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Second-Best Life: Real Virtuality

2008

Reams of empirical studies and a century or two of social theory have noticed that modernity produces increasingly shallow and instrumental relationships. Where bonds of mutuality, based on face-to-face connection, once survived, we now tend to exist in a depthless, dematerialized technoculture. This is the trajectory of industrial mass society, not transcending itself through technology, but instead becoming ever more fully realized.

In this context, it is striking to note that the original usage of “virtual” was as the adjectival form of “virtue”. Virtual reality is not only the creation of a narcissistic subculture; it represents a much wider loss of identity and reality. Its essential goal is the perfect intimacy of human and machine, the eradication of difference between in-person and computer-based interaction.

Second Life. Born Again. Both are escape routes from a gravely worsening reality. Both the high-tech and the fundamentalist options are passive responses to the actual situation now engulfing us. We are so physically and socially distant from one another, and encroaching virtuality drives us ever further apart. We can choose to “live” as free-floating surrogates in the new, untrashed Denial Land of VR, but only if we embrace what Žižek called “the ruthless technological drive which determines our lives.”¹

Cyberspace means collapsing nature into technology, in the words of Allucquere Rosanne Stone; she notes that we are losing our grounding as physical beings.² The key response in the arid techno-world is, of course, more technology. Drug technology, for the 70 million Americans with insomnia; for the sexually dysfunctional males now dependent on Viagra. Cialis. etc.; for the depressed and anxious who no longer dream or feel.

And as this regime works to further flatten and suppress direct experience. Virtual Reality, its latest triumph, comes in to fill the void. Second Life. There, and whatever brand is next to offer dream worlds, to a world denuded of dreams. In our time, “virtual bereavement” and “online grieving” are touted as superior to being present to comfort those who mourn,³ where tiny infants are subjected to videos; where “teledildonics” delivers simulated sex to distant subjects.

“Welcome to Second Life. We look forward to seeing you in-world”, the website promo beckons. Immersive and interactive, VR provides the space so unlike the reality its customers reject. For a few dollars, anyone can exist there as an “avatar” who will never grow old, bored, or overweight. Wade Roush of *Technology Review* declares Second Life a success insofar as it is “less lonely and less predictable”

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso. 1997). p. 44.

² Allucquere Rosanne Stone, “Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?” in Michael Benedikt, ed. *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1991).

³ Joseph Hart, “Grief Goes Online” in *Utne*, April 2007.

than the life we have now.⁴ This inversion of reality is the consolation of the supernatural of many religions, and serves a similar substitutive function.

Reality is disappearing behind a screen, as the separation of mind from body and nature intensifies. The technical means are being perfected fairly quickly, making good on the promises of the early 1990s. At that time VR, despite much ballyhoo,⁵ could not really deliver the goods. Fifteen or so years later, the technology of Second Life (for example) engages many users with a strong sense of physical presence and other pseudo-sensory effects. Virtual reality is now the definitive expression of the postmodern condition, perhaps best typified by the fact that nothing wild exists there, only what serves human consumption.

Foucault described the shift of power in modernity from sovereignty to discipline, and an enormously technologized daily life has accelerated this shift.⁶ Contemporary life is thoroughly surveilled and policed, to an unprecedented degree. But the weight and density of tech mediation create an even more defining reality, and a more profound stage of control. When the nature of experience, on a primary level, is so deeply altered, we are seeing a fundamental shift — a shift being extended everywhere, at an accelerating pace.

Virtual reality best typifies this movement, its simulations and robotic fantasies a cutting-edge component of the steadily advancing, universalizing, standardizing global culture. Sadly pertinent is Philip Zai's judgment that VR is the "metaphysical maturity of civilization".⁷ All that is tangible, sensual, and earth-based corrodes and shrinks within technologically mediated existence.

Of course, there are forms of resistance to this latest efflorescence of the false. But a luddite reaction always seems to pale before the magnitude of what it faces. There is a very long, sedimented history behind every newest technological move, an unbroken chain of contingency. The leap involved in grasping new technics is made easier by the gradual impoverishment of human desires and aptitudes caused by the earlier innovations. The promise is, always, that more technology will bring improvement — which more accurately means, more technology will

⁴ Wade Roush, "Second Earth" in *Technology Review*, July/August 2007, p. 48.

⁵ Widely circulated books include: Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1991); Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of VR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Rudy Rucker, R. U. Sirius, Queen Mu, *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992); Nadia Magnemat Thalmann and Daniel Thalmann, *Virtual Worlds and Multimedia* (New York: Wiley, 1993) Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992). An excellent corrective is Robert Markley, ed., *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁶ For his idiosyncratic twist on this, see Jean Baudrillard. *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext, 1987).

⁷ Philip Zai, *Get Real: A Philosophical Adventure in Virtual Reality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 171.

make up for what was lost in the preceding “advances”. The only way out is to break this chain, by refusing its imperative.

Heidegger assailed the “objectification of all beings . . . brought into the disposal of representation and production,” pointing out that “nature appears everywhere as the object of technology”, and concluding that “World becomes object”.⁸ He also understood how technology changes our relation to things, a phenomenon underlined by virtual reality. “Talk of a respect for things is more and more unintelligible in a world that is becoming ever more technical. They are simply vanishing . . .” remarked Gadamer.⁹ Virtuality is certainly that “vanishing”.

There has been in fact a recent counter-attack in favor of respecting things as such, in favor of freeing them from an instrumental status, at least on the philosophical plane. Titles such as *Things* (2004) and *The Lure of the Object* (2005) speak to this.¹⁰ Desire for the authentic experience of “thingness” (Heidegger’s term) is a rebuke to the pathological condition known as modernity, a realization that “accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such.”¹¹

Immersion in virtual reality is a particularly virulent strain of this pathology because of the degree of interactivity and self-representation involved. Never has the built environment depended so crucially on our participation, and never before has this participation been so potentially totalizing. With its appeal as, literally, a second life, a second world, it is *The Matrix* — one that we ourselves are to continually pay to reproduce. Heinz Pagels’ description of the symbolic, in general, certainly applies to virtual reality: in denying “the immediacy of reality and in creating a substitute we have but spun another thread in the web of our grand illusion.”¹² This use of cyberspace takes representation to new levels of self-enclosure and self-domestication.

Spengler’s survey of Western civilization led him to conclude that “an artificial world is permeating and poisoning the natural. The civilization itself has become a machine that does, or tries to do, everything in mechanical fashion.”¹³ Second

⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word ‘God is Dead’” in his *Off the Beaten Track*, translated and edited by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 191.

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 71.

¹⁰ Bill Brown, ed, *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Stephen Melville, ed., *The Lure of Things* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005).

¹¹ Brown. op. cit., p. 12.

¹² Heinz R. Pagels, *The Dreams of Reason: The Computer and the Rise of the Sciences of Complexity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

¹³ Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics*, translated by Charles Franco Atkinson (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 94.

Life, Google Earth, etc., using graphics cards and broadband connections are sophisticated and enticing escape hatches, but it's still the same basic machine orientation. And VR, as David Gelernter happily proclaimed, "is the sort of instrument that modern life demands."¹⁴

Born of military research and the entertainment industry, Virtual Reality depends on us for its projected role throughout society. Real virtuality will be the norm when it infects various spheres, but only with our active consent. Wittgenstein felt that "it is not absurd e.g. to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity."¹⁵ Science and technology are the greatest triumphs of civilization, and the point is more grimly apparent than ever.

¹⁴ David Gelantner, *Mirror Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 34.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, translated by P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 56.

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May 21, 2012



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2008

From *Green Anarchy* #25, Spring-Summer 2008