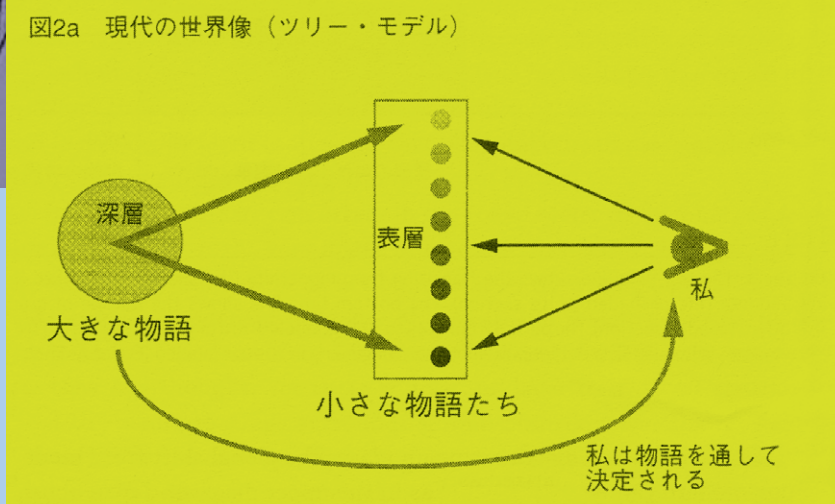

Fig. 3

Azuma 1: the world-image of the modern age: the tree model. The shaded circle is labelled 'Depth' and associated with 'Grand Narratives'. The centre rectangle is labelled 'Surface' and associated with 'Small Narratives.' The eye-shaped figure (right) is labelled 'I', which, the figure notes, is 'determined through narratives'. (Azuma 2007 [2003]). Courtesy of University of Minnesota Press.
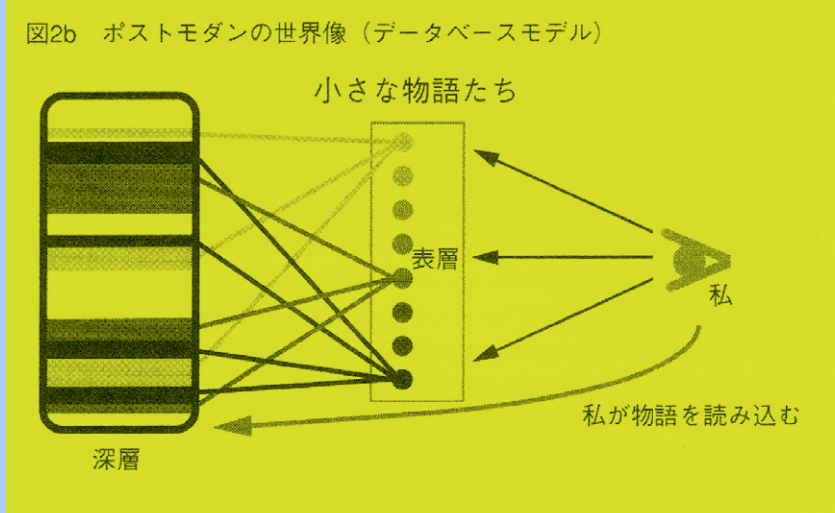

Fig. 4

Azuma 2: the world-image of the postmodern age: the database model. The striped rectangle (left) is labelled 'Depth'. The centre rectangle is labelled 'Surface' and associated with 'Small Narratives'. The eye on the right is labelled 'I', and is the one who 'reads into (inputs) the narratives'. (Azuma 2007 [2003]). Courtesy of University of Minnesota Press.

Whereas the modern era formed a structure in which a single grand narrative or ideal controlled the diverse small narratives and cultural and social criticism consisted of analysing grand narratives as reflected within various small narratives, in the postmodern, people may grasp any number of small world-images.[11]

Azuma claims that one can identify two ways in which the *otaku* deal with this new world-image. He calls one the 'animalesque' (*dōbutsuteki*) side of database consumption; that is the solitude and passive consumption of the many small narratives of computer games, anime, or manga that are merely based on 'combinations' (*kumiawase*) of self-referential elements from the grand database. Database consumption also has a second, active or 'humanesque' side, because *otaku* actively intervene in received commodities by breaking down the narratives into their compounds (for computer games these are screenplay, character, background or for manga it is the single 'sensitive elements' (*moe yōso*) that characters are composed of), and thereby get access to the database that lies in the 'depth' behind the small narrations and 'recreate' (*niji sōsaku*) from it their own narrations or pictures.[12] This 'double structure' (*nisō kōzō*) of deconstruction and reconstruction prompts Azuma to interpret *otaku* culture as a deconstructivist and, thus, subversive form of cultural reception that brings it close to a deconstructivist method in contemporary literary theory.[13] Azuma bases this assertion also on the fact that to the *otaku* it doesn't matter any longer if the 'author' of the small narratives they consume is a professional - '*author*ized' by one of the big manga or anime publishers - or an amateur who publishes his self-made anime or manga in one of the many fanzines (*dōjinshi*) or on the Internet.

Internet, databases and pedagogy

What can we conclude from Azuma's positive remarks on the new media literacy of the *otaku* with regard to what I have defined rather negatively as the 'fallenness' of the Internet user? In any case, the suggestive question posed by *The Atlantic* or *Der Spiegel*, about whether Google, the Internet, databases, or the new flood of information in general, is making us stupid *per se*, seems to be pointing in the wrong direction. Even Heidegger's or Benjamin's perspective on distracted or habitualised perception is not as pessimistic as I have described it here. In fact, they agree that curiosity or tactile appercep-tion aren't necessarily something that should be condemned from the outset. According to Heidegger, curiosity, which is non-'anticipatory' (namely 'non-self-projecting') and thus merely 'awaiting' (*gewärtigend*), 'has its natural justification [...][and] belongs to the everyday kind of being of Da-Sein and to the understanding of being initially prevalent.'[14] Similarly, Benjamin reminds us that perception in a state of distraction is important, since 'the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.' Obviously, if applied to our cognition of the interactive structure of the Internet, Heidegger's and Benjamin's perspectives refer to two ways of dealing with electronic and interlinked texts. First, the 'authentic' *Seinsweise* of understanding and contemplation, one that, to borrow hypertext theorist Jay D. Bolter's words, looks '*through* the text' and thus grasps and understands the meaning of the narration 'behind' the text. (This is what Azuma describes as the 'deconstructivist' and 'humanesque' side of *otaku* culture). Secondly, a 'fallen' or 'animalised' mode, in which the user has to 'look *at* the text, as a series of possibilities [or links, F.S.] that he or she (...) can activate.' Accordingly, they are to a lesser extent two *modes* of usage – one active and 'authentic' and one passive and 'in-authentic' – than two different *strategies* of dealing with electronic and networked information – namely explorative browsing ('power browsing') on the one hand and the purposeful search for a particular document and its subsequent contemplative reading on the other. As for the latter, it is important for the user not to lose sight of his – in Heidegger's words – 'ownmost projection' that has to guide a search; for the former, it is even necessary to let oneself be 'taken away' by one's curiosity, governed merely by the possibilities given by the structure of homepages or databases. With regard to university pedago-gies, however, it is necessary to teach students the sharp distinction between these two modes of dealing with digitised texts and knowledge that is based on the particular goal one pursues. Moreover, it will be of particular importance to teach contemplative and analytic reading to a generation of *otaku* and Google users that possesses a highly developed digital literacy but is beginning to lack basic reading and writing skills.

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3. Benjamin, Walter 1977 [1936]. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
4. ibid.
5. For instance, the tactility of hyperlinks is particularly obvious if a phrase of a text appears as a hyperlink (i.e. blue font colour) but does not have the respective function. Only through the *Unzuhandenheit* (un-readiness-to-hand) of a link *as a link* do we become aware of the haptic interactivity of hypertext described by Benjamin as 'tactile appropriation'.
6. Heidegger 1993 [1927]
7. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/downloads/
8. Heidegger based this distinction on the fact that an animal is essentially captivated and wholly absorbed by its environment (its *Umgebung*, as opposed to the *Umwelt* of *Dasein*) and thus can only behave other than how a human being does. Heidegger, Martin (1983 [1929/30]). 'Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit'. In: *ibid.: Gesamtausgabe II. Abteilung Vorlesungen 1923-1944. Vol. 29/30.* Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann
9. Azuma, Hiroki. 2001. *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: Otaku kara mita Nihon shakai.* Kodansha: Tokyo
10. ibid.
11. ibid.
12. *Machinima* ('machine cinema'), the art of using a computer game to create a movie, is a similar active form of 'recreation' by computer users. Cf. http://www.machinima.com
13. Hypertext theorist Jay D. Bolter emphasized the relationship between Derridarian poststructuralism and hypertext as well. According to Bolter, based on the rhizomatic structure of the internet or databases, electronic texts don't have a centre or margins because of their 'deconstructive reading': "The reader can follow paths through the space in any direction, limited only by constraints established by the author. No path through the space need be stigmatized as marginal." Cf. Bolter, Jay D. 1991. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing.* Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum
14. Heidegger 1993 [1927]
15. Hiroki, Azuma. 2007 [2003]. 'The Animalization of Otaku Culture'. In: Luning, Frenchy (ed.). *Mechademia 2. Networks of Desire.* Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.