

The Umwelt and the Operational Image

Guest Lecture for *Nematode*

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A video of this lecture is available at:

http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/events/the_multiverse_spring_residency_events/2015

This lecture responds to British artist Joey Holder's work. I suggest that there is a new politics of the first-person, embedded perspective, to which Holder's video installations respond by producing zones of indistinction between the embedded viewpoints of sea creatures and those of machines.

In 2009, the age of online 'filter bubbles' (as Eli Pariser calls them) began. Since then, search engines and social media feeds have routinely used algorithms to filter information, customizing what comes to users' attention such that their feeds reflect what their perceived interests already were. This makes it very difficult for online users to encounter views drastically opposed to their own. Such a bifurcation of viewpoints has profound and much-debated political ramifications, as it becomes more and more difficult for citizens to see opposed political viewpoints online, and thus to get a balanced perspective on the political climate.

All of this suggests the need for a new politics of the perspectival: of the embedded, first-person perspective on the world. Yet in order to construct such a politics, it is necessary to consider more than just how this problem affects online users. Compiling a deeper history of the filter bubble, I argue, involves drawing from at least two other intellectual histories. On the one hand, Jakob von Uexküll's early twentieth century concept of the *umwelt* – the self-centered world on organisms, based on their sensory capacities – gave biology a profound perspectival reversal. Rather than understanding ecosystems as simply composed of organisms, Von Uexküll suggests that we envision them as overlapping worlds – bubbles of sensation produced by each organism. This shift of perspective drastically changes how biologists might understand organisms' activities with respect to their environment. On the other hand, in a recent essay on operational images, Trevor Paglen (drawing on Harun Farocki) suggests the need for a similar reversal of perspective with respect to machines. In a world in which machines routinely act directly on the world, based on "images" of the world they produce on their own terms (which are not easily legible to human eyes), it becomes important, Paglen suggests, to think about what it might mean to see the world as machines see.

Holder's video installations bring these two strands of thought together, by suggesting a blending of animal and machine sensory perspectives. Thus, her works take us to the limit cases of this new politics of the perspectival, and ask us to extend the empathetic limits of our vision.