Interface: information overlay

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There would be no economy without information. And today there would be no trade routes without the electro-optical pathbreaking of the international information economy. These flows of images and alphanumeric text across copper wire, fiber-optic cables, and satellites to their provisional destinations on monitors not only track but often guide the flows of people, goods, and money that they appear to represent. People and things are set in motion, displaced, by the super-mobility of information --- whether news, capital, or commercial data. It often comes down to a question of differentials in speed: the movement of vast quantities of data around the world can take place at the speed of light, effectively allowing it to govern the slower movements of commodities and workers. The politics of information today reside in the question of access to or accountability for the mobility of data in these networks.

Where do we meet these flows? How to account for what is called the **interface** between bodies, of things and people, and the information that codes and recodes them? The curious fact is that the information networks at once represent something somewhere else ("people translated into data," as they put it in the case of Max Headroom) and at the same time cannot simply be decoded back into what is represented, at least not without distortion, invention, and leftovers. The flow of information constitutes something like a space of its own, a folded zone into which cuts are made to enable interaction. The condition of the cut is the surface of the screen or page, and mapping the architecture of information has to begin not with the anachronistic attempt to render data space in three dimensions but rather with effort to chart the layered movement of information across the flatness of the monitor. Of course, any mode of representing data is just that, a translation of a translation, and the textual or graphical interface on a screen has no particular priority. But the banal flatness of the display screen reminds us that it hides not a plenitude of depth and the richness of a world at one's fingertips -- it hides nothing -- but that it makes available a complex system of relays and differences, a veritable network of layers and translations, whether simply optical or invisibly fiberoptical. Structural asymmetry of the network: speed of light and effect of immediacy, with reflection and deflection, delay and relay ... **information overlay**.

No information comes "raw," especially real-time data feeds, but rather always arrives packaged in an interface. Computerized information systems like Dow Jones Telerate offer their users real-time data, and analysis, for markets around the world in stocks, bonds, debt, currencies, and commodities, as well as

economic statistics, news, weather, and other information. This network and its competitors are in widespread use today, and the feeds are diverted here in order to investigate what they represent, or fail to represent, and how they function. **Interface: information overlay** is made up of two Telerate data feeds, Matrix and Teletrac, displayed over two independent networks. One allows multiple windows to show constantly updating data on worldwide markets, from the yen in Frankfurt to silkworm cocoon futures in China, from Brazilian debt to the New York Stock Exchange ticker. At any given moment the composite screen offers a highly selective map of the international economy, and makes possible certain kinds of interventions in it. The other is an analytic system that reconfigures these real time data feeds into graphical form, with a wide array of charting functions that enable both synchronic and diachronic analysis. Here the high-speed flow of information, arriving and being processed around the clock, travels on its own networks through the gallery of objects, marking out some of the pathways for the movements of the global economy to follow.

Video display screens have today acquired an omnipresence that renders them obvious, virtually invisible. **Interface: information overlay** relies on a minimal version of a military technology called "head-up display" (HUD), another version of which is at work in teleprompters, an imaging device used to project information onto a transparent surface in daylight. Data from a monitor are relayed through mirrors and optically focused on the clear screen at a remote point, obligating the user (originally an aircraft pilot) to focus on the view beyond in order to read or see at the same time the information on the screen. Here the transparent screens dematerialize the depth of the monitor into the simple flatness of the image it displays, a text made only of light, and superimpose that inscription, as another layer in a network of relays, onto the world of walls and people and objects.

"Immediacy, ubiquity, omnivoyance are the elements of the politics of tomorrow. For the moment, no one controls real time. No one is seriously asking the question of the effects it induces. [...] There is no politics possible at the scale of the speed of light. Politics is the time of reflection. Today, we no longer have time to reflect, the things that we see have already taken place. And we have to react immediately... Is a real-time democracy possible? An authoritarian politics, yes. But what is proper to democracy is the sharing of power. When there is no longer the time to share, what do we share?"

Paul Virilio, *L'écran du désert.*