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DOI

[10.1163/9789004376175_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004376175_002)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hesselberth, P., Houwen, J., Peeren, E., & de Vos, R. (2018). Introduction: Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines. In P. Hesselberth, J. Houwen, E. Peeren, & R. de Vos (Eds.), *Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines* (pp. 1-17). (Thamyris/Intersecting; Vol. 33). Brill Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004376175_002

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Introduction: Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines

Pepita Hesselberth, Janna Houwen, Esther Peeren and Ruby de Vos

In *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida notes that “it is a mistake to believe in the immediate and ahistorical legibility of a philosophical argument, just as it is a mistake to believe that without a prerequisite and highly complex elaboration one may submit a metaphysical text to any grid of scientific deciphering, be it linguistic, psychoanalytic, or other” (188). This volume takes off from the idea that this warning pertains not only to the legibility of philosophical arguments and metaphysical texts, but to the legibility of any form of cultural expression, from literary texts, films and artworks to social structures, beliefs and practices, from performances and language to binary code and algorithms. All legibility is historically, culturally and materially specific, and has a political and ethical dimension. Consequently, what is required is a complex elaboration of what makes something legible – or, alternatively, illegible – and to whom or what, as well as a careful account of what kinds of reading, processing or navigating this il/legibility facilitates or forecloses.

To enable such an elaboration or account, it is first necessary to specify what legibility is. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “legible” as that which is clear enough to read; that which is available for reading, comprehensible, and enjoyable or interesting to read; and that which is easily understood. The primary association with clarity indicates that the legible should be presented in an unobstructed, recognizable manner; a badly typeset or handwritten text may be illegible, as may a corrupted digital file. Legibility is also tied to comprehension, enjoyment, interest and ease of understanding. While it is significant that comprehension is highlighted through its reiteration as “ease of understanding,” it is possible to imagine a reading generating enjoyment and interest without comprehension, for example when someone unable to read musical notes encounters a score. Similarly, the legible as clear enough to read does not necessarily imply understanding; a clearly presented text in a language one does not speak can, after all, be read in a basic sense of identifying letters, words, sentences and paragraphs (pattern recognition). In this regard, it is instructive to also look at the *OED* entry on “readable,” which has “legible” as its first definition, suggesting the two are synonyms. However, the rest of

the definitions, while alike, are not identical, tying the readable first to the decipherable or understandable; then to what is clear, easy or enjoyable to read; and, finally, to what is capable of being processed or machine-readable (to the extent that one can speak of such a thing at all). Although here the quality of being clear is subsumed to that of being decipherable or understandable, like the legible, the readable is not restricted to that which can be understood (in the sense of being processed cognitively or hermeneutically), but includes what can be processed machinically and what generates affect. When considering legibility, therefore, we cannot take the term's meaning for granted. In this introduction, then, we first ask how the issue of legibility functions in relation to questions of how to read for meaning, after which we probe how machinic processes complicate questions of il/legibility.

The question of *how* we should read has been central to the recent turn in literary studies away from close reading. One exponent of this turn, distant reading as pioneered by Franco Moretti, critiques close reading on the basis of its necessarily restricted corpus, which he argues turns it into "a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously" (57). Moretti's assertion that only canonical texts are subjected to close readings is demonstrably false, but his point that distant reading allows a focus on "units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" across many more texts than close reading can tackle is valid. Notably, Moretti does not reject close reading altogether; in fact, in "Conjectures on World Literature," he mobilizes other critics' close readings in his distant reading of the way cultures across the world moved towards adopting the novel form. His statement that "no matter what the object of analysis is, there will always be a point where the study of world literature must yield to the specialist of the national literature, in a sort of cosmic and inevitable division of labour" confirms that the distant reader cannot completely replace the close reader (Moretti 66).

More recently, proponents of surface reading have equated close reading – presented, as in Moretti, as much more of a monolithic practice than it ever was – to symptomatic reading as a "mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings" (Best and Marcus 1). Here, the argument is that readings that go "deep" wrongheadedly position the critic as a potential activist and literature as potentially emancipatory. Surface reading – and related forms such as Heather Love's descriptive reading – has been taken to herald a "new modesty" on the part of the literary critic, who is seen as made more realistic, responsible and even ethical by remaining on the surface of the text and reading literally (Williams n. pag.).

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, in their programmatic and polemical “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” explicitly herald the “*embrace of the surface*” as “*an affective and ethical stance*” that “involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects” (10, emphases in text). This volume shows that such a colonizing attitude is in fact alien to many forms of close reading – even, or especially, when it takes the form of what Colin Davis calls “overreading.” In *Critical Excess*, which focuses on the reading practices of Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell, Davis asserts that

overreading is the precise opposite of the hermeneutics of suspicion ... These readers achieve a step beyond suspicion as they place their trust in works to which is now attributed the power to speak what they know, rather than merely to hide what they could not conceive or openly state. (Davis 186)

Thus, this form of close reading is all about deferring to the text, but to its complexity rather than its supposed self-evidentiality. A crucial question proponents of readings that stay at the surface, literal or descriptive level have not been able to answer in a satisfactory manner is how the surface of a text, the literal meaning of a word and the act of description can ever be absolutely distinguished from a text’s depth, a word’s figurative meaning and the act of interpretation, given that the linguistic sign has multiple components (signifier/signified) linked by convention, opening it up to difference as deferral, change and polysemy.¹ Instead of assigning absolute ethical values to particular ways of reading, it seems more productive to follow van de Ven’s suggestion in this volume to explore how different ways of reading supplement each other and may be productively combined. To do this, we should ask of each way of reading (and its variations, since neither close reading nor distant reading or surface reading takes only one form) what elements of that which is to be read it highlights, what kinds of questions it allows to be explored and what processes (including affective and machinic ones) it operates through and sets into motion.

1 For a trenchant Marxist critique of surface reading that questions any absolute distinction of surface and depth, see Baskin. The similarly absolute distinction between literal and non-literal meaning that Best and Marcus hold to when they propose to “take texts at face value” and to let “ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of” (13, emphasis in text) is equally problematic: language, being referential, has no face value, while a ghost is, per definition and quite literally, the return of something other than what it is now.

Perhaps more important than the question *how* to read, then, becomes the question: what is legible, in what ways and to whom or what – and what is, should or can(not) be the object of critical inquiry (whether we call this inquiry reading, analyzing, navigating, processing or computing) in the age of signs and machines. It is from Maurizio Lazzarato's *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (2014) that this volume derives the second part of its title. A follow-up to his self-proclaimed "homage to Félix Guattari" entitled "'Semiotic Pluralism' and the New Government of Signs" (2006), *Signs and Machines* unpacks Guattari's claim that "capital is a semiotic operator" and outlines its implications for critical theory. In order to explain how signs function in power apparatuses and the production of subjectivity today, Lazzarato claims, we need to move beyond the dualism of signifier and signified, and develop a theory of semiotics that can account for the distinct registers in which semiotic components operate under the conditions of global capitalism and our increasingly media-saturated culture. It is worth quoting Lazzarato at some length here:

The first is the register of "representation" and "signification" or "production of meaning," both of which are organized by signifying semiotics [in particular, language] with the purpose of producing the "subject," the "individual," the "I." The second is the machinic register organized by a-signifying semiotics [like stock market indices, currency, mathematical equations, data, diagrams, algorithms, code, scientific functions, statistics, accounting and so on], which "can bring into play signs which have an additional symbolic or signifying effect, but whose actual functioning is neither symbolic nor signifying." (2006: n. pag.; see also 2014: 39)

The production of subjectivity today, Lazzarato claims, takes place at the intersection between these two modalities: on the one hand social subjection, on the other hand machinic enslavement. Where the mechanisms of social subjection resort to a semiotics that equips us with subjectivity and turns us into individuals by assigning us to pre-established social places and roles, from which we then feel necessarily alienated, the mechanisms of machinic enslavement – ironically and precisely – work to dismantle the individuated project. Its operations and forces are at once pre-personal, in that it aims to capture and activate affects, emotions and perceptions, and supra-personal, in that it makes these elements "function like components or cogs in the semiotic machine of capital" (Lazzarato 2006: n. pag.). Unlike in the first regime, in the second, signs act as "sign-operators." Rather than mobilizing representation and taking the subject as referent, they enter directly into the flows and

functioning of capitalism's social and technical machines, thus bypassing consciousness and representation. Where signifying signs refer above all to other signs, a-signifying signs, Lazzarato claims, "act directly on the real" (2014: 40). This is possible because the machine fundamentally disregards distinctions between subjects and objects, words and things, human and non-human operators.

It was Karl Marx who first used the term "machine" in this way. In his famous "Fragment on Machines" from *Grundrisse* (first published in 1938, written between 1857 and 1858), he reflects on the – detrimental implications of the – historical transformation of the machine from a tool or instrument for the individual worker into a form of fixed capital, that is, a means for producing surplus-value through the exploitation (rather than the reduction) of labor. Significantly, the machine Marx speaks of – and Lazzarato, Deleuze, Guattari and many others have expanded on – is more than a technical machinery, device or technique. It is the complex technological, intellectual and above all social assemblage that objectifies (and ultimately automates) all human skill, expertise and knowledge into the machine, thus taking it away from the individual worker, who starts to function as an instrument (or indeed cog) of the machine itself, part and parcel of its complex socio-technical assemblage.

That we have come a long way since the publication of Marx's treatise, the pertinence of which seems ever greater in the age of robotics, digital labor and the mass-digitization of almost every aspect of our everyday lives,² becomes clear when we consider how this technical, political, social and cultural machine is envisioned in popular culture, from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) to, say, the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999). Where Chaplin's little tramp is portrayed as, at once, an extension of and cog in the machines of industrial labor, the protagonists of *The Matrix*, Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013) and Benjamin Dickinson's *Creative Control* (2015) appear first and foremost as the battery (in *The Matrix*) and raw material of the machines of semio-capitalism – their desire and mental capacity objectified, captured in the machine; their bodies exploited and/or left behind.³ The caveats of popular

2 The example of robotics is instructive here. In the weeks leading up to the writing of this introduction it was announced that Uber is planning to buy 24,000 self-driving cars (Pollard 2017) and that Walmart has silently started to replace their cleaning personnel with self-driving scrub-machines (Cutter 2017). Largely crafted on the competences and skills of the people it seeks to replace and that are now captured in large data aggregates (think of the connective data chip in your car), platform capitalism thrives on the "free labor" (Terranova 2000) that makes our waged labor redundant (see, for example, Scholz 2012; 2016).

3 The irony of our own disregard of the machinic processes at work in broaching this example does not escape us but is discussed elsewhere (see Hesselberth 2017).

culture notwithstanding, the machinic, rationalized and technocratic logic of contemporary culture, Lazzarato and others have pointed out, poses a significant challenge for critical theory, so much so that some have deemed it necessary to contemplate the end(s) of critique (e.g. Latour 2004; Rouvroy 2013). For where critical theory has traditionally paid a great deal of attention to the processes and language through which we are socially subjected, Lazzarato argues, it has largely (but, we would like to add, not entirely) been blind to the machinic nature of our present-day culture.

It should be pointed out that Lazzarato here upholds a rather narrow definition of critical theory, which is mostly due to his critique of the (im)possibility of political and existential rupture in certain forms of critical theory that lies at the heart of *Signs and Machines*. Thus, while he directs his metaphorical arrows predominantly at Badiou, Rancière, Hardt and Negri, Virno, Žižek and Butler, he finds clear allies in Guattari, Deleuze, Foucault, Latour and Bakhtin. Though his claim that “machines and machinic assemblages can be found everywhere except in contemporary critical theory” may thus hold true, to some extent, for the theorists he confronts, it largely disregards the most recent developments in critical media and network theory, as well as the impact his self-identified allies have already had on some more recent (but perhaps less established) debates in critical theory (Lazzarato 2014: 13). We are nonetheless sympathetic to Lazzarato’s claim that we are in need of a different, or at least additional theory of semiotics, and to his idea that critical theory has its blind spots when it comes to the legibility of cultural signs and apparatuses, and to the crisis in the production of subjectivity today. For if we are indeed surrounded by “sign machines [that] operate ‘prior’ and ‘next’ to signification, producing a ‘sense without meaning,’ an ‘operational sense,’” unearthing and redirecting these operations will require new methods and attitudes, originating not only in individual or even collective subjects but in a

convergence/assemblage of forces that do not split into “living” and “dead,” subjective and objective, but are all variously “animated” (physical and sub-physical forces of matter, human and subhuman forces of “body and mind,” machine forces, the power of signs, etc.). (Lazzarato 2014: 27)

At the same time, as Lazzarato also insists, established forms of reading remain necessary, since, “assignifying semiotics remain more or less dependent on signifying semiotics,” which “are used and exploited as techniques for control and management of the deterritorialization undermining established communities, social relations, politics, and their former modes of subjectivation”

(2014: 40, 42). Accordingly, this volume explores what is legible to whom (or indeed: what), and above all: what role is left for critical (media) theory and literary studies to tackle these and related issues.

These questions are predicated on a more fundamental one concerning the constitution of legibility itself: what appears to us as legible (as signifying or a-signifying sign systems), and what remains illegible? Answering this requires thinking the relation, and arguable incommensurability, between the legible and the illegible. One way to do this is by taking the relation between the visible and the invisible as an analogy. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida distinguishes two orders of the invisible: the *absolute invisible*, which is inaccessible to the faculty of sight, and the *visible in-visible*, which is hidden from sight but potentially accessible to it (90). To this, Akira Lippit has added the *avvisual* as that which is “presented to vision, there to be seen,” but nevertheless remains unseen (32). Paradoxically, what is *avvisual* is at the same time *hypervisible*: it is excessively visible in a way that makes the eyes not want to take it in. The example Lippit uses is that of Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1995 [1954]), in which the black man is unseen precisely because the difference that negatively marks him, the color of his skin, is so conspicuous.

Are these forms of (in)visibility paralleled by similar forms of il/legibility? The absolute illegible is difficult to imagine, as legibility is not a circumscribed capacity like (human) sight. What is illegible today could conceivably be made legible tomorrow, as writing in ancient languages has been deciphered over time. So being illegible appears to always be relative and thus not absolutely illegible but legible-illegible. However, in the digital age, it is more and more common for the legible to, quite quickly, become illegible as technology evolves. While this illegibility still falls within the realm of the legible-illegible, as the fact that something was once legible suggests it could be made legible again, it does introduce a new anxiety around legibility, which can no longer be assumed to last (far) into the future, as previous, analog forms of legibility could. What we might call the a-legible comes into play with regard to particular historical realities, such as colonial or neoliberal ones, that are not illegible at all but remain (deliberately or not) unread. The hyperlegible, in turn, could be used to denote something of which certain elements are taken to be particularly easy to read in a predetermined manner according to fixed frames of legibility, leading to it only ever being read in this way (or, in the case of the a-legible, to it not being read at all).

The chapters in this book deal with what is and is not (conceived as) legible from cultural, literary, cinematic, curatorial, historical, material, juridical, computational, affective, human, technological and machinic perspectives. The specific questions the contributors seek to answer include: what are the new

conditions, forms and technologies of il/legibility in a machinic world? How does cultural and historical difference impact on legibility, which has often been considered in terms of general (even universal) accessibility and assimilability? What new ways of reading (and new kinds of readers) are emerging in relation to old and new media – from distant, surface and descriptive reading to automated perception and data mining? What do these new ways of reading imply about the modes and aims of il/legibility, and what kinds of agency and subjectivation do they afford or presuppose? What values are attached to il/legibility in museum and archiving practices? How does the legible relate to the law (to which it has been etymologically linked) and to the sensible or affective?

The book is divided into four thematic clusters that focus on desire, justice, machines and heritage. The first section focuses on how legibility relates to desire, shedding light, from different perspectives, on the desire expressed by particular ways of reading and on how desire itself can be read. All four texts in this section position themselves against traditional hermeneutics, which conceptualizes interpretation as a systematic reading culminating in a full, sometimes even definitive understanding and ignores the affective dimension of reading. As David Wellbery argues in his foreword to Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks, 1800–1900*, this form of hermeneutics does not describe “what human beings always do with written or spoken texts,” but constitutes “a contingent phenomenon within the evolution of discursive practices in Europe” (x, xi). Emerging in its stead is post-hermeneutics, which, on the basis of the poststructuralist theories of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, abandons the “presupposition of sense” to argue that what makes sense is constructed through operations of discourse, mediality and corporeal inscription that also determine what appears as nonsense or as meaningless (Wellbery xi). By implication, this entails a shift from simply asking what something means to how it means, implying new questions of legibility: what is made available to us for reading through different, changing technologies of cultural inscription, in what modes can we read these inscriptions and what meanings do they make (in)accessible?

Post-hermeneutics also makes space for a new reading of desire. According to Wellbery, Kittler's reading of the crucial role of desire for the maternal figure in *Faust* and other Romantic texts combines Lacan and Foucault to show that

before the phantasm of the Mother and before the attachment of desire to this phantasm ... there is a discursive network, and both phantasm and desire are functions of and within this network. The Romantic (and psychoanalytic) origin derives from a beginning, from a network of technologies, empirical, historical and other. (xxiii)

Here, desire is not subjective but operates as part of a discourse network, with the specific elements of this network determining the forms and functions desire can take on, how it can be read and if and how it inhabits the reading process.⁴

Ernst van Alphen's contribution reads the desire inscribed in Andrew Wyeth's 1948 painting *Christina's World*, which is oriented towards "an unobtainable object," identified by van Alphen as the American Dream. Following Eugenie Brinkema's trenchant critique of the affective turn and her proposal for a radical formalism, van Alphen does not focus on how this desire affects him or the viewer but on the way it manifests in the painting through "legible forms" and "legible signs." In what can only be called a close reading (but is emphatically not a symptomatic one), he shows how the painting gives form to desire not through narrative emplotment but through a melodramatic *mise-en-scène*. For van Alphen this is still an "affective reading," but one "based on ... unconventional forms encountered as sensations that shocked to thought," with the latter expression, taken from Deleuze, conveying the idea that signs that do not signify but are sensed find their value in leading to critical inquiry or, in other words, to new readings and interpretations.

In his book *Critical Excess*, Colin Davis associates traditional hermeneutics with a "desire for containment" that causes a fear of overreading as reading too much into a text; to this, he opposes a desire to "push at the limits of what can be said about the texts or films or people that matter to us" (187). His contribution to our volume endorses the latter by arguing that Freud's misreading of a memory recorded by Leonardo Da Vinci, which conjures up a vulture where none is mentioned, nevertheless bears a certain truth within it, and by showing the failure of authorial intention to provide an absolute limit on "our hermeneutical imagination." After presenting his own overreading of Louis Malle's 1990 film *Milou en mai*, Davis concludes that, instead of asking whether a particular meaning was intended to be legible or is legible (as making sense) for everyone, we should legitimate or dismiss a particular (over)reading on the basis of what is gained – or lost – by the meanings it makes discernible.

In Seth Rogoff's chapter, Freud returns, not as an audacious overreader, but as the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010 [1899]), engaged in a hermeneutical quest to assert and contain the legibility of dreams and of the wishes and desires he takes them to express. By charting the various colonizing

4 In *Signs and Machines*, Lazzarato specifies how the specific conditions of contemporary capitalism have made desire machinic: "Desire is not the expression of human subjectivity; it emerges from the assemblage of human and non-human flows, from a multiplicity of social and technical machines" (51).

moves Freud makes in his interpretation of his own dream about his patient Irma (the so-called “specimen dream”) in order to restrict its meaning to the psychoanalytical schema of legibility he is developing, Rogoff draws attention to the operation of power in relation to legibility. He shows that while something was indeed gained by Freud’s success in making dreams – which had been considered illegible – legible, it also produced an important loss in the form of the subjection of the patient to the psychoanalyst. At the same time, Rogoff evokes Irma’s rejection of Freud’s authoritative readings of her symptoms, the fact that Freud’s account of the specimen dream has been re-read by various (feminist) critics to expose its blind spots and Freud’s own reference to the dream’s “navel” as a point of persistent illegibility to show the impossibility of imposing a singular, definitive meaning on that which has been rendered legible.

In the final contribution to this section, Looi van Kessel reads James Purdy’s 1956 novel *63: Dream Palace* “from behind,” following Jonathan A. Allen’s attempt to render anal desire legible in a mode of close reading that privileges, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms, the reparative over the paranoid or the symptomatic. Purdy’s novel is seen to mount a critique of the idea that particular (sexual) acts can be straightforwardly read as signifying sexual desire and identity, either figuratively or literally. By portraying both figurative and literal modes of reading as fallible, unsuccessful and risky, the novel – as well as van Kessel’s reading of it, which is presented as a literal reading that does its own violence to the text and can therefore be seen as an overreading in Davis’s sense – posits the question of whether (anal) desire is readable at all and challenges any fixed ethical valuations of particular forms of reading, including the reparative one championed by Allen.

In the second section, the attention shifts from a focus on the relation between legibility and desire to a focus on legibility in relation to justice and the law. The authors in this section ask how processes of legibility and justice intersect and diverge, to what extent legibility is necessary for justice to prevail and to whom these practices or performances of the law must be intelligible. The pertinence of the connection between il/legibility and the law becomes most evident in the manifestation of the law book and its application, which is where the registers of signifying and a-signifying semiotics as identified by Lazzarato collide.

In theory, the textual nature of the law makes it accessible to anyone able to read, but in practice, the heavy complex jargon of the law and the intricacies of the different legal systems give rise to ambiguities and a need for interpretation. This effectively renders the law legible only to trained interpreters such as lawyers and judges, whose interpretations are reinforced through a performance

in court (see Horsman 2010). For the outcome of this performance to be a success, i.e. for it to be considered *just*, it is necessary for there to be an agreement that the law was read correctly. However, this reactive procedure of the law is preceded by its pre-emptive functioning; despite a shared understanding of the law as a text demanding interpretation, its prescriptive character is in fact governed by a machine-like logic according to which one is either within or outside of the law. It is this logic that is referred to in the common phrase “the apparatus of the law.”

The chapters in this section emphasize how neither signifying nor a-signifying registers operate free of interference; the law functions within complex assemblages that go beyond the sphere of the legal. For example, as legal cases increasingly play out in the public sphere before eventually – if at all – moving on to the more enclosed space of the courtroom, the issue of justice regularly shifts from being situated in a legal framework to a socio-cultural and often highly mediated one, where signs circulate and operate differently, and their interpreter becomes much more fluid. Nonetheless, these trials scaffolded by (social) media cannot be considered separate from the legal sphere, as public judgement comes to act as a matter of justice in its own right.⁵ Meanwhile, legislators are increasingly building on the machinic logic inherent in the law in order to sustain law enforcement, including through the development of algorithms that aim to predict and prevent law-breaking – predictive profiling being perhaps the most well-known example. While the programming of these structures may build on human input – and at times indeed human prejudices and assumptions – these structures are governed by a switch from language to numbers that arguably defies the meaning-making process in the materialization of the law.

To map and investigate the il/legibility of the registers of signifying and a-signifying semiotics in relation to the law, the authors in this section take cultural expressions from literature, popular culture and social media as their starting point. The focus is on the intersection of the textual, rhetorical, theatrical and machinic in the assemblages through which the law operates. Thus, for example, Siebe Bluijs uses Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony” to explore the tensions between the law as an abstract, immaterial idea and its concrete, material manifestations. Asking in what way the law should be readable

5 The #metoo discussion, which surfaced in fall 2017, concerning sexual abuse and harassment in Hollywood and elsewhere, is a case in point, as one of the recurring issues in the public debate is that of “due process” versus the court of public opinion (Chachra 2017), which gains importance in light of the complexities of taking sexual harassment to court (Gentleman and Walters 2017).

for it to function and for its materializations to be identified as just, Bluijs problematizes the idea that the law's legibility is located in the textual sphere alone, reflecting in particular on the tension between the human interpreter of the law and the machine of justice that executes it in Kafka's text.

Isabel Capeloa Gil similarly makes a case for the law as extending beyond its textuality by identifying how cultural expressions may not only help to think about the legal, but can also impinge on its performance. By conceptualizing the porosity of the law, she shows how non-legal narrative and structural traditions are part of the assemblage in which the law functions, opening up new but sometimes also constraining interpretations of the law. Cultural engagements with the legal thus provide an alternative framework of legibility that seeps into the legal order itself, highlighting its circular and accumulative complexity.

While both Gil and Bluijs emphasize that the signification of the law cannot be fully understood without attention to the machinic logic that is also part of it, Tessa de Zeeuw's chapter turns this statement on its head by rendering explicit Yasco Horsman and Frans-Willem Korsten's claim that, as much as the law may be conceived of as "an abstract machine," its materializations do not "function independently from the cultural and socio-political sphere that surrounds it" (278). Emphasizing the law's dependence on these surrounding spheres in order to demonstrate its own efficacy, de Zeeuw shows how notions of systemic (in)justice paradoxically become dependent on a theatrical space of representation. Ultimately, she argues, a more legible legal system would rely on accounting simultaneously for the two different semiotic registers that constitute the law.

While the incommensurability of the legible and the illegible, of the signifying and the machinic, is a recurring issue throughout this volume, the chapters in the third section tackle the problematic of il/legibility most stridently from the point of view of the machine. Taking up diverging machines and machinic processes, from computation and programming (Gauthier) to networked connectivity and image circulation (Cubitt), and from robotics and cybernetics (Horsman) to big data and machine reading (van de Ven), the authors in this section converge in calling attention to the use of metaphors to describe machines and machinic processes, thus confronting us with the knottiness of notions like "computer language" (Gauthier), "personhood" (Horsman), "networks" and "connectivity" (Cubitt), and, indeed, "reading" itself (van de Ven). As Sean Cubitt reminds us in his chapter, while "the application of a technical metaphor to non-human realities" may be illuminating in its own performativity, it is also "just that: a metaphor" – and "as metaphor, it is a translation, a communication of incommensurable terms."

It is the issue of incommensurability that lies at the heart of this section. Thoroughly embedded in the discourses on computation, assemblages, cybernetics and big data, the chapters in this section nevertheless point to the significance of critical theory and the Humanities in probing these phenomena. At the same time, they place emphasis on the socio-cultural, machinic and technological transformations that give rise to them. The task at hand, the chapters suggest, is first and foremost to identify and expose what remains illegible in the machinic processes at work in our culture and society, so as to unmask – through these legible illegibilities – the power dynamics at play. For, as Cubitt claims, “Humanities alone are equipped to identify what is truly illegible, a task we perform precisely by reading, using every technique we have, eclectically, to find an entry into the opacity of events.”

The section opens with Yasco Horsman’s commentary on the dramatic irony inherent to the temptation, for us as human beings, to project personhood onto machines we know are governed by algorithms. Drawing on Lacan’s lectures on psychoanalysis and cybernetics from the 1950s, as well as on Hannah Arendt’s well-known reflections on the Eichmann trial, Horsman calls attention to the friction between the two incommensurable modes of understanding that we employ when faced with intelligent machines, i.e. the fact that we “*know* that they are operated by software [and yet] cannot help but to project personhood onto them.” The perplexity to which this leads, he claims, must be framed in terms of a type of uncanniness “that pervades our attempts to put forth legal responses to the rise of algorithms,” as in the case of drone warfare, self-driving vehicles or, indeed, Stephen Hawking’s computerized voice, the example to which Horsman returns throughout the chapter.

The section continues with David Gauthier’s critique of the concept of “machine language.” Offering a genealogical account of the advent of the language metaphor in Computer Science, cybernetics and discussions on so-called new media and the digital, Gauthier highlights how its development has yielded an illusionary separation of computation into “hardware” and “software”: on the one hand, a machinic “black box” (illegible); on the other, a symbolic regime of (legible) code and commands. What is effaced in this logic, Gauthier claims, is the in-between moment in computer programming – the temporal interval between two instances of legibility: the moment of “instruction/interpretation” (legible as textual source code) and the moment of “result/ interpretation” (legible as that which is effectuated by a given program). Gauthier stakes a claim for the study of this in-between, this legible illegible, which is the moment of execution itself (or action as such), for it is here, he asserts, that the machine’s violence of labor precarization, as well as its potential for (self)modification, and thus the possibility for cultural critique, manifests itself most clearly.

Sean Cubitt's chapter picks up on this issue of labor precarization with a pressing critique of the metaphor of connectivity and the cultural practices and machinic processes it stands for and obscures. Cubitt draws attention to the emergence of what he calls the "mass image" (singular) comprised of the many commodified images aggregated through disciplined consumption (i.e. the viewing, sharing, liking, etc. of images online). On the one hand, he asks whether and, if so, in what forms, it is possible to "restore legibility to images [plural] today, thereby returning them to culture." On the other hand, he points to the significance of paying heed to (the implications of) the ways in which images circulate in and as data, and the cost of signification (or significance, as Cubitt writes), which is the logic on which the network condition thrives. This sliding scale between signification and asignification means we need to attend to both the unstable single images of which the mass image is made up and the notion of connectivity from which it emerges and to which it gives shape, for it is here, Cubitt maintains, that the political-aesthetic task of the Humanities presently lies.

Finally, in her chapter, Inge van de Ven usefully proposes to move away from positing close reading and distant reading as mutually exclusive towards an integrated approach of "reading in terms of scale variance, of zooming in and out between part and whole, thus discovering the myriad shades of grey between close and distant."

The fourth and last section explores questions pertaining to the close and the distant, the incommensurability of the legible and the illegible, and the signifying and the machinic in relation to the il/legibility of cultural heritage. Its chapters reflect on the il/legibility of objects from the past, as well as on the il/legibility of the past itself. Not only do the ravages of time affect the material form of objects – such as images (Fossati and Verstraten), books (Sarion), weapons and clothing (Bosma), and ledgers (Hesselberth and Dirckinck-Holmfeld), the legibility of which comes to depend on practices of preservation, digitization and restoration – but the passage of time also entails ongoing changes in the historical, cultural, technological and political contexts that frame, enable or preclude specific modes of processing and/or reading (objects from) the past. For this reason, as Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Pepita Hesselberth demonstrate in their discussion of the digitization of Danish colonial archives, the legibility of heritage necessarily compels a critical examination of the legibility of positionality.

The era from which the authors approach the legibility of heritage has often been characterized as a "digital" and a "postcolonial" one. Both characterizations raise specific questions, some of which prove to be intertwined in the chapters at hand. The main questions addressed in this section are: What does digitization do to the il/legibility of objects and practices, and how? Is the

logic of digital technology as such legible in relation to both past and present? How is the colonial past made il/legible in archives and exhibitions? And how should we deal with the persisting illegibility of violent aspects of colonial history in a postcolonial era that arguably has not really earned the prefix “post”?

The section opens with Peter Verstraten and Giovanna Fossati’s conversation on the legibility of film archives, in which they comment on the oft-heard argument that the transition to digital technology preserves the legibility of analog images by halting their deterioration. However, surprisingly, one of Fossati’s main challenges as Chief Curator at the *EYE* Filmmuseum in Amsterdam is not so much the deterioration of analog images, but the rapid obsolescence rate of digital film. Digital technology is evolving so fast that the legibility of digitalized film heritage is under constant threat because of the impending incompatibility between digital formats and technologies. Digitization further leads the authors’ attention to the legibility of precisely that which is often deemed lost in the digital age: the materiality of cultural heritage. Thus, they discuss how the legibility of century-old film images is renewed through digitalized restoration processes such as the retrieval of faded colors in hand-colored film images. According to Fossati, these digitally restored tints not only form a hermeneutic tool, but also draw attention to the material layer of the film, spurring the question whether the material level of objects can be deemed legible on its own terms.

A similar issue is addressed by Dirckinck-Holmfeld, who, in her conversation with Hesselberth, wonders how to account for the viscosity inherent to analog colonial records when studying digitalized archives. This leads her to address the political function of assembled fragments of material cultural, which she reads, with Saidiya Hartman, as “critical material fabulations.” Likewise, Roxana Sarion, who in her chapter discusses various materializations of the seventeenth-century Spanish colonial text *Conversion de Piritu*, shows how the digitalization process challenges our bookish reading habits, but also promotes the exchange of knowledge in interactive networks and adds new layers of legibility to the 1690 missionary text, thus enhancing the meaning-making capacity of cultural heritage.

Unlike Sarion, who studies digital archives as paratexts that open up new meanings, Dirckinck-Holmfeld approaches the digitization of the Danish colonial archives primarily as a machinic process that arguably further obscures rather than expands the legibility of our colonial past because its logic mirrors, bears witness to and builds on the technologies of chattel slavery that created the archival records in the first place. This logic is not transparent or legible to the user of the archival database, who, Dirckinck-Holmfeld argues, cannot but submit to the old, violent colonial structures that haunt the digital archive.

In a similar vein, Anke Bosma argues in her chapter that colonial violence haunts Dutch society like a ghost, a lingering yet invisible presence. By comparing two exhibitions of a collection of objects obtained by Dutch colonizers during the Aceh-Dutch war (1873–1914), Bosma demonstrates how different modes of framing (e.g. “scientifically” or from a predominantly Dutch perspective) make colonial objects legible in specific and restricted ways. Her comparative approach to the two temporally distinct exhibitions (the first from 1907, the second from the present) exposes how colonial violence is as illegible now as it was then. While Bosma reads the illegibility that precludes a critical reading of colonial violence by analyzing the omissions and restrictions in presentations of colonial heritage, Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Hesselberth reflect on the possibilities of making the colonial archive legible in critical ways. In the end, it is only by attuning to the gaps and the noise in archives, and by paying attention to broken links and glitches that we can disclose the impossibility and illegibility of the stories that nonetheless want to be told. Finally, in his closing remarks, Frederik Tygstrup makes the case that to probe the meaning of legibility in the age of signs and machines is also to significantly reconsider the role and theory of representation. Revisiting the chapters included here, Tygstrup shows how the questions of il/legibility asked in each section also come to bear on the notion of representation as the authors negotiate the “increasingly knotted” relations between subject, object and image within the assemblages that representations are always already a part of.

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