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THE RETURN OF THE VIRTUAL

A whole new lexicon has arisen that seeks to capture the new ways of working . . . including 'Web enterprises', 'virtual organisations', 'virtual teams', 'teleworking' and so on.

(Jackson, 1999: 3)

Do you think that there is anything new about the virtual? If so, you will be surprised to learn that in 1556 Thomas Cranmer was executed in large part because of his affirmation of the virtuality of the Eucharist. Similar charges were levelled against the reformation theologians Luther and Zwingli. Indeed, debates surrounding the virtual and practices of virtuality have a long history. This chapter introduces the historical importance and associations of the virtual as an aspect of cultures in Europe and other parts of the world. Sections introduce historical virtualities and develop the argument for the historicity of the virtual, as follows:

VIRTUALISMS IN HISTORY

The virtual certainly has been controversial in the past. Where today's users of virtual reality or members of online virtual teams complain of carpal tunnel syndrome, in earlier epochs other notions of the virtual could carry the punishment of death. The argument here is that the virtual has long been significant as a cultural category, as part of the human mental toolkit. Furthermore, two brief examples suggest that we could learn a great deal about the social actualizations of the virtual from historical cases. The virtual has long existed in the form of rituals, and in the built form of architectural fantasies and environments.

In fact, if the virtual has meanings of 'virtue', of being 'almost-so' or 'almost-there', one does not need to look far to find virtual worlds which surround us or their historical counterparts. Virtual worlds are simulations. Like a map, they usually start out as reproducing actual worlds, real bodies and situations; but, like simulations (see following section and Chapter 2), they end up taking on a life of their own. Somewhere along the way they begin to diverge, either when it is realized that no map can be so complete that it represents an actual landscape fully, or when they become prized as more perfect than messy materiality. As virtual worlds, they become 'virtuous', utopian. Virtual worlds become important when they diverge from the actual, or when the actual is ignored in favour of the virtual – at which point they are 'more real than real', as Jean Baudrillard, a theorist of the ironies of late twentieth-century cultures, has pointed out. An example is found in the way representations of the health of

stock-markets, as expressed in, say, the charts and econometrics of a computerized news service, routinely stand in for the actuality of the economic life of nations half a world away. This 'hyper-real' quality implies that the virtual has to be taken into account on its own terms, because it is no longer simply a reflection of the actual (see Chapter 7).

Baroque cyberspaces

One of the most interesting historical uses of the virtual anticipates the way in which people now refer to virtual realities or virtual teams. This is found in the discussion of mirror reflections as ‘virtual images’ and of the way we experience dreams as ‘virtually real’. In optics, a ‘virtual image’ is formed by the apparent, but not actual, convergence of light rays to make an apparent but not exact counterfeit of the real. This is not simply a matter of perfect resemblance, however, for the image is reversed left to right. The image is virtual in that it suggests a potential mirror-world on the other side of the glass, an early precursor of the power of simulation. Illusions, mirrors to extend the space of a room (such as the Palace of Versailles’ Hall of Mirrors) and *trompe-l’œil* decoration fascinated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers.

If cyberspace is a ‘consensual hallucination’, in the words of the novelist who coined the term, William Gibson (1984: 67; see Chapters 3 and 4, this volume), then cave paintings might well count also. But skipping backward only 200 years, and much closer to our time, another historical moment celebrated the virtual to produce the first elaborate virtual environments – often in the form of the interior decoration of churches. This indulgence in *trompe-l’œil* contrasted with the dislocation and wars of eighteenth-century Europe, the first state powers asserting a harmonious, ecstatic world, in part as an expression of their power. These simulations were made to appear to defy gravity.

The heady lure of these mystical works is based on their elaborate continuities of human and fictive space. . . . They pair techniques involving the creation of a dreamscape, and the provision of [human] figures for identification that call the viewer to enter fictive space, changing with their movements, inviting their co-authorship. They are fundamentally navigable . . . ‘spaces of persuasion’.

(Maravall, 1986: 74–5, quoted in Cubitt, 1998: 75)

Baroque architecture and decoration rendered a dramatic space of swirling movement beyond the cares of the sublunary world into paint, plaster and marble. Not only did painted scenes of heavenly delights on vaulted ceilings trick the eye; the buildings were celebrations of forced perspective both in their floor plans and sections. Dominant lines of cornices, and rows of columns were shifted off of a right-angled grid to converge slightly, giving an impression of grandeur and distance.

At its pinnacle, the Baroque offered the thoroughly mediated interactivity of audience participation in the spectacle of its own rule. . . . [It] 'was, like postmodernism today, at once a technique of power of a dominant class in a period of reaction and figuration of the limits of that power' . . . we need to understand the culture of spectacle in the first Baroque as the beginnings of our own. To understand that the vertigo of imperial expansion, the terrors of absolute power and the morbid fascination with decay and mortality have been transformed into these virtual architectures is to catch a glimpse of the emergence of our own obsessions with the universe as our object of possession, our anxieties about absolute commodification.

(Beverly, 1993: 64, quoted in Cubitt, 1998: 75)

Virtual environments have been less spectacular in their treatment of space due to technical limitations. However, they share the concern of the baroque church ceiling to draw the viewer into a spectacle which transcends the everyday spaces of the temporal world, at the same time pushing that participant away as a 'fallen' mortal. The mind and soul could escape, but in both cases the body is a dead weight which pulls one back to Earth. Angels indeed – these spaces solicited a separation of the mind and body into a virtual and concrete pair: the soul and the flesh. For the former, salvation came through the powers of the state and its church; for the latter, abjection and domination as a 'bare life' (cf. Agamben, 1998) worthy not of lofty institutions such as the state but of the soil.

Some of the first commercial immersive environments, such as nineteenth-century panoramas, drew huge paying crowds to see the world as controlled spectacle. Like a diorama in a museum which has been constructed and arranged to show the ecology in which an animal lives, panoramas attempted to create a virtual environment via a 360-degree painting viewed from a central viewing platform. Into these circular paintings 'it was possible to project yourself imaginatively, exploring the *mise-en-scène*' visually, as earlier Europeans had marvelled in the baroque ceilings of their basilicas. In

a curious inversion of the panopticon, placing the subject in the centre of the field of vision, radiating out into a world prepared for ocular discovery, placing . . . the power of universal vision firmly in the eye of the mass spectator, a bizarre democratization of the aristocratic gaze, first as panoptic professional, and then as the world-spanning, mobilized look of the sovereign individual' – the paying spectator.

(Cubitt, 1998: 78–79)

Panoramas

The gazebo-like central viewing platforms of famous circular panoramas such as, for example, the *Mesdag Panorama* allowed viewers to look out on a circular painting mounted in a rotunda. The 14m-high *Mesdag Panorama* presents a seaside scene. This virtual beach has been on display since 1881 in The Hague, Netherlands. It allows one a vicarious view of a timeless, harmonious and cultured nature. Patrons would ascend from a staircase below into a viewing platform constructed like a gazebo which blocked out the ceiling of the building and prevented the viewer from getting too close to the painting (Halkes, 1999: 84). This is not an interactive environment – nothing in the painting changes to respond to the viewer, nor was the scene ever peopled by actors to enhance the illusion. It is not simply a representation but a simulation in which real sand conceals the

bottom edge of the painted beach scene (Halkes, 1999). The panoramas were extravagant attempts to not only mimic reality but to outdo actual experience (in this case of the popular seaside destination of Mesdag), by relocating the viewer to a panoptic and omniscient position.

As Crary argues in his book *Techniques of the Observer*, vision had been understood as the privileged sense of truth and of divine revelation. Seeing was believing. The pinhole camera obscura was the icon of classical vision because it revealed the physics of light and images. By contrast, he argues, the panopticon and stereoscope broke with this timeless model. These are the icons of the embodied, binocular vision of the nineteenth century. Unaided vision was shown to be all too human. It depended neither on revelation nor on laws of optics but on physiology and the imperfect, ageing biology of the human eye. The inverted images seen through pinhole cameras or in a camera obscura demonstrated this in physics and optics (Halkes, 1999). The stereoscope (an apparatus for 3D viewing by combining two photographs of the same scene, one slightly displaced from the other) and zoetrope (in which a series of drawings of an action, spinning on a circular tape or shade, were viewed through a slit, giving a cinematic appearance of moving images) depended on human binocular vision to make sense of otherwise nonsensical images (Crary, 1992: 67ff.).

the pictorial panorama was in one respect an apparatus for teaching and glorifying the bourgeois view of the world; it served both as an instrument for liberating human vision and for limiting and 'imprisoning' it anew. As such it represents the first true visual 'mass medium'.

(Oettermann, 1997: 7; see also Halkes, 2001: 60)

But more recently, Halkes incisively argues that the panoramas did not break with classical vision once and for all, nor did they testify to an alienation from an all-embracing truth. The panopticon was not part of a linear evolution of the sense of vision.

Rather the panopticon was an example of more complex desires in the nineteenth century for a classical vantage point analogous to the eye of God – even as it was being displaced at the time. Advances in technology and medical understanding removed vision from the order of divine revelation while visible appearance was displaced in favour of the microscopic and invisible in the sciences (see Mizroeff, 1999; Friedberg, 1993).

In some ways, today we are back to the panopticon. The rise of digitally simulated objects and environments raises similar issues. They displace unaided vision and the frail bodies as the standard of insight and performance. Digital simulations both liberate and incarcerate, displacing the original material world in favour of virtual environments (see Chapter 3).

Liminoid virtualities

Although these are only two examples, none of the many historical virtualities required the purchase of computers or online subscriptions. But we can clearly find historical types of virtual realities, fictions, simulations and perception games which tricked the mind and body into feeling transported elsewhere. Retrospectively, it is clear that there has been a history and succession of ‘virtual worlds’ which anticipate the ability of information and communications technologies to make present what is both absent and imaginary. The cinema is one example, but any number of rituals create, through a willing suspension of disbelief (for Euro-Americans), milieux in which rules other than those that govern the face-to-face interactions of actual bodies are the norm (for example, flashbacks and other temporal reorderings, leaps from scene to scene and ‘superhuman’ powers).

For most cultures, however, collective ‘conjuring’ of altered modes of perception and understanding are more common practices. These virtual spaces that populate the anthropological literature are lived more strongly than the mere ‘consensual hallucination’ envisioned for cyberspace (cf. Gibson, 1984). Rituals inaugurate liminal zones which are the performative

settings for rites of passage such as puberty or marriage (Turner, 1974). These zones allow what is often a symbolic death or removal from one social status and birth into another. Initiates first lose their status and, after undergoing the appropriate rituals, are received back into the society and the space of the everyday with a new status. In between is a 'time out of time' on the '*limen*' (threshold) of membership or a new status. In this space, initiates are instructed in their new identity and responsibilities. The bride and groom's walk down the aisle at a wedding is a common example familiar in European and American societies. The wedding service is a liminal time and space. In it, the bride and groom enter according to strict customs. Harking back to ancient patriarchal traditions, the bride is escorted down a central aisle and 'given away' by her father or another representative of her family. The couple receive instruction from the priest and promise to care for each other, even if in what seems like code today – 'I promise . . . to have and to hold' and so on. The bride and groom then exit down the aisle as a new, socially recognized couple.

Like Janus, the double-faced god of doorways and portals, the border between the everyday and sacred, ritual spaces face both inward and outward, creating an equivocal, ambiguous zone – a zone is not just a line, but a strongly marked, interstitial space. '*Limen*' are thus 'threshold' spaces in which one is neither 'in' nor 'out' (Turner, 1974). A key part of the transformation is the suspension of everyday social norms to allow a rearrangement of the social order, conferring new status and allowing society to acknowledge and recognize the new identity of those who have been the focus of the ritual. As such, liminality offers a utopian moment in which the weight of limiting social regulations is lifted. Liminality is crucial to the adaptive powers of a culture.

Liminal zones are virtual environments or spaces. The bride and groom remain quite close by; they do not literally and materially travel from one place to another. The rules of quotidian face-to-face life are suspended or even inverted in a carnivalesque of norms. In their place, special rules of engagement rule the

moment and the space. Victor Turner's famous dictum states that liminality is 'betwixt and between' stages in the life process, located between the urban/civilized/members and the wilderness/nature/outside (Turner, 1974). Of less life-changing status, there are many examples of *liminoid* spaces and genres in any society – the Web, vacation resorts, theme park environments not to mention specific holidays and events (Shields, 1989). In contemporary society, liminality has been stripped of its transformative power to become a commodified experience, and no more so than in the tourism and leisure industries (Shields, 1991) and online (Shields, 1996; Silver, 2000).

Like liminal zones and events, virtual spaces are 'liminoid' in that they are participated in on a temporary basis, and distinguished from some notion of commonplace 'everyday life'.¹ Virtual space is not only betwixt and between geographical places in a non-place space of telemediated data networks, but participants take on specific 'usernames' or identities, and many surreptitiously engage in activities they might not otherwise consider. Computer-mediated, digital forms of virtuality are continuations of long-running processes; to be understood they need to be linked back to a history of cultural forms such as the liminal.

However, is this loss of the liminal a degradation of the virtual in digital virtual spaces? The technology and fixed programming code of virtual realities supercharges and often overpowers the qualities of liminality. The greatest power of digital virtuality – and perhaps its most widely discussed feature – has been in providing a matrix in which new modes of being and practices of becoming could be experimented with. In its early stages through the 1970s and 1980s, few and tenuous guidelines were provided for *metaxis*, the leap from the concrete to the virtual. This was usually a leap of imagination but in the case of online gaming it became merely a question of adjusting a computer interface (see Chapter 2). *Metaxis* is the key conceptual sleight of hand in allowing users to imagine leaving behind identities in one realm to become something/someone else or to play an

entirely different role (for example, in a role-playing game). The charged, affectual space of online games and chats gained its character as an extension of the rhythms and encounters of virtual bodies, sociable exchanges and animated tracings of hypertext links, none of which the space pre-existed except abstractly. A liminal zone provides the potential for assuming new identities, and thus the virtual became a liminoid space; not one directed at rites of passage, but rather at experimentation – like that other, sacred liminoid space of advanced economies, the scientific laboratory.

The virtual rebounds on the material and the abstract, changing the Enlightenment tradition of simple dualisms not only of here and there, inside and outside, but of concrete and abstract, ideal and actual, real and fake, transcendent and immanent. The either–or model is shifted in a tangible and everyday manner into a system of hybrids of the old dualisms which are best understood as intensities and flows (see Shields, 1997). The virtual infects the actual as a metaphor which has moved from the realm of digital domains and computer technologies to become an organizing idea for government policies, everyday practices and managerial strategies. The virtual shifts the commonsense notions of the real away from the material. The virtual, as in a ‘virtual organization’, is more heavily invested with notions of collective performance and *inhabitation* than a priori architectural objects such as ‘the factory’ or ‘the office’.

Like other liminoid zones under capitalism, such experiences and sites generally become commodified as package tourist attractions, not sacred places which are the sites of cures or pilgrimage destinations. From the virtual as a threshold to the effervescence of cultural margins, the Internet becomes more and more a pay-per-view, pre-screened information service. Much of the popular discussion of computer-mediated communications amounts to domesticating virtual spaces and bringing it out of its liminoid status – a realm of illicit information (how to build a nuclear bomb and so on), the resort of the repressed that contemporary culture generally excludes or refuses to grant a

place to (the obese, those physically challenged in one way or another), an arena in which forbidden desires are unleashed, and a subculture populated by mythified figures such as the hacker.

UTOPIAN VIRTUALISM

The hype around digital virtuality over the past decade has been more about myth and less about actual cyberspaces. As a fad and myth, virtualism is itself virtual. Symptoms of virtualism include exaggerated expectations of anything described as 'virtual', and unrealistic expectations that digital technologies will solve social problems. The boom in technology stocks and enthusiasm for virtual reality hinted at the ongoing expectations of the virtual. In line with its historical definitions, it carries a certain promise of positive potential or virtue. Portrayed as enabling a human virtuosity beyond the limits of the body or gravity, the legacy of the baroque echos through the claims of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

The explosion of virtual reality as well as more mundane virtual spaces is that it allowed a utopian moment of gaiety that was arguably the most significant Western, and even more specifically American, counter-cultural moment since the 1960s. Although it was reabsorbed into the commercial mainstream, its utopian and liminal moments commodified and packaged into experiences for sale or vague promises of excitement attached to the purchase of a home computer, virtualism marks the culture of the close of the twentieth century as surely as stock-market booms marked the economy.

Unlike the 1960s this moment of cultural effervescence and optimism was not limited purely to one demographic group such as the young or the wealthy but was participated in by a range of consumers and producers who stretched from the young inventors of video-games (in their early teens) to financiers and investors who supported and 'bought in', socially and psychically, to the utopian dreams of, first, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and, later, dot-comers. Statistics showed that older people, poor

households and young black men neither dived into the consumer frenzy for technology (the devices themselves) nor acquired the skills to enter and keep abreast of the rapidly evolving industry. Computers came to appear as essential, as a necessity. Despite all this hand-wringing, the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of utopianism into the mainstream which has been only partially quelled by the familiar journalistic doubt, accusations of political naivety and an unwarranted faith in technology to transform social relations and redress inequalities from a personal to a global scale.

A remarkable element of this process was how quickly the paradigms on which information and computing technologies were based evolved and matured. Short, two-year cycles of novelty followed by obsolescence which had been finally rejected by automobile consumers reappeared in the computer industry. Software and machinery that did not work or was so insecure as to be a dangerous liability together with inflated promises and hype echoed some of the cars of the 1950s and 1960s. The car, after all, was the greatest vehicle not only of people and materials moving from place to place, but of myths and dreams – virtual delights and transports. However, as Poster notes,

the history of electronic communication is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed.

(Poster, 1990: 5)

SUMMARY

This chapter has considered the virtual as defined in dictionaries and encountered in historical forms of social interaction. The basic dictionary definition of the virtual is ‘anything that is so in essence . . . although not . . . actually’ (*OED*) as in a task which is ‘virtually complete’. A related term, ‘virtue’ suggests the

intangible or latent quality of virtuality – there but not necessarily obvious to the senses. Historical virtualisms abound in simulations and representations that take on a life of their own (such as Baroque church interiors and Panoramas). But religious debates over the nature of virtual presences, such as during the Reformation, have been ugly in the past. The close affiliation between the virtual and liminality is especially significant for cultural and anthropological analyses of the ‘prehistory’ of contemporary European and American fascination with digital virtualities. In its use to conjure altered perceptions and understandings, the virtual overlaps with liminal rituals such as rites of passage. Liminal zones are social spaces in which initiates are ‘betwixt and between’ old and new social statuses and identities. Today’s commercialized, digital virtualities are liminoid in that they derive from the liminal but do not entail rites of passage. The utopian tint and optimistic outlook of late twentieth-century virtualism indicates its positive potential across social groups. However, later chapters will consider the exclusive quality of digital virtuality. While suspicious of a sales pitch that mobilizes fears of a ‘digital divide’, the question of who speaks and who gains entry to digital virtual environments and simulations is an important one. More profoundly, the implications of the virtual for our attitudes and actions towards risk and our understanding of the importance of balancing the virtual with the concrete (in economics) and the virtual and the abstract (in culture) will be probed in the chapters that follow.