Narrative and database in "All that is Solid", a desktop documentary

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Abstract: This paper proposes to analyze "All that is Solid" by artist and filmmaker Louis Henderson, a documentary film that uses the desktop of the computer as a background for a new kind of narrative structure to unfold. This film will be looked at mainly through Lev Manovich´s notion of the "database as a symbolic form" (MANOVICH, 1999) which the author attributes to the "age of the computer" when the database becomes the key form of cultural expression after the novel and cinema. It conducts a close reading of the film while pointing out several moments when database as a cultural expression surfaces, becomes dominant, and competes with conventional narrative forms of filmmaking. Through the basic system of organizing folders on his computer's desktop Henderson reflexively unravels a complex story: as technological progress advances in the West, piles of obsolete computers are thrown away, sent to the coast of West Africa, and end up being recycled in waste grounds such as Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. The film confronts us with a strange system of recycling, a kind of reverse, neo-colonial mining, where groups of Ghanaians search for residues of mineral resources in the computer waste materials sent from Europe. It tells us of the correlation between technology and race, and of the immateriality of the 'Cloud' in contrast to the heavy materiality of e-waste zones.

Keywords: documentary; narrative; database; e-waste.

Resumo: Narrativa e base de dados em "All is solid", um documentário na área de trabalho - Este artigo propõe analisar "All that is Solid", do artista e cineasta Louis Henderson, um filme-documentário que utiliza a área de trabalho de um computador como o pano de fundo para um novo tipo de estrutura narrativa a desdobrar-se. O filme é analisado, principalmente, através da noção de Lev Manovich de "banco de dados como uma forma simbólica" (MANOVICH, 1999), que é atribuída pelo autor à "era do computador", já que o banco de dados se torna a forma chave de expressão cultural, depois do romance

e do cinema. Este texto conduz uma leitura atenta sobre o filme na medida em que indica diversos momentos em que o banco de dados como superfície de uma expressão cultural torna-se dominante, competindo com formatos narrativos da filmagem convencional. Através da simples organização de pastas sobre a área de trabalho do computador de Henderson, desvendam-se, de forma reflexiva, histórias complexas: como os progressos tecnológicos avançam no ocidente, montanhas de computadores são jogadas fora e enviadas à costa do oeste africano, acabando por serem recicladas em terrenos residuais, como Agbogbloshie, em Accra, Ghana. O filme nos confronta com um sistema desconhecido de reciclagem, um tipo de mineração ao inverso, neocolonial, em que grupos de ganenses buscam por recursos minerais em restos de computadores trazidos da Europa. Conta-nos sobre a correlação entre tecnologia e raça, além da imaterialidade da 'Cloud', em contraste com a materialidade pesada das zonas de lixos eletrônicos.

Palavras-chave: documentário; narrativa, banco de dados, lixo eletrônico.

> As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world (MANOVICH, 1999, p. 85)

The database can be comprehended and defined as a large amount of structured information stored in a computer system in such a way that it can be easily located to be looked at or changed (OED). As abstract as this definition might seem, it becomes easier to visualize if we note that a computer's desktop allows us entry to the database through a system of folders that can access data stored in the computer. Another way of seeing it is to look at the database as a "symbolic form" and as a site that can disrupt, or compete with traditional narratives. As an example of this I will focus on a 15-minute film "All that is Solid" (2014), by British filmmaker and artist Louis Henderson, a documentary film that uses the desktop of the computer as a background for a new kind of narrative structure to unfold. Through the basic system of organizing folders on his computer's desktop Henderson unravels a complex story: as technological progress advances in the West, piles of obsolete computers are thrown away, sent to the coast of West Africa, and end up being recycled in waste grounds such as Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. The film confronts us with a strange system of recycling, a kind of reverse, neo-colonial mining, where groups of Ghanaians search for residue of mineral resources in the computer waste materials sent from Europe. It tells us of the correlation between technology and race, and of the immateriality of the 'Cloud' in contrast to the heavy materiality of e-waste zones.

I will analyse Henderson´s film mainly using Lev Manovich´s notion of the "database as a symbolic form" (MANOVICH, 1999) which the author attributes to the "age of the computer" when the database becomes the key form of cultural expression after the novel,

and cinema, that both privileged narrative. In Manovich's quote above, he explains that the database aggravated a disruption in the narrative form, it is a structure that does not follow any particular order, specially insisting in not following the traditional narrative arc: beginning-development-conclusion. However, the methodology applied to the analyses of the film is one of unpacking the sound, image and text ciphered in the screen of the computer in a sequential order; it proposes a close reading of the film while pointing out several moments where database as a cultural expression surfaces and becomes dominant over conventional narrative forms of filmmaking. In effect, this desktop documentary uses the computer not only as the apparatus through which the film is composed, but the setting for the story to unfold, a story that reflects back on the materiality of the desktop itself.

Documentary film practice, in its broad tradition, has developed multifarious forms of representing reality, and has more recently gained particular attention within the contemporary arts. (cf. STEYERL; LIND, 2009). Since its inception in early 20th century, the documentary film has incorporated the inclusion of technological advances both as subject and as a mean of representation. The 'desktop documentary' has been identified as one contemporary form of filmmaking which is being used by several artists and filmmakers partly because it relies a low-cost production and partly because it reveals our direct access to information through the computer and the Web. "All that is Solid" is thus a good example of what we have come to know as a "desktop documentary", a term widespread by film critic and filmmaker Kevin B. Lee. In his words, the desktop documentary

> […] does not procure its footage in the usual way (using a camera) but instead sources its images from the internet. Screen capturing software takes the place of the camera, turning the computer screen into both the method of production and of dissemination of such a documentary.[1]

As an aesthetic approach it has several precedents, three of which I may cite as framing it: Nick Briz's "Apple Computers" (2013), an investigative documentary into the proprietary restrictions governing the use of Apple products; "Noah", Walter Woodman & Patrick Cederberg, (2013) a Canadian short-film about a high school student who hacks into his girlfriend's Facebook account; and "Grosse Fatigue", (2013) a dense audiovisual work that combines spoken word poetry and the desktop unfolding images from computer´s folders by French artist Camille Henrot.

Before "All that is Solid"

"All that is Solid" emerged out of Henderson´s previous film, "Lettres du Voyant" (2013), the filmmaker "mine" an existing work and "recomposed it". Both films share

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[1]   <http://www.filmscalpel.com/portfolio_page/desktop-documentary/>. Accessed February 1th 2019.

the same research and theme however, they result in two different objects. One way of articulating their difference is to say that "Lettres du Voyant" reflects a more *narrative form* and "All that is Solid" reflects a *database form*. Edward Branigan proclaims in his book "Narrative, comprehension and film," that as a general definition

> […] narrative is a way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle and end, that embodies a judgment about the nature of the events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events. (BRANIGAN, 1992, p. 202)

In "Lettres du Voyant" the narrator reads letters written in the first person that directly address Henderson throughout the film and, through the letters, a narrative if formed leading the viewer through a cause and effect sequence of events. The narrative speaks about the colonial history of Ghana, of gold, and of technology. The narrator promises to "tell the truth" and to "exorcise bad spirits" through an ancient ritual, Sakawa – a trance ritual that is portrayed in the film as a form of colonial resistance – while the narrator plays the role of a visionary who speaks about historical amnesia. In these ways "Lettres du Voyant" revisits aspects of Jean Rouch´s ethno-fictional hybrid tradition that gives space for the real and the fictional to coexist within the film although in Rouch´s film it is the trance ritual itself that provides the narrative structure, while the voice-over accompanies it along the way.

The historical situations and the filmic material, as well as all the research collated for the making of "Lettres du Voyant" is rearticulated in "All that is Solid" through a kind of archaeology into Henderson´s personal hard drive. This process resulted in a very different version of the same story. My intention is not to enter into a detailed comparison between the two films, but to outline the difference approaches to using narrative and database in both films. "All that is Solid," contrary to "Lettres du Voyant," presents us with some of the main characteristics of what has been considered the "cultural expressions of new media" (MANOVICH, 1999), which includes stories without a beginning or an end that are mainly composed of individual items that share similar significance and as such don't follow the familiar narrative structure of introduction, development and conclusion. However, in "All that is Solid" we can still find some kind of narrative. How can narrative and database coexist?

No beginning…

> This is a film that takes place, - *C´est un film qui se dèroule,*
> in between a hard place, - *entre un endroit dur,*
> a hard drive, - *un disque dur,*
> and an imaginary, - *et un imaginaire,*
> a soft space - *un espace doux -*
> the cloud that holds my data, - *le nuage qui content mes données,*
> and in the soft grey matter, - *et dans la matière grise douce,*
> contained within the head. - *contenue dans la tète.*[2]

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[2] From the film *All that is Solid* (2014).

In his film, Henderson places the viewer within his laptop framing only the screen. Within the frame of the desktop Henderson opens *Google's* browser and then proceeds to open a new *Google Translate* window where he types the above text in English while the interface translates it directly into French. The text explains to the viewer that the film is set within the space of the computer and determines a relation between soft and hard matter, in a materialist sense but also in a metaphorical sense.

Then, another tab is opened, this time directing the viewer to a Wikipedia page on Ghana – previously referred to by the English as the Gold Coast while under British colonial rule. As Henderson scrolls down the page, it is possible to read more information about the 'Gold Coast´s' geographical position in the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa, and that the country was a British colony from 1867 to its independence as the nation of Ghana in 1957. As he continues to scroll, we read that the first Europeans to arrive at the coast were the Portuguese in 1471, where they encountered a variety of African kingdoms, some of which controlled substantial deposits of gold.

Slowly fading from the white background of the text another image starts to emerge, it shows a blacksmith melting gold and forging it into the shape of gold bars. Another layer of moving images appears in the background of the text, this second level of moving images reveal an open field, or more specifically, a site for disposing waste and unwanted electronic material, an e-waste junkyard where several people, mainly young, black men, seem to be looking for, or/and collecting, pieces of metal from computers or other similar types of electronic equipment.

Further within the text about the Gold Coast the words "gold" and "solid" become highlighted as a hyperlink directing the user to a new search. Here Henderson clicks on both words, and Wikipedia immediately opens other pages with more factual information about these words. Suddenly a dense layer of clouds takes over the screen covering all the information on Wikipedia about the definition of "solid" – as if erasing its meaning and replacing it with the its opposing state of matter in nature, that of gas. Then another layer appears with bold letters crossing the screen from the right to the left reading "The Black Stack". Now, we are directed to a page where a text scrolls up on the screen drawing our attention to specific words within the text such as *governmentality*, computation, privacy, distorts, jurisdiction, image, Carl Schmitt, Earth, geometrics, political. Several layers start to overlap, and over this text another text, now announcing the title of the film: "All That is Solid".

The title references Karl Marx famous assertion:

> All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind (MARX; ENGELS, 1969, p. 16)

Or, perhaps it references American philosopher Marshall Howard Berman, who in 1982 wrote *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, a book that examines social and economic modernization and its conflicting relationship with modernism. Berman uses Marx´s text to analyse the self-destructive nature of modernization. Also, in Henderson´s "All that is Solid", the title might attempt to frame a contemporary socio-historical structure that points at human´s conditions of life, namely geographical and racial relations, as well as the human relation with technology. Early in the film we are presented with several textual and visual references that point at the relation between black bodies and capitalist exploitation. Later we will see an accumulation of references and it is through accumulation that the film will gain in complexity. At the moment, all the information the film presents to us about the "Gold Coast", "Gold" and "Solid" has been sourced and cut from Wikipedia; the reference to *The Black Stack*, as well as to *governmentally*, computation, privacy, jurisdiction, Carl Schmitt, Earth, geometrics, etc.; and the images of goldsmiths melting gold and young men working in e-waste junkyards seem to present no specific hierarchy. Yet, they prefigure an introduction to a narrative-like constellation throughout the film.

Archive as database

The layers of information Henderson has been scrolling through disappear, and he takes us back to *Google's* search engine. Now, we are looking at the Webpage of "Colonial Film - moving images from the British Empire," a free online database of films produced during the colonial era. Another window opens and a black and white film with the title "I will speak English" appears. The synopsis of the film positioned next to the widow where the film is running explains that is an instructional film made on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare, demonstrating a new technique to teach 'English to illiterate adult audiences in the Gold Coast'. The film's title appears on a blackboard, as an African instructor points at each word as they are spoken by the class. The instructor then talks directly to the camera: "I want to tell you of a new method of teaching simple English", while a group of adult African students sit outside behind desks. After instructing the class to open their books - they all appear to understand his instructions - he starts the class with the words "me" and "you", which are acted out, written on the board and then recited by the whole class.

The image of the film "I will speak English" is interrupted, by another *Google* window while we still hear the English lesson happening on another layer of sound in the background. "Gold Coast" are the key words for the next search, yet this time instead of textual data, Henderson leads us to look at associated images. From the preview of *Google's* collection of images, Henderson leads our attention by clicking on some of the images. The rhythm that these apparently random images of Ghana are shown increases in speed coordinating with two layers of sound in the background: the sound of a deep

expanded electronic bass expressing tension or suspense; and the sound still coming from the English lesson: "This is me, that is you" - demonstrates the African student mimicking the professor. On screen it continues to show images of white tourists traveling in Ghana; a drawing of African slaves in chains; luxurious hotel bedrooms; the golden statue of Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah; and a webpage explaining how to access the e-commerce Gold Mine of Africa.

Henderson incorporates the found footage from the Colonial Film Archive to reveal ethnographic documentation. Although we are not seeing the original, the images point to an original 16mm film production, which is culturally inscribed in the footage and in the archive. In Henderson´s film, people which we see in the English class have a very different status than they did in its original ethnographic context. The implicit challenge of found footage in this film is directed to the issue of authorship, memory, and vision as a problem of subjectivity, authority and above all, to history.

Henderson employs a specific way of using found footage, both the film in the Colonial Archive and the *Google* database as an archive of images. He introduces them as an aesthetic of "old ruins", that of the colonial educational film; and of a contemporary ruin from *Google's* image database of Ghana. The film´s intertextuality is an allegory of history and a montage of memory traces. It makes use of the archive to engage with the past through recall, retrieval, and recycling. Henderson´s film points at a "new ethnographic temporality" (RUSSELL, 1999, p. 239) that we might recognize in the treatment he gives to the archive in this section of the film; a kind of a post-modern treatment of the archive as simulacrum. The images of the Colonial Film Archive, but also the random images that surface out of Google´s database, involve the overlapping and coextensive aesthetics of realism, modernism, and postmodernism´s simulation. The desktop as an open space to access the archive is testament to this overlapping. Within the desktop these images become allegorical, and the allegory requires a certain randomness. Allegory is different from a symbol; an allegory is unmotivated (RUSSELL, 1999), as data is also unmotivated (MANOVICH, 1999). The images may bear the sign of history, but they might also question the allegory of historiography that archives mobilize. As allegorical-data the archival images - both the colonial archive or the Internet, are individual items that share the same significance elemental to a kind of structure, which is not a standard cause and effect narrative structure. Rather they belong to the database form.

Linear, non-linear history

This sequence ends with Henderson progressively closing the browser windows he opened, eventually revealing only the background image of the desktop. The image in the background is black with the title in white letters of a well-known poem "The Sea is

History" by Nobel prize winner Derek Walcott, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite´s assertion "The unit is submarine". Walcott is a recurrent reference in Henderson´s work, his film "The Sea is History" (2016) is a free adaptation of the poem with the same title. The film begins with a series of questions quoted from the poem:

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?"
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History

"The Sea is History" restages the perspective of a subject that arrives in the Caribbean islands and is confronted with the monumentalisation of European colonial history. This confrontation is antagonized by the reading of the poem in voice over, which acknowledges the past as a "bitter memory" (WALCOTT, 1995, p. 372) - a memory that is the result of two different cultures, like two different bitter fruits, that have seamed together. These seamed cultures work towards a future of créolised assemblages as a politics of *re-narrativising* history.

Walcott´s family is of English, Dutch and African descent, reflecting the complex colonial history of the places that he explores in his poetry. Having recently passed away, he left a legacy to English literature with his poetic voice that reflected his sensitivity for the English language and his sense of his own people/s. Because of this, Walcott was recognized for writing about "the harsh legacy of colonialism and the complexities of living and writing in two cultural worlds." (GRIMES *apud* NY TIMES, Mar 2017). In his text "The Muse of History" Walcott questions precisely the allegory of historiography. Walcott says that the "method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction." History, therefore, "is a kind of literature without morality." (WALCOTT, 1995, p. 370)

The problematization of dominate histories is reasserted in referencing Brathwaite as well, one of the major voices in the Caribbean literary canon. He is the professor in comparative literature at New York University who coined the term "Nation Language", parallel to Èdouard Glissant's notion of "forced poetics". By the time Glissant publishes *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Brathwaite had presented and published *History of the Voice*, wherein he detailed his conception of "Nation Language". It refers to writers from the Caribbean and the African diaspora who write in non-standard English, as opposed to the traditional designation of it as "dialect", which can have a negative connotation. For Brathwaite, as well as for Glissant, what is important to the development of the emergent language in the Caribbean

> is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very software, in a way, of the language. What English has given us as a model for poetry, and to a lesser extent prose (but poetry is the basic tool here), is the pentameter" (BRATHWAITE, 1995, p. 311)

In the epigraph of *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant cites both contemporary Caribbean poets: "Sea is History" by Derek Walcott and "The unity is submarine" by Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The citation within Henderson´s film is a re-citation of Glissant´s citation, in a way positioning himself next to Glissant, sharing a background of ideas. The three writers are concerned with excavating existing cultural and historical links between the Caribbean islands and generating new ones, especially through language. Thus, the Caribbean writers represent, in a brief passage within the film, the philosophico-poetic touchstone of Henderson´s film. It forces the question of cultural representation in a non-linear form and the reinvention of memory as cultural representation and imagination - a non-linearity that is implicitly inscribed in the use of the database as structuring the film itself. It also intentionally critiques the previous sequence of the colonial archive and the Google imagery archive: tying together the English lesson for African students to Walcott and Brathwaite´s poetry, and Glissant´s post-colonial theory, carries a particular intention to associate the history of influential Afro-Caribbean literature and the "recycling" of English language.

"Soft Montage", hard materiality

On the desktop of Henderson's computer another search engine is opened. Now, it is the search engine of the computer itself, widely known as the "finder" of the computer, responsible for finding data stored by the individual user on the computer. Here the search shifts from online archives and resources, which are collectively constructed, to access the private files from Henderson´s own productions.

Within an external hard drive icon named "The Night" which sits on Henderson's desktop is a folder titled "soft montage". The name of this folder conceals a theory of montage that Harun Farocki explains below:

> This idea of not saying "A or B," but "A and B" is somehow important to my own conception of soft montage. When Deleuze read Godard, he had this idea that images in his films are not excluding each other, but just building up a relationship between them during a specific film. This is of course a different approach to images beyond iconoclasm. On one hand, there is a soft montage, because there is the presence of several images in the same film that relate to each other in a soft way. On the other hand, you have one film in the space and a different film next to it and they are interrelating. It is not a soft montage, but more like a battle, it is cacophonic. I don't know if there is an equivalent for images – like "caco-images" (laugh). In this sense, montage can also be hard between certain parts of the work" [3]

Farocki´s theory of "soft montage" reflects on sequences of images within a film that do not necessarily exclude each other. On the other side of the spectrum instead of a "soft montage" we would face something more like a "battle", meaning that if there are several

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[3]   Interview with Harun Farocki in *Senses of Cinema* (2016).

sequences playing at the same time in the same space, for example in the gallery space, then images will struggle with each other to produce meaning. Similarly, images struggle for meaning within Henderson´s desktop: they overlap, juxtapose, and superimpose on each other, often they also compete for attention with text. Together with the stacking of layers of images and text, the film unfolds in a sequence over time which is intended to be viewed from the "beginning till the end." Here, Henderson's desktop is a space where there is infinite access to the database and where several films are allowed to play simultaneously and at times, "battle" each other for attention. But, this battle might also happen because the film integrates two different discursive approaches, i.e. the narrative and the database, both also competing to produce meaning within the film.

Inside the "soft montage" folder, another three folders appear: "1. DATA"; "2. GOLD"; and "3. _____". Inside folder "2. GOLD" the director leads the viewer to a selection of ".MOV" files – these files are images captured by Henderson in Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. His research moved away from the possibilities offered by the online world to a space where the director archives data related to the field work he did and meeting with the mineworkers. The ".MOV" files expand rapidly over the screen and show the image of a hand holding drops of gold in a loop. The sound changes and an anonymous voice speaks over the image in French:

> [...]
> We send it to London
> They put it in a safe
> It serves no purpose to anyone
> It´s finished
> It´s bad gold that is…
> It stays there
> With the English
> It serves no purpose to anyone
> The English have created the Africans
> They come to take away their gold
> And that´s it
> They take it back to their country"[4]

The text above is a testimony of an unidentified person speaking about the current status of English exploration and exploitation of African territory and resources. Listening to his voice, we are confronted with a broader idea: technology and racial exploitation are engines of what has been named as "the industrial revolution" (HOBSBAWM, 1999). While the voice continues, several windows open in a sequence juxtaposing each other and forming a *mise en abysme*, repeating *ad infinitum* the image of a hand holding teardrop shapes of gold, followed by images of an open–air gold mine where gold diggers and

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4   Excerpt from the film *All that is Solid* (2014).

machines excavate the landscape. Giving visibility to mining resources for technology construction sets in motion a discourse based on cultural and economic anachronisms reminding us that there is still a heavy material fabrication and processing of goods that is concealed behind the general idea that technology and virtual space have tried to dispel (SEKULA, 2012, p. 17). The virtually instant connection which can be achieved in transferring information between distant places is still very much dependent on resources from the material world, such as certain precious metals that exist in the composition of the computer's hardware. Even though there is a general idea that cyber technology is immaterial allowing an instant connection between places, "All that is Solid" points at the heavy and unregulated industry at work behind large scale computation systems that relies on bulky infrastructure to work. It illustrates how and why "after a century of moral refutation of statements that deny it any role in modern existence, the most consistent effect of the racial seems to govern unchallenged the contemporary global configuration" (da SILVA, 2007, p. 22-23). Thus, that what instigates the bringing together of discourses of race and technology in this film is the belief and assumption that race provide the template for how the West frames its relationship with those technological transformations. Following the argument that is made in his recent book, "The sound of culture: diaspora and black technopoetics", Louis Chude-Sokei (2016) asserts that the relationship between technology and race or, more specifically, black people and technology is rooted in old colonial paradigms. It is a fact that "race was central to how industrialization was conceived or made sense of during the nineteenth century in England and America" (CHUDE-SOKEI, 2016, p. 1). For example, why are terms like "master" and "slave" still at work in basic computer programming colloquialisms? "The reason is simply that technology has always been racialized or been articulated in relationship to race" (*ibidem*, p. 2). Race and technology issues are moving closer to the center of cultural and critical awareness and can therefore benefit from the far longer tradition of such inquiries, narratives, and responses that this film excavates. "Technopoetics" is a term that, in the book, identifies what music, and literature, have to do with the machine. Chude-Sokei argues that Caribbean thinkers have been "very notable in this intellectual realm, with the plantation and black folk culture being rich with the kind of metaphoric meanings necessary for a black technopoetics" (*ibidem*, p. 25). The references to language and poetry, that were mentioned above, can be seen as undermining the cultural and technological divide that is part of the colonial project which assumes that not knowing English, or not having direct access to Western culture in general, is a sign of illiteracy and primitivism. Critic Alondra Nelson put it differently accentuating this divide in terms of culture and technology where the metaphor of a "digital divide" is one that features "the ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future)". This metaphor maintains an "underlying assumption ...that people of color, and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society" (NELSON, 2002, p. 5-6). Under this light, language is a zone of racial

engagement that operates in tandem with the historical fact that language itself, as well as technology, has carried racial meanings in advance of that engagement. The tension between race and technology is a manifestation of the relationship between Africa and its enslaved peoples to a white, colonial modernity.

From junkyard to "junkspace"

Again, we return to Henderson's desktop where this time we witness him opening the folder "1. DATA", where he selects another .MOV file and expands the video to show several people dismantling electronic devices in an e-waste site in Ghana. The camera pans over the site showing people breaking down old computers with hammers and other basic tools. Another group of people are shown collecting material and transporting it, this carefully organised labour all happens within a landscape of apparent chaos. Another layer of sound comes in, this time in American English a man speaks,

> About ten years ago we had one of our most important insights. And that was, that the PC was going to became the digital hub for your digital life. What did that mean? Well, it meant that that's where you are going to put your digital photos, where else, are you going to put them? Your digital video, or your digital camcorder (Excerpt from the film *All that is Solid* [2014]).

Then, the *iCloud* logo juxtaposes with the images of black workers dismantling computers. We continue to see images showing the e-waste deposit site as it becomes an unlimited resource of precious metals that run beneath the culture of a "computerized society". These images overlap and fall into a *mise en abysme* as the voice continues,

> So, we got a great solution for this problem. And we think the solution is our next big insight. Just like an iPhone, an iPad, and an iPod, and we want to move the digital hub, the centre of your digital life in the iCloud. All these new devices have communications built in them and they can all talk to the Cloudnwhenever they want. And so, now, …now some people think the Cloud is just a hard disk in the sky, right? And, you take a bunch of stuff and you put it in your Dropbox, or in your iDisk, or whatever, and it transfers it up to the Cloud and stores it, and you can drag whatever you want back out from your devices. So, everything happens automatically, and there is nothing new to learn. It just all works. It just works! (applause) Now, you might ask, 'Why should I believe them?' They are the ones who brought me… (Excerpt from the film *All that is Solid* [2014]).

The voice is interrupted abruptly, leaving unanswered the question of "why should I believe them?". The next clip shows a Google tour where one can virtually explore a data centre owned by Google using a "Google Street View" tool. A voice over explains where the Microsoft cloud is physically located: "In reality, it lives in our vast network of data

centers that provide the foundation for a variety of online services". The virtual tour takes the viewer inside several data centers revealing the vast materiality that exists behind the online world. The space of the data center appears to be an immaculate, regulated, and normalized site, reinforcing the unregulated, dirty and dangerous e-waste site in Ghana, where people dig for metal in the open air, putting up fires to melt the metal that they are digging for with their own improvised, handmade tools.

Towards the end of last sequence of Henderson's film another two layers of text begin scrolling over the image: one saying, "know your past" and another asking, "Is the Internet dead? This is not a metaphorical question". The image continues to scroll over the text accelerating and becoming too fast to be read, creating some kind of opacity for the reader's comprehension until we are finally allowed to read again: "slowly turning the world into a multilayered motherboard". In this last sequence it is recognizable the reference to an article by German writer and filmmaker Hito Steyerl, "Too much world: Is the Internet dead?" published in e-flux, an international art journal. Steyerl opens the text with the question: "Is the internet dead?" and immediately she remarks that this is not a metaphorical question and, in fact, there is no good reason to be suspicious of whether the Internet is dead or not, because "it is all over!"; the internet has gained a spatial dimension; and "it has started moving offline" (STEYERL, 2013). Steyerl relates this with the event of when web infrastructure started supplementing TV networks as circuits for image circulation, replacing productivism for circulationism - if productivism claimed that art should enter production and the factory (cf. BENJAMIN, 1943), then circulationism suggests that nowadays what is important it is not so much the art of making an image, but the art of putting an image into circulation and accelerating it. For example, data, sounds and images, started to transition between different states of matter, they have expanded beyond networks, they contract and expand, they are crowding the off-screen space, and materialize as "junkspace". Here, the relation with Henderson´s film is quite literal: the Internet has moved offline, digging for metal on e-waste sites in Africa is the offline of a bigger online world.

> The internet persists offline as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization a form of intense voyeurism coupled with maximum nontransparency. [...] The all-out internet condition is not an interface but an environment (STEYERL, 2013, p. 04)

The "web" has also expanded and grown into the material world, and the offline "junkspace" is the residue mankind leaves on the planet as a result of its online life. To circulate images one needs a medium, or even different kinds of mediums. They move from iPhone, to iPad, to iMac, to iCloud, and from iCloud back into the extraordinary raw materials that these devices are made of, now left in piles spread over junkyards distributed far away from its original site of production. Steyerl´s referencing of junkspace stems from

Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect, architectural theorist and urbanist, who wrote extensively on the idea. Accordingly, "junkspace" follows no rules, it has no inherent order, and no connections between its parts. In junkspace, cities of production and consumption grow to reach the acme of modernism, leaving their inhabitants no chance of escape. Koolhaas is mainly pointing at the new buildings emerging in cities worldwide, with no clear function. In the film, we may notice the juxtaposition of two very different kinds of junkspaces: first, that of the data center - those huge cloud storage drives that rain down as skylines in desert locations, to which the film takes us within its very own inside mechanisms; and second, that of the open air e-waste junkyard we see portrayed in the film, accumulating discarded electrical or electronic devices, which are destined for reuse, resale, salvage, recycling, or disposal. Both, the data center and the e-waste site are places where modernization manifests sideways, indirectly. These are places that are held together not by structure but by skin, they have no walls, only partitions, or membranes (KOOLHAAS, 2002, p. 176). They are not visible to the user, they are invisible spaces, away from inhabited spaces.

In Henderson´s film, these spaces meet; they juxtapose and collide on his desktop. These spaces, that in the "real world" occupy the end of a long chain of production and circulation, are correlated, reticulated, and ciphered together. In the desktop, as in a database, or in junkspace, composition is replaced by addition. This is the extensive and exhausting materiality that Henderson tries to hold on, put together, and edit: filtering, scanning, sorting, and selecting creating a new layered, a kind of uneven geography.

In the end of her text Steyerl assures, "The internet is not dead. It is undead and it's everywhere" (STEYERL, 2013, p. 01). The internet has probably gained the characteristics of a zombie; it has blurred the lines of what is real and not real. "Conceptually, each monitor, each TV screen is a substitute for a window, where real life happens inside, and cyberspace has become the great outdoors" (KOOLHAAS, 2002, p. 189). Towards the end of his text Koolhaas asks, "Will junkspace invade the body?". Probably both authors are pointing at a condition partly created by humans but also only partly controlled by them. During the final sequences of Henderson's film, his computer desktop creates the post-cinematic affect for post-human bodies to enter: the film takes us deep into a digital rendition of an underground mine, and more images of the e-waste site in Africa dazzled in a kind of a pixelated digital glitch juxtaposed with fragments of text referencing the "post-cinematic" and the "post-human" – these are references contained within Steyerl´s text. The glitch on Henderson´s desktop fades into an endless abstract geometrical forms and fragments of images of palm trees. The desktop itself becomes a digital junkspace. The image of the desktop turned into the "screen saver" noticing that the user stopped using the computer, announcing the end of the film.

…not end.

"Is it about decoding a secret, or keeping it?". These are the last words spoken by Harun Farocki in his installation *Interface* where he seems to be questioning his

own filmmaking process. Similarly, "All that is Solid" invites the same question, by unpacking the textual references I question "is it about decoding a secret, or keeping it?" leaving the reader with an unfulfilled desire of a resolved conclusion. I would like to refute this desire by emphasising that the purpose of the film itself is not to generate narrative conclusions. This is a quality that derives from the struggle between the logic of the database and the logic of narrative within the film.

> Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or an end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise, which would organise their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other (MANOVICH, 1999, p. 80)

Within a "soft montage" the elements of a film need not to eliminate each other, instead they are generate meaning cumulatively. In this sense, the database competes, struggles, overlaps with narrative. As a sequence of images the elements pulled out of a database can actually form a narrative and the narrative is built through the performance of the operation of showing or hiding data on the desktop. However in essence they contradict each other. The desktop is then used as a multidimensional editing room where we can see several shots playing at the same time, which is different from the regular editing room where one shot is edited after the other. Still, the narrative is constructed in one screen only as in single channel cinema but, at times, database in Henderson´s film gains relevance and predominance replacing narrative within a continuous change of paradigm. Fundamentally, within the film, database works as a collection of items: sound, image and text from which Henderson can excavate and use as raw material. The database appears to the director as a collection of items on which he can perform several limited operations in his desktop such as view, navigate, and search. This gives us, as viewers, a very different experience from that of literature or cinema. It is precisely because this experience is so different that Manovich addresses database as "cultural form" of its own and its predominance in culture can also be addressed looking at its emerging poetics, aesthetics, and ethics. The author sees database as "a new symbolic form of a computer age," which has found in the computer a "new way to structure our experience of ourselves and the world" (*ibidem*). We are speaking of new digital media operations that we have become familiar with navigating through the display of the desktop. They may further signal the power structures and distribution systems governing the image economy from data centers to e-waste sites, where the degree of access to a given site also reveals differences in the governance of space.

Since Tim Berners-Lee 'invented' the Internet, the world appears "as an endless and unstructured collection of images, text and other data, of which database become the only possible way to access it" (MANOVICH, 1999, p. 81). Databases allow for the rearrangement of the elements of narrative to be rearranged infinitely. This is what

we witness in this paradigmatic desktop documentary: an access to the world through the database where the narrative form of the film is subjected to and influenced by the possibilities of the desktop. Here, the database becomes the language of a post-cinema era thus providing the potential for new forms of representation to emerge, such as structures existing without a beginning or an end. If the beginning and the end are effaced from History it might happen that the logic of heroes and victims is subverted, or at least, leave a narrative open to continue to be re-written. Eventually allowing for "History, really beginning" (WALCOTT, 2007).

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