Book Review

Origins and social meanings of algorithmic culture

Abstract

The social sciences have much to say about the cybernetic turn our lives have taken thanks to the use and intermediation of software applications spread through the Internet. The book Algorithmic Culture before the Internet by Ted Striphas takes the burden of explaining with originality and expertise the deep cultural history of this epochal turn, offering us useful reflections to interpret and make sense of the current expansion of our relations with the mechanic world.

Keywords: culture, algorithm, algorithmic culture, computation

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Introduction

The mass diffusion and adoption of information and communication technologies that occurred in the decades of Internet's advent have eventually contributed to delineate a set of practices and cultural meaning shared by billions of people. Due to the intertwining – in the 21st century ever more closely – between the phenomena of computing and those of culture we are now living in a new human and social condition. The definition of "algorithmic culture" is then intended to designate precisely the poignancy that programmatic processing of symbolic practices is taking on in such an important field for human communities.

Algorithmic intermediation

Indeed, much of what we do today, in terms of action and thinking, is intermediated by platforms and applications functionally shaped by the mathematical logic of software (the algorithms). Ted Striphas, a professor and scholar of cultural studies, who is among the sharpest pioneers in highlighting the profound cultural and social spillovers of the intersection of computational techniques and culture, now wanted to return to the topic with his last book Algorithmic Culture before the Internet.

As the author himself states, there have been many studies in recent years able to critically analyze the many aspects and implications that digital developments are having in our lives in terms of behavior, expression, understanding and various conditioning. However, at the same time, he notes the rapid habituation – we might say naturalization – regarding the "terms and conditions" under which all of this has come about – in Striphas' words, we have not "come to terms with how we come to terms" (p. 245) for living together in an algorithmic culture. This condition is taken so much for granted that the algorithm itself aproblematically enters as a protagonist figure in popular family films – think of Disney's Ralph Breaks the Internet[1] or even in more recent TV series, among other see Mrs. Davis.[2]

Slippages in the frameworks

Yet, the transition we are experiencing is remarkable. Striphas defines algorithmic culture as both "the use of computational processes to sort, classify, and prioritize people, places, objects, and ideas" and "the repertoires of thought, conduct, expression, and feeling that flow from and back into those processes" (p. 5). The welding of computation and culture then marks the beginning of an important new phase of "reorientation" of practices and meanings in which today so many people find themselves engaged. In a relatively short period of time "a digital army consisting of 'automatic critics and censors'" has assumed a growing responsibility in helping us "in discovering personal and professional connections, products and services,

news and knowledge, taste and opinions" replacing human cultural intermediaries such as "critics, clerks, recruiters, matchmakers, scholars, teachers, editors, curators, compilers, and librarians" (p. 4). To talk about and investigate algorithmic culture then means having to enter in "the role of computers, large data sets, and mathematics in establishing, maintaining, and transforming the frameworks by means of which human beings orient our judgments, actions, and dispositions toward one another and toward the surrounding world" (p. 6).

Culture and computation, a long genesis

Faced with such high stakes the author is unwilling to take anything for granted, starting with the very defining sense of the terms culture and algorithm, and their fusional mix. The problem then is to penetrate, with a non-deterministic approach, into the history and nature of the intertwining of culture and computation – a relationship that both comes from afar and is "a moving target" (p. 7), reverberating in the actuality of our human and social issues that are as unresolved as they are overlooked.

As an expert in cultural studies, Striphas decided to follow a great precursor in the field, Raymond Williams, using his teachings and methodologies to stimulate and renew a heuristic methodology – following the evolution in language and common experience of the use of particular keywords – in order to bring out what we have difficulty in bringing into focus yet. Starting, not surprisingly, from the very word "culture" – one of the most complicated terms of reference in our history to define, as well as its very relationship with technology. Using generously a vast array of social sciences – sociology, anthropology, literary studies, comparative philology, history of mathematics – Striphas is so able to help us gain a deeper and more comprehensive perspective on current affairs through the reconstruction of some key points that have marked a past – even a very distant one – which has never completely passed – think of intertwining, nourishment and concealment operations between Western and Islamic culture. In his words, it is like repeating the journey on an escalator that sets out to rotate in reverse "instead of traveling up, the motor shifts into reverse, and you travel down. As your point of departure recedes, you start to discover what precedes and surrounds it, and gradually you grasp the broader context within which your starting point – your present – exists" (p. 228).

Countering the storytelling of engineers

In this we find the seed of another famous metaphor useful to counteract the predominant storytelling of engineers of cyberspace. Faced with the scenario of the newness (the high-tech disruption) that the digital turn has favored and in which we find ourselves entangled among hopes, conveniences and shadowy heaps of anxiety, Striphas's

[3] witty work recovers the intellectual sensitivity of many authoritative scholars of cultural phenomena. Among many, we remember Walter Benjamin's teachings about how much there is repetition in the new that is born. Drawing inspiration from the angel painted by Klee – in his imagery "the angel of history",[4] which advances into the future with its gaze looking backwards – he invites us to reflect critically on the construction of "the rapture of the unique, the new, the yet unborn" because "is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived".[5]

Acknowledgments

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

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5. Benjamin W. Agesilaus Santander (Second Version). In ID., Selected writings. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; 2005;2(2):714–716.