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The degree zero of digital interfaces: a semiotics of audiovisual archives online

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Abstract: Interfaces have partially replaced editors. They now administer and have industrialized the processes of content circulation. Web platforms mediatize cultural memory and one example of this is that of online audiovisual archives which are a paradigmatic case involving interfaces mediating our image of the past. Therefore, their role as an enunciative framework is clearly worthy of thought and study. We will thus use a semiotic approach based on the starting hypothesis that digital interfaces shape our belief systems through a discursive framing of content to which they give access. By analyzing two case studies, we will argue that the transparency of interfaces appears to recall the notion of “mechanical objectivity” and thus refashion the reliability of the archives. However, a final counter-analysis of a document read in the framework of an on-site consultation invites us to reshape our considerations and enlarge the perspective from semiotic visual analysis to include the social processes linked to the publication of digital heritage.

Keywords: audiovisual archives; belief; digital heritage; digital media; disinformation; fake news; interfaces; objectivity; semiotics; YouTube

1 Introduction

Digital interfaces are most often perceptible, in visual terms at least. YouTube, for instance, provides us with videos through a device managed by the user and we all understand the importance of the algorithms that hide or make content visible. Clearly there can be no doubt that mediation is there and is perceptible as such. If we take the practical elements of media such as the mouse or the keyboard into account rather than just the graphic elements, we can only assume that mediation is not

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disguised for the user.¹ The YouTube interface requires considerable effort as a space for practice and, although it can be quickly mastered by the user, it nevertheless remains a necessity for accessing audiovisual content. And yet, this mediation does not seem to take responsibility for the enunciative dimension of the content displayed. In other words, it is often perceived as neutral from the standpoint of meaning. A considerable gap seems to exist between the content displayed and the interface displaying it. The platform merely makes content accessible to us. It transmits rather than communicates, and does not seem to be part of the meaning of the broadcast content. The paratextual elements of a document published online, like the title and description, may be the only factors considered to be determinant in interpreting the document. Most of the literature in digital studies has examined the influence of the medium on cultural practices and the esthetic dimension of digitization: the notions of relocation and remediation are an example of these viewpoints (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Casetti 2015). From a semiotic perspective, these phenomena can be seen as examples of reframing and genuine discursive focalizations. We will thus attempt to determine the effects of the interface as an enunciative practice, or a re-enunciation of the content displayed (Colas-Blaise 2018). We will examine the issue of digitized audiovisual archives, and thus question historical documents published online. Archives have a social impact on cultural memories, and studying their mediatization helps us understand how complex cultural memories are built through digitization (Hoskins 2009). There is an increasing amount of audiovisual archive material in media spaces (Ernst 2013). This phenomenon influences what Bernard Stiegler calls “collective protentions” and thus also the collective horizons for the future (Stiegler 2018). The role of interfaces has become of considerable importance since the “archival turn” – the digitization and online publication of digital heritage (de Leeuw 2012; Doueihy 2011). These images make the past visible and archival documents thus have a special role to play as memorial inscriptions, which show a privileged link with the past. They keep traces of the past and their apparent authenticity is fundamental for consolidating our belief in it. Our projections are based on the past and are expectation horizons concerning the future (Derrida 1995). Studying the semiotic role of interfaces as new mediations of cultural memory is therefore important if we are to understand how cultural identities are formed. We will first propose the hypothesis that interaction and meaning are linked since a way of interacting with content may constitute an interpretative mode. We will then analyze two case studies of audiovisual archives remediated on YouTube in which the interaction produces specific effects, like the anonymization of images and the confusion of genres. Next, we shall attempt to

¹ “The computer instantiates a practice not a presence, an effect not an object. In other words, if cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic” (Galloway 2012: 22).

define the notion of digital objectivity as one possible semiotic result of interactive mediation through web platforms. Finally, a counter-analysis – the observation of how a digitized record is consulted through a platform in situ at France’s National Audiovisual Institute (Ina) – will invite us to adopt a complementary standpoint.

2 On interfaces and belief

This article explores the strange paradox between the enunciative camouflage of an element, in this case the interface, and the fact that this interface is actually visually and perceptibly present. This inconsistency seems to indicate a difference between perception and interpretation, or embodiment and narration. The seminal text “Remediation” by Richard Bolter and Jay David Grusin uses a fairly traditional dialectic of aesthetics studies namely the contrast between the visual presence of the representative regime and the transparency of representation. In the audiovisual field, we refer to a dichotomy between an editing practice that makes itself visible, reminding us of its role as a spectator by denouncing the artifice of fiction, and a transparent edit aimed at giving viewers the actions filmed without mediation, or, better still, which uses a rhetorical strategy aimed at remaining hidden so the spectator does not notice it. Bolter and Grusin apply these esthetic terms to the relationship to media and speak about the presence and transparency of interfaces. Their two paradigms – transparent immediacy and hypermediation – are of course rhetorical strategies in which mediation is always ontologically present and is even the condition of viewing but is hidden in esthetic terms. They also explicitly speak of “visual styles” and insist on the perceptual dimension of this shaping.

This dichotomy must be looked at through a heuristic lens to effectively understand media relations. Hypermediation and transparent immediacy make a good starting point to understanding how interfaces can disguise themselves. Consequently, we may refer to interfaces that are hidden through rhetorical and visual strategies to the extent that this camouflage may prevent the user from being aware of their editorial role. However, our main point here is that the kind of presence we want to understand is not just perceptive in nature. Most of the interfaces we use in the digital regime are hypermediations which are visible, present and not transparent however their semiotic role is not clearly evident for the user. The digital mediation’s enunciative role is mostly disguised even if the user is aware of its presence. YouTube displays videos and the website, its algorithms or the way we access content have been thoroughly examined, but there has been less thought about the way it intervenes in the discursive dimension of video content. Interfaces are present and yet they are perceived as non-epistemically

important – a place of power for digital mediations (see the notion of “trivialité”: Jeanneret 2014).

3 Regimes of interaction and regimes of belief

Our hypothesis will be that the role of interfaces as a way of interacting with content may constitute a regime of belief that frames content and actualizes some interpretative paths.

Eric Landowski analyzed the interaction between a subject and the other (or another subject) from a semiotic point of view to theorize different regimes of interaction. As relational practices, these regimes may produce effects of meaning with meaning produced from the starting point of a practical relation. The idea that an interactive practice could generate an interpretative mode is similar to the notion of genre as an element which constitutes a horizon of expectation. The interaction may constitute a sort of genre, which frames content and directs interpretation in a certain way. Landowski considered four regimes of interaction: manipulation – making another actor do something; programming – an interaction based on pre-established rules; chance – where randomness prevails; and adjustment – based on the mutual exchange between the interacting actors (Landowski 2005). Manipulation means using the other actor like in the relationship between teacher and student, for instance; programming means following certain procedures which are independent from the specific interaction (the kind of interaction between subjects that we may find in a game, for example); chance is an unpredictable interaction (unexpectedly meeting another person); and adjustment is a shared interaction in which one actor does not prevail over the other (as in the case of a dance, for instance). This classification reflects ways of seeing an interaction – heuristic modes – and not a real typology, which means that we can find all these dimensions within a single interaction.

Each regime can be used to analyze the interaction a user has with the YouTube interface, for instance. Here the poles we consider are the user and the interface. We may use YouTube as an instrument to find what we are interested in (manipulation); however, our exchanges are programmed by the rules of the system (programming); serendipity may bring us to documents that we would have never found otherwise (chance); and the interface adapts to our profile through recommendation algorithms that follow our search and visualization history (adjustment; Cardon 2015). These four modalities will help us in our analysis of the two case studies. We will see that interaction leads to a regime of belief that seems to confer a status of objectivity to the proposed documents. We will argue that this is a form of digital or computational objectivity, based on the interface’s potential to interact. Our study will be

focused on two institutions specialized in the conservation and distribution of audiovisual archives, the French National Audiovisual Institute (Ina) and the Italian Istituto Luce, with their online platforms on YouTube. We will observe the role of the globalization and industrialization of a mediated memory in the framework of what has been called the “platform paradigm” (Burgess 2015). YouTube is a global platform, used by two different national archives, whose histories and ways of distributing archives online are similar and can be compared. These examples can be used, from a methodological point of view, as paradigmatic cases in the sense discussed by Agamben (2009). Agamben interpreted Foucault’s notion of paradigm and posited that a case can be used to interpret the problematic context that produced it. If a given context produced such a case then it can be used to shed light on that environment to better understand it. Our two case studies are thus symptomatic instances of this problematic topic. The final counter-example will help us to isolate patterns and define general tendencies.

4 A case of fake history

Istituto Luce operates a channel on YouTube called Cinecittà Luce. The channel shows an interesting playlist of newscasts from the 1930s called *Cronache dall’Impero* (Chronicles from the Empire). It is a series of propaganda movies from the fascist period about Italian colonies. An auto-ethnographic approach is useful for describing the viewing experience when visiting the channel. A video captured our attention on 17 April 2018 namely a report from 1936 entitled “Cronache dall’Impero da Mogadiscio.”² The 2-min report talks about an Italian governor (General Santini) arriving in Somalia. Typically of Luce reports, pompous music and a reporter’s voice play over the shots of the governor parading before the troops at the airport with some institutional salutations exchanged between Ethiopian and Italian soldiers. However this short film shows the complexity of the mediations which we usually encounter when watching images from the past in some kind of a naturalized way. This footage was produced in 1936 by the Istituto Luce which was then the propaganda arm of the fascist regime. It was archived and digitized by an institution with the same name today but which does not have the same objectives and intentions. It went from being a producer and broadcaster to being a heritage institution. The Luce logo and time code are burned into the video. All Luce videos have this time code, which must have been added during the passage of the original film to Betacam. The YouTube platform also shows the name of the account that posted the video (Cinecittà Luce) and the publication date (June 15, 2012). Underneath the video there

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ki973DicCo>.

is also a title, commentary, and credits that were obviously absent from the original 1936 report. There is a multitude of layers of mediation namely the platform, the YouTube channel, the institution that digitizes and preserves the archives, and the producer of the original report. They are historical, professional, technical layers which are also authoritative in nature. The reliability of archival records is judged by the presence of some iconic elements from the institution that preserves these records. For example, the presence of the logo is seen as “trustworthy” and elicits a sense of confidence in the user. It is believed that these archives were not manipulated or modified by Istituto Luce.

However, similar videos suggested by YouTube’s algorithms attracted our attention, particularly two videos in the right-hand column of the interface called “La Guerra d’Etiopia” (“The War of Ethiopia”) and “Colonialismo: le verità nascoste” (“Colonialism: the hidden truths”). For information, this auto-ethnographic example is linked to a specific profile and date and we know that recommendation algorithms lead to the right column changing according to the IP address, YouTube profile, and so forth. The first film is a re-edit recounting the story of the fascist war in Ethiopia. It was shot as a documentary and does not seem to have any particularly political stance. During this visit to YouTube we did actually not notice straight away that we had left the official channel of Istituto Luce and passed to a content author’s unverified account. More precisely, the author, “Studio del Bianco,” based in the Italian town of Fano, seems to produce historical documentaries. His website offers an interview with an expert and “teacher” who studies the poet Ezra Pound. This poet’s collusion with fascism is well known, especially in Italy, where his name is even used in an extreme right-wing movement (Casa Pound). It takes a rather detailed search to find the web page of this photographic studio. The fact that the video is suggested by the algorithm next to the Istituto Luce videos is somewhat concerning as we stumbled upon it as if it were a reliable document without realizing that the channel watched was no longer that of the institute’s. Even if viewers do notice the change, a logo appears on the screen from the archival document but of course the author is no longer the same. The least we can say is that the multitude of mediations blurs the enunciator’s visibility. We do not know if the author has just uploaded an archival document taken from elsewhere or if the footage was manipulated before being posted, nor do we know the document’s real origins. The fact that the difference between a verified video and an unverified one is not particularly clear is even more problematic for users who navigate these pages without paying close attention.

The second video, called “Colonialismo: le verità nascoste,” announces straightaway its conspiracy theorist’s standpoint. The author, “NeroItalico” (which makes reference to the paramilitary Blackshirts in fascist Italy) clearly displays his political orientation and the title claims there are “hidden truths” or secrets that

need revealing as in most conspiracy theories. The user does not hide his leanings. Among his publications, we find a video entitled “Il fascismo è per sempre” (‘fascism is forever’), which has been taken down by YouTube. The use of archives is very similar to the use of documents in most of what is usually called “fake news” today. This kind of content is often based on the use of authentic archival documents which have been manipulated or misinterpreted by the author. A recent European report on these issues avoids the term “fake news,” stating that the real problem is disinformation, “which involves content that is not actually or completely ‘fake’ but fabricated information blended with facts, and practices that go well beyond anything resembling ‘news’ to include some forms of automated accounts used for astroturfing, networks or fake followers, fabricated or manipulated videos, targeted advertising, visual memes and more” (European Commission 2018). The question is more complex than a simple dichotomy between fake and real. Authentic documents are often used to misinterpret history, for instance.

These two examples show the subtle link between videos recommended on the platform and the tricky dimension of publishing archives online the authors of which have to be verified to judge the authenticity of the footage. Therefore, the issue of authenticity for digital archives has also to face the issue of how documents circulate as well as their mediatization online (Duranti 1995). This issue is not just a traditional question that can be confronted, for instance, in archive based documentaries: the mediations create confusion regarding genre, author, and enunciative instances that become difficult to individuate.

5 Moving the Eiffel Tower

A second case study will help us better understand the issues involved in publishing audiovisual archives online. In 2014, we analyzed a very special case in which recontextualization prevented the right framework being adopted to interpret the contents of an archive video (Treleani 2014). In 2009, Ina published on its website (Ina.fr) a report produced by the French national agency ORTF (Office de Radio-diffusion Télévision Française) from 1964 in which an engineer explains in an interview that the Eiffel Tower is to be moved a hundred meters to make room for a municipal stadium. The date was April 1, 1964 and this was indeed an April Fool’s Day joke. The reception of this joke is interesting to study. At least two bloggers wondered whether the information was true or false. The statistical relevance of these two reactions is not the issue, but the mere fact that a person could actually think there was a project to move the Eiffel Tower invites us to investigate the contextual elements that make this information credible when its contents clearly are not. One blogger, Marion, says that she found “an Ina record” with an engineer’s

interview³ and considers that the fact that it is from an archive means that it is proof of the past. That this record comes from Ina makes the content reliable and verifies its authenticity. This example effectively shows the importance of contextualization in archival practices of distribution, in which the institution becomes an editor rather than just a “gatekeeper of knowledge” (Noordergraaf 2010).

When the Ina discussed this case, the institution modified the descriptive notice and added an explanation referring to a “trick” as they realized the viewer needed clues to avoid misinterpreting the video. This is a summary of what happened in 2009 but the question remains valid today. A video called “Why the Eiffel Tower must be moved? Archive – Ina” was published by Ina on its official YouTube channel on 31 March 2016 (with April’s Fool’s Day in mind).⁴ The descriptive note displays the French word *trucage* added by Ina to clarify the genre of the report. However, one of the three comments (an account named Daichi San) says “yet it has never moved, there is no stadium.” This example shows that the joke is still effective. Even if the joke is clearly explained by the interface, some users still believe in the veracity of the report. We can list myriad reasons why users still believe in this joke (see Treleani 2014), but there are two reasons in particular that seem interesting here. First, clearly the ORTF video becomes a record and, once published online, assumes the status of a media document that circulates alongside other documents in the digital environment at the rapidity of consultation typical of the web. This means that its status has changed from that of a report to a record and then from a record to digital content. So, the regime used to read these documents is fairly different from the one a user would adopt to read an archival document. Most Internet users do not watch videos all the way to the end, and 6 out of 10 Internet users share information without having read it (Gabiolkov et al. 2016). Secondly, the multitude of layers that constitute the access to the document makes it difficult to understand the author of the video. The video is simply linked to the authority of the Ina, an institute that guarantees the content’s reliability to the extent that users feel they do not have to question its trustworthiness. In any case, although the contextualization is necessary, it does not suffice to guarantee that users will understand the joke. Daichi San is unlikely to have read the notice or perhaps did not use it to interpret the video (the word *trucage* may not refer to the content of the video).

In these two cases – the Eiffel Tower being moved and the manipulated propaganda videos of the fascist colonial period – the archival content seems to be considered as being objective in nature. We shall argue that this feeling of objectivity is a consequence of how the content is consulted.

³ <http://www.parcoursnumeriques-pum.ca/introduction-39>.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_HZWPN6XZc.

6 Anonymized images

Drawing a parallel with certain narratological notions may be of interest here. The fictional pact is based on a particular form of belief: the *je sais bien mais quand même* ('I know that, but still') analyzed by Frédéric Lambert, in a parallel analysis of semiotic and anthropological questions (Lambert 2014). When you read a novel or watch a film, you know that it is only fiction but you want to believe it. The enunciative framework – genre, for example – has some importance in this belief assumption. You need to know where the story ends and what its limits are in order to adhere to it. The perimeter of the narration and the context in which it intervenes are fundamental to understanding which interpretative mode to choose in order to read it. The genre defines the belief in the story's content: is it about the real world or is it fiction, for instance? (Jost 2010). So, what happens with content displayed through a web platform? Frédéric Lambert points out that in our media regimes, images circulate between cultural industries, news media and art and this permeability of media creates confusion between fact and fiction (Lambert 2014: 116).

As a result, the issue of anonymity becomes particularly interesting. This confusion between genres and media involves questioning the author's role of a message, which becomes complex to identify. According to Lambert, cultural industries are factories of anonymous messages and "without an author, our images are authoritative" (Lambert 2014: 116). On YouTube, we see the name of the institution that preserves the archive (Istituto Luce or Ina). This contributes to distancing or dissociating the idea of an enunciator of the video from that of the online archive. This instance seems to lend authority to images that would not be referable to a clearly identifiable enunciative instance. They are "re-enunciated" instead of being simply enunciated by a subject, which means that the institution only shows something which has been shot by someone else, and this simply guarantees the reliability of the content, but does not explicitly "say it." Thus, although the institution intentionally published the video, the video was not intentionally meant to be seen by us (at least not today and not on the web). The platform just makes it accessible. The authority of the institution means we should be able to believe what is shown. On the one hand, once the images have been anonymized, they belong to the past, and thus become proof of it. On the other hand, the absence of a clear enunciator implies a lack of point of view on the narrated facts. These archives have been shot by someone, broadcast on TV, then archived, digitized, and redocumentarized by an institution (Pédaque 2009). Some meta-data have been selected by the institution for the footage's online presence before it is published on a platform (YouTube) that provides access via its interface. These technical,

semiotic, cultural, and even historical mediations are difficult to grasp in their complexity for a user.

If we apply Landowski's interaction regimes to these two examples, we will see how the technique is perceived as a purely instrumental element that does not participate in the enunciation of the displayed content. The regime of manipulation gives us a sense of power: the interface is used, it allows us to find data ourselves, independently from the tool that gives us access to it. The user is thus responsabilized and becomes the real enunciator of the document because s/he actually found it (Marion says: "J'ai trouvé une archive de l'Ina"). The multiple mediations can be seen as a large number of pre-programmed rules. These are fixed systems, but they overlap and eventually blur the lines between them, thereby hiding the sources and identity of the enunciating instances. We therefore have a regime in which we manipulate the interface, and the multitude of overlapping programs gives rise to a form of chance where we have a feeling of power, based on interaction. At the same time, there is a sense of incertitude of what will be displayed due to the algorithms. Chance and the responsabilization of viewers contribute to building a feeling of objectiveness, or, at least, not of intentionality (the lack of a clear subjective instance responsible for the document's content). More generally, the fact that technology is a non-human element seems to give a sentiment of objectivity to the instruments used to access content. The presentation is not experienced as a frame showing an enunciative intention but only presents it to us "logistically."

7 Degree zero contextualization

The enunciative dimension of interfaces is often hidden when talking about the online publication of content, and this issue is especially clear when talking about data. For example, the philosopher Michel Serres went so far as to defend the idea that knowledge would be available online without mediation or a need for mediation.⁵ Antoinette Rouvroy conceptualized this phenomenon, which she called the "regime of digital truth," based on Michel Foucault's regime of truth, as a mode for categorizing reality (Rouvroy and Stiegler 2015). The same kind of critique was put forward by Manovich (recalling that "Data does not just exist – it has to be generated," Manovich 1999: 224) and as Lisa Gitelman also asserts, the very idea that raw data may exist is oxymoronic⁶ (Gitelman 2013: 12).

⁵ "Que transmettre ? Le savoir ? Le voilà, partout sur la Toile, disponible, objectivé. Le transmettre à tous ? Désormais tout le savoir est accessible à tous. Comment le transmettre ? Voilà, c'est fait" (Serres 2012: 19).

⁶ Daniel Rosenberg analyzes the evolution in the use of the term "data" and he observes the semantic shift from something that is used rhetorically in order to support an argumentation to the

From a semiotic point of view, this kind of criticism is evocative of Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, published in 1953. Thus we may speak about a degree zero contextualization in which this notion of contextualization refers to the intentional activity of a content manager that inscribes content within a specific digital context. Data visualization sites rely on rhetorical strategies that hide the enunciating instances but the online publication of audiovisual records seems to hide these instances without intentionality. In the case of interfaces which display data to us, mediation is always clearly present and is not disguised by a rhetorical technique but it still manages to appear insignificant. The issue has a social dimension as well as a rhetorical one. Julia Bonaccorsi (2017) has worked on the question of transparency regarding esthetic issues related to data visualization. She states that "on the one hand, the act of making data available is defined as evidence of informational or even political transparency ... ; on the other hand, the calculation of data and the representation of their analysis are considered as indicators of public ownership by civil society and its representatives (experts, media, entrepreneurs, citizens)." The social dimension is thus important: the fact of showing a public ownership of data is a first step in creating value through data, which means that the social act of making data (or archives) visible is a first step to legitimating content through something that is socially perceived as an act of "revealing something." The logic of revelation is a singular notion that is linked to a legitimation of content which are discovered.⁷ Here again the responsabilization of the user can be seen to be important to make the content reliable. We have to find it to believe in it. The fixation of belief is often the result of an inquiry that legitimates the results as is explained in Peircean philosophy (CP 5.358–5.387; see Borges and Gambarato 2019 for an application of Peircean approach to the circulation of fake news on Facebook). In other words, the regime of interaction may produce a sentiment of empowerment within the user who in turn becomes the enunciator of the visualized content. The content is raw so the viewer is responsible for what is shown and what is shown thus becomes objective. In a certain way, records become objective since they are anonymized and thus not intentionally enunciated. They do not give a clear context of genre which would affect their meaning and they were found through an interface that helps us discover them.

result of a research: "... during the eighteenth century, data changed connotation. It went from being reflexively associated with those things that are outside of any possible process of discovery to being the very paradigm of what one seeks through experiment and observation." (Rosenberg 2013: 36).

⁷ About the link between truth and secret, see Eco (2017: 328).

8 Mechanical objectivity

This way of perceiving a document's objectiveness is coherent with certain notions of objectivity. In their history of the concept, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) underline the arrival around the mid-19th century of what they call a mechanical or non-interventionist objectivity, linked to the development of technical instruments used in observation and measurement. The principle of this form of objectivity, which then contributed to the conception of modern objectivity, is based on the delegation of observation to a technical instrument. The idea is to set aside any subjectivity of the observer, in order to guarantee the reliability of the observation. The delegation to another entity – in this case an instrument – reduces the influence of subjectivity.

In this case, the concept moves away from an idea of objective vision as the closest representation of nature (“truth to nature”). For instance, the use of the daguerreotype in some medical discourses is not justified by a better adherence of the representation to the object, with more details, for example. Drawings by professional artists were used before the arrival of the daguerreotype and were much more detailed and useful for scientific description. The daguerreotype introduced viewing difficulties that did not exist before (problems of focus, the black-and-white, and so on). Even though these imperfections made viewing difficult, they did not lead to questioning of the objectivity of reproduction. On the contrary, they become a mark of objectivity, and their presence serves as a guarantee to the reproduction's authenticity and objectivity.

Delegating representation to a technical authority gives the reader the responsibility of interpreting what is presented to him. Since the observer only gives an image of reality that undergoes technical – and therefore non-subjective – mediation, the reader is the real interpreter and observer of data. There is therefore a shift, from the observer to the reader: mediation is perceived as non-intentional. This concept of objectivity seems well suited to describe how we feel about data visualizations and digital interfaces for audiovisual archives. The interface is indeed a technical mediation in which the tool is only mastered, and semiotically transparent. However, the specificities linked to digital culture can show another type of objectivity linked to mechanical objectivity, but with certain specificities that define it more effectively.

9 Digital objectivity

Published online content undergoes a process that has been called “editorialization” which is usually automatic. An editorial team can decide on a certain amount of

paratextual elements (records, keywords, descriptions, titles, etc.) but algorithms usually shape the context in which the content is received (Vitali Rosati 2018). Automating the editorial process is a digital specificity that imparts a feeling of non-intentional or non-subjective contextualization – although not entirely a form of objectivity.⁸ The automation of publication has to be coupled with the interaction and the active role of the user. Databases give us the possibility to search through indefinite catalogs. The interface can thus be seen as a *dispositif*, in a Foucauldian sense, in which the user is involved through a process of “subjectivation.” The *dispositif* assigns a role to the subject who is able to act through the interface and does not merely have a passive role.

Where mechanical objectivity aims to confine the subjectivity of the observer in order to let the results of the inquiry speak for itself, thereby responsabilizing the viewer, we can thus affirm that digital objectivity exacerbates the position of the observer by empowering him. The observer becomes a user who searches for his archives, produces his own statistics, and therefore assumes the role of co-enunciator of the content. The interface is a technical mediation – a black box in which the human being (an engineer or designer, for example) intervenes through processes that are multiple and too complex to find a clear and homogeneous intentionality – which actually reinforces this feeling.

10 Counter-analysis

We can list two effects of the recontextualization of videos on the YouTube platform: the anonymization of the images and the multiplication of mediations. These elements make it difficult to interpret certain features that determine an image’s meaning, such as the enunciative instance (who says what) or an image’s genre. As a result, these effects lead to a form of co-enunciation. We explained the reactions of the users of the footage about the Eiffel Tower moving through the responsabilization of the user who seems to be the co-enunciator of the records displayed. However, we performed a counter-analysis to confirm the relevant elements in the interface that contribute to creating this feeling. In linguistics, this would be some kind of “commutation test,” to verify the validity of our results and understand the pertinent elements to consider for making meaning. Consequently, we analyzed the consultation of a document through the Ina interface on-site which can be done in the rooms of the Ina at the Bibliothèque National de France in Paris. Ina’s workstations feature software called Hyperbase that provides a very deep consultation of the

⁸ Bruno Bachimont (2014) talks about the reification of cultural contents produced by digitization.

national base of French television, for example. This counter-analysis should validate our hypothesis made on the analysis on YouTube.

The first remark to be made concerns the situation. The consultation takes place using a specific workstation where one can only access the tools for consulting the Ina database. There is no web browser for instance although Internet can obviously be consulted using a laptop, but another device is thus required. Moreover, online archives are distributed to us as media objects whereas here we look for them which mean our attitude is very different and presupposes the critical questioning of sources. The user will therefore be very attentive, focused on the contents and its context. The archives consulted via Hyperbase are not mediatized in the industrial sense; they are not made accessible through a distribution that targets the greatest number of people and are instead given access in a paradigm closer to traditional archiving even though this can sometimes be done remotely (Ina's consultation centers are spread throughout France in municipal or university libraries). The question of authority does not arise as the video is not paired with other videos that do not come from archives or are not kept by the same institution. Our investigation is carried out within the Ina and everything else is clearly outside this significant context. The paradigm of access is therefore opposed to the paradigm of broadcasting. As a consequence, the status of the archive and its mediatization seem to be the most important factors to consider.

As regards the interface itself, the interaction involves a conscious manipulation of tools that are particularly complex to manage, less immediate, and which sometimes give unsatisfactory or uninteresting results. It is necessary to follow very precise rules and to have acquired a certain level of experience to use them effectively. A great deal of time is required to understand their procedures and yet chance remains a very important element in archival work. Many parameters have to be chosen and a period of adaptation is necessary in order to be able to use it effectively. There is a delay between a request for video content and being able to view it which also makes it less "accessible." It remains quite possible to come across misinterpretations due to a lack of context given by the interface, which is often reduced to the title and meta-data written by archivists who look to achieve some level of objectiveness, but it is still clear that any misinterpretation will be interpreted and questioned by users who finds themselves in a context and situation in which critically questioning the sources is their very purpose.

This counter-analysis would appear to encourage us to review the conclusions of the observations from a semiotic approach of interfaces and almost to invalidate them. Digital devices do involve a series of contextual interpretative problems but most seem to be due to a phenomenon that is more linked to the situation and a sociology of practices of heritage institutions than semiotic or media-based: the act of publication that constitutes the mediatization itself implies some semiotic

consequences. In other words, the main issue seems to be linked to the cultural practices of publishing contents online, independently from their status (thus included historical content). An effect of meaning of objectivity still seems to be a valid analysis but it may be difficult to demonstrate the effective role of the interface. This has to be framed in a more general contemporary way of using web contents.

11 Final considerations

The comparison between the consultation of archives through the industrialized and standardized platform of YouTube and the on-site consultation shows the dichotomy between an interaction with archival documents based on distance and one that shows a tendency toward proximity. It could be argued that putting archives online after their digitization is a form of technical reproducibility of documents from the past aimed at “bringing things closer humanly and spatially” as Benjamin’s put it, seeing this process already at work with photography and cinema (Benjamin 1969; Treleani 2017). The mediatized interface of YouTube is a way to bring archives closer but on-site consultation keeps a high level of distance that creates a dynamic of critical awareness. Proximity ultimately blurs the semiotic references for interpreting a document: the identification of genres, enunciators and the status of the document becomes blurred and these phenomena can give rise to meaningful effects that may lead to feelings of objectivity by questioning the relationship of an archive’s authenticity.

Finally, the notion of distance should be reintroduced, as should our consideration of the role it plays in user interactions with heritage documents. The philosopher Byung Chul Han, in analyzing the transparency society, states, “the society of transparency views all distance as negativity to be eliminated. Distance represents an obstacle to the acceleration of the flows of communication and capital. In keeping with its inner logic, the society of transparency eliminates every form of distance” (Han 2015: 15). Faced with the radically generalized accessibility – whether immediate or remote – of any form of cultural product, what seems desirable for our highly mediated society in terms of its relationships with the past is a rehabilitation of the importance of distance as an identity and interpretative factor: “Given the pathos for transparency that has laid hold of contemporary society, it seems necessary to gain practical familiarity with the pathos of distance” (Han 2015: 4).

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