Lecture 3: Alberti and the (untrustworthy) power of man-made images.

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When you need something done accurately – Please remove humans.
*The **machine** and the **media** of reproduction – the attempted removal of the human from the process of reproduction.*

Within the discussions surrounding Alberti's production of his treatise and his creation of a machine for reproducing the plan of the city of Rome in the middle 15th century, one consistent derivative theme that underlies portions of both developments is the desire for removal of subjective human intervention on the modes of reproduction.

In Alberti's documented insistence on the removal of actual illustrations for his architectural treatise, the attempt was to summarily remove the subjective results of human intervention from the reproduction of this work. Because of written text's signifying status, the lack of fidelity inherent in physical human intervention has little effect on the true result of the text's meaning. This is why Alberti's request for the ablation of illustration is significant: it is the only input that would be completely dependent on physical input from a human. With its removal, Alberti was trying to assure a certain level of fidelity that simply could not be maintained through physical human input. Alberti also transposed the physical presence of text to allow for the visualization of graphic form, thus eschewing its typical condition within the signifying structures of actual words and phrases: Although this method of transposition of illustration was actually relying on the physical production of the text, there was an already a culturally established graphic notion that allowed the adequate reproduction of its graphic presence. In other words, Alberti was willing to depend on established social and cultural norms to regulate the reproduction of meaning (words as signifiers) and the very abstract reproduction of graphic composition. In both cases, the human was at least partially removed as a subjective contributor to the reproduction.[1]

Alberti's Description of the City of Rome also removes the human as much as possible from the reproduction process. In this case, the machine devised by Alberti to allow the reproduction of the map of Rome (with its output limited to the digital spectrum of reproduction), attempts to remove the subjectivism of human intervention even more distinctly than the use of text. With the simple introduction of a digital interface as a mode of reproduction, the machine discourages (or disallows in an ideal situation) any additional input or notations from the reproducer. In this sense, it can be said that the machine within Alberti's reproductive process is forcing the appropriation of the human as a reproductive machine[2]: the human is, by design and intention, only used within a linear input to output sequence that translates digital information to a graphic composition of analog information (the completed map itself). The human-as-machine is the reproducing 'tool'.

The reference to Ptolemy's composition of the map of the world and its possible effects on Alberti's processes of digital documentation are also an interesting commentary on the removal of the human from the process of reproduction. The Renaissance cultivated a cultural necessity of accuracy: Embedded within the geometric constraints of built classical works were the very principles of the cosmos itself[3]. This is what began to demand the need for a higher order of fidelity in reproduction. Ptolemy's world map was crucial in reducing the factors that contribute to accumulated error when reproducing an image with the reliance on the subjective human. Ptolemy's insistence on the physical redrawing of the map based on the digital data every time reproduction was undertaken was again intentionally appropriating the human as a reproductive machine, thus removing the subjective human input[4].

Even within the methods of drawing that were being developed in the late 15th century; i.e., geometric perspective, the removal of man is an issue that permeates the very nature of input and output. The geometric perspective allows the removal of the cone of vision; the very cone of vision that has its origins in the eye of man. Without the need for this cone, and the development of the idea of infinity or vanishing point, man is not allowed to subjectively contribute to the reproduction process. In fact, man is physically removed from the 'assembly' that allows the reproduction of image through or within a projection plane. Instead, with the constraint of geometry in the construction of three-dimensional space, man is once again appropriated only as a machine to record the graphical representation of this geometry.

In all of these cases mentioned above, limitations in technology would not allow the removal of the human from the initial inputs of data. This, of course, has now changed with the methods of sensing and digital documentation becoming as conceptually rigorous as the methods of reproduction itself. The implications of this human removal are quite varied, and could be discussed in length (especially in relationship to the humanist principles of the Renaissance)[5].

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[1] This could be a possible answer to the question, "Why did Alberti resist the inclusion of illustration?" as addressed in class: In an underlying way, it was to remove the human from the act of reproduction. In this case, it could not be a complete removal, but only a partial one based on the technical constraints and social norms of the time.

[2] The removal of human is achieved through a transposition of function or task. The subjective human is replaced by the human-as-machine.

[3] It may be interesting to note that with the advent of calculus and descriptive mathematics, the universe itself could be codified and structured completely through digital constraints and descriptions. The geometrical principles that would insure

accuracies in the construction of these classical building elements were principles that were bound digitally to the very descriptions of the universe itself.

[4] The human development of reproduction method is consistently steeped with this quest towards the removal of man from the process. With the advent of newer and faster processing capabilities, the overall removal of man has become easier to accomplish, but the analysis of such methods has yielded certain production thresholds that illustrate the need for some human intervention. For more information on the removal of man and its relationship to methods of production please see Manual De Landa's War in the Age of Intelligent Machines.

[5] A question that could be asked: Was there a true objective understanding of the removal of man from these processes, or was it just a more abstract notion of higher fidelity that could only be reached through digital methods?