Visions of Excess

Graham B. McBeath, Stephen A. Webb
1995

"Technology is dangerous, but less dangerous than the geniuses of the place."
-- Emmanuel Levinas

Introduction

In this paper we develop some of the critical issues raised by Allucquere Roseanne Stone in her essay "Virtual Systems". We set out to examine in some detail the relationship between embodiment, flesh and cyberspace. In seeking to extend her provisional insights we concentrate on two main areas : 1) the production of identity and difference, which is structured by new technologies through its mediation and authentication of various cultural representations; 2) the mediation of bodies and (dis)embodied identities vis-a-vis bio-technologies which may or may not be within physical proximities, that is, as interfaces within a system of visual images and spatial forms.

Before addressing the important relationship between cyberspace and bio-technology as a distinct cultural form it is necessary to examine some of the basic presuppositions which underlie the concept of cyberspace itself. The relationship between the imaginary and the real is of crucial importance in this respect. We can ask what is the mode of existence of cyberspace ? Is it imagined or is it real or indeed is it a juxtaposition of the two ? In some ways the formulation of the question is problematic since its suggests us to extract from it fixed and marked terms. When asked whether cyberspace is imaginary or real, the realist will naturally only see "hard" data and the computational props of new bio-technologies, whilst the metaphysician will see an aesthetic place with unassignable interstices between bodily space and bodies in space. Either way we would suggest that the focus should not just be one cyberspace a system of cultural expression, or what Lefebvre (1991) calls "representational spaces" which embody complex symbolisms, are rule bound and coded. Instead, we would begin further back by asking whether cyberspace is a force for cultural transformation and creation which is made to create enigmas or to elucidate them ?

Cyberspace, the Imaginary and the Real

Critical analyses of cyberspace and emergent electronic media are necessarily entwined with questions of the relationship between the imaginary and the real. Before going on to consider this relationship from a phenomenological standpoint it is worth setting some parameters around what it is meant by "ordinary images" such as paintings, photographs, televisual displays, maps, diagrams etc. By concentrating primarily on visual images this will help us in establishing how, if at all, cyberspace has formal properties which allow us to designate it as belonging to the dimension of ordinary images. We have in mind here some of the more mundane aspects of new electronic media which emphasise spatial representations such as telepresence and video conferencing. It is relevant here to acknowledge that Dennett (1969) and Fodar (1975) amongst others

have carefully analysed the determinancy of certain properties as properties of the image itself as well as the relationship between menta l acts and representations.

In the discussion that follows, however, we shall avoid these important analyses and focus instead on the rhetorical devices and presuppositions about cyberspace which are made in relation to various notions of the relation between the imaginary and the real.

We think it uncontestable and basic that cyberspace is at some substantive axis composed of images, be they auditory, sensory, tactile or visual. Let us concentrate on unpicking the later since it seems to us to be the most obvious element for elucidation. Ordinary visual images have something peculiarly to do with the visual system, and in particular, with the properties to which that system is characteristically sensitive. For cyberspace, as well as other new electronic media, which rely on ordinary visual images, the two most important properties are those of light/colour and space. In his discussion of visual images Rey (1981) claims that "the central property here is associated with light (and/or colour). But at least for human beings, other properties that are reliably indicated by light also seem to count importantly as visual properties. These are especially spatial properties" (p.118). For example, visual images are represented by propositions that incorporate various spatial relations (e.g., "left of", "above", etc).

He goes on to detail these as including : length, width, depth, proportion, composition and orientation of parts. The visual images entailed in cyberspace are forms or patterns that posses at least some spatial properties. Visual images in cyberspace are ordinary images in the sense that they are images of something. As Rey note out "this 'of' relation, however, can be quite diverse : an image can be of the thing(s) it resembles, or of thing(s) that played a certain role in its production, or of thing(s) that it is used to represent; and these things may be the same or different in different cases" (pp 118-119). The point being made here is that visual images depict the relation between an image and the spatio-temporal particular it purports to represent. Therefore visual images in cyberspace are particular kinds of representation. Leaving aside questions of imagery resolution, processing capacity and clarity, which are technical considerations, cyberspace fulfills a representation role through the exploitation of certain correspondences between its properties of an Y - depicting image and the properties of an Y - it represents.

Thus the Web page of a map of Berlin depicts the place of Berlin by virtue of certain visual properties of it (such as the length of the street lines) which correspond to and represent Berlin itself (such as the lengths of the actual streets). As Rey states "the correspondence is systematic in that it is lawlike, supporting a certain range of inferences and counterfactuals... many properties [of Berlin] can be inferred" (p.119) and he calls these correspodences forms of "compositional exploitation" with Y - depicting properties which are different from Y - denoting or Y - describing properties. The concept of compositional exploitation allows us to distinguish cyberspace as an imaginary representation from other non imaginary representations.

In much of the literature on cyberspace, and within cyberpunk fiction, the imaginary demands to be taken as the real. This applies just as much to the speculative theorist as it does to the extrapolative computer scientist. However, "to be taken as real" is something that can occur in two very different ways. It means that the imaginary world of cyberspace takes the place of the real entirely, is substituted for it and somehow effaces it; this we know, is the ideal of an atomised model of technological progress that aims to take hold of the cybernaut subject, cast a spell on her, reduce her entirely to a cyberspace condition. The sort of cyberspace it seeks, in short, is to be so enthralling that is renders whoever embarks on it within its spell. But secondly, this also means that cyberspace has value to the extent that it passes, albeit in a discontinuous way, for "the real"; therefore deriving its value from its equivalence or commensurability with things that exist in real spatial forms, and thus in return it has a value in reality. From this perspective cyberspace gives reality its meaning. Here the two poles of opposition between the imaginary and the real are complementary; together they build a commensurate totality; with each giving the other what it lacks. This of course, is particularly true of certain claims made about

cyberspace for enhancing relations of sociability, gender and community. Either way in each of these accounts cyberspace is characterised as a representational form which is derived from compositional exploitation which mixes image with reality and relies upon some notion of a reflexive subject forming a part of the cleavage.

We find that with some of the more exaggerated claims for "cyberspace as community" the aim is to represent the true relations between human beings as an embodiment of their social meaning and spatial positioning. This ambition to express the meaning of human reality is founded paradoxically on the unreality that constitutes the way of being of things in cyberspace; being imaginary it is in the nature of these things to remain always at a distance, set aside from what they are, from what they would be if they truly were. It is this setting aside of reality which simultaneously gives cyberspace its own reality and allows it to make present the process whereby meaning comes to the things in the world, a process which, precisely is possible only through a retreat from those things and in their setting aside. In addition, paradoxically, cybernauts, being always at a distance from themselves, can retain that essential characteristic only by becoming real equivocally, and the role of the imaginary is to make them real, albeit, as we have seen, in a mode of ambiguity and contestation.

Indeed, as McHale (1992) points out in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk" both Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Cadigan's *Mindplayers* attempt to resolve the ontological ambiguity we have detailed above between the imaginary and the real by constructing "a two-tier ontology by juxtaposing a primary reality plane with an inset cyberspace world" which makes possible "metafictional reflection by the text on its own ontological procedures" (pp.252-253).

In the latter "bad copy" version of cyberspace we may recall the critique of Platonic forms offered by Deleuze. Those who remain faithful to the Platonic ideal of "good" and "bad" images would regard cyberspace as been an inadequate resemblance to the real and as only an inferior simulacrum. That is, as an unauthorised and inadequate copy of the real. In this theory of images there is a value judgement which relegates cyberspace to the position of a dubious fabricator and inauthentic expression of the human condition. In Logique du Sens, Deleuze reverses this perspective by positively proclaiming the simulacrum and praising the fictionalist for the inadequacies of her forgeries. Here the bad copy version of cyberspace is celebrated precisley because of its limited resemblance to the real. Lecercle (1985) illustates this Deleuzian point when he says that "the simulacrum, because it rejects, or is denied, any direct relationship with the Idea, loses that permanence, that capacity to be encompassed by the limits of reality : it is mobile, animated by the irrepressible movement of fiction, and it escapes the control of its creator, because it avoids the action of the Idea" (p.97).

In this account cyberspace is an antagonistic counter-flow which germinates from and corrupts reality by investing in bastardized spatial forms with inexact representations, flawed spatial boundaries and uncertain outputs. Cyberspace come to resemble magical realism in its fusion of opposing representations, the splicing together of fantasy and fact and the mixing of solemnity with comic detachment. Here cyberspace stands against real spatial forms and is indifferent to those representational significations and processes which constitute it in "the real". This closley resembles simulated learning modes in neural network application research which positively relies on error and contradiction for achieving desired outcomes. With unsupervised learning or what is sometimes called "self-supervised learning", neural networks use no external influences to adjust their weighted inputs. "Hidden layers" of processing elements, are immunised from external influence and have no direct contact with the "real" environment. Their neural architecture often relies on stochastic learning and procedures to achieve pattern recognition and disease syptom diagnosis of external world phenomena.

From the above we can see that cyberspace is thus destined to attract two contradictory sorts of evaluation : first, for being too true to life or second, for not being so. Or put in another way for being an inexact depiction through being fantastical or an unfaithful one through being too faithful. This can be taken to reveal two ethical positions around the imaginary-real axes and the claims that are made for cyberspace for increased sociability. First is the claim that an overly formulaic construction of characters in cyberspace will be so one-dimensional

and utility bound that it is deprived of the living force of individual beings. Hence in the world itself they take on the life which they lack, or which is refused them in cyberspace. The second claim is that cyberspace will give reality to the world of cultural forms with such imaginary scope and such inspirational power that cyberspace truly appears to be in rivalry with the "real" world and to be capable of entering into competition. Thereby granting the cybernaut who enters therein the illusion of being able to dwell there for almost her whole life. This claim resembles the Lacanian concept of the "symbolic relation" in which cyberspace takes the place of the real; it is not complementary to the real world at all, but instead takes the place of the lack in the other. However, as Zizek (1989) notes whilst it "embodies what is lacking in the other" we discover that "the opposites, the poles of the symbolic relation, each in a way returns to the other its own lack; they are united on the basis of their common lack" (p.172). Whichever claim one prefers, the signifying power to which cyberspace advocates propose does not exist either as a pure interior or exterior of cyberspace, rather it retains a primary reference to dialectic of imaginary and real and a "real" presentation, that is, to a perception and positing of existence, to a set of cultural politics in general.

The Politics of Cyberspace and Bio-Technologies

Social theorists have struggled to properly articulate the foundations for a securely grounded aesthetics of social life in terms of either art or science or indeed as offering new forms of political emancipation. Habermas, for instance, in recognising the failings of thinkers who fall within his own critical heritage, such as Marx and Adorno, refuses to establish a programmatic framework for the aesthetic experience in modern societies. As McCumber (1989) has suggested "cultural tendencies to bring art and politics together lead, in general, either to authoritarianism (as in fascism), or to antiauthoritarian forms (such as anarchism)" (p.363). It seems appropriate to ask then how those who advocate some emancipatory potential for cyberspace can convincingly square the historical circle of uncertainty expressed in political aesthetics with the virtual futures which they wish to persuade us of ?

The cyberspace enthusiast is thought to undergo an advanced bio-technological and reflexive enchantment. In cyberpunk literature this is no less active in those novels, such as Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where Case undergoes a reconciliation with himself, than in those such as Jeff Noon's *Vurt* where the hero Scribble, in searching for his sister Desdemona, gets lost in cyberspace never to return. Cyberspace claims to be an instrument of knowledge, in the sense that its visual and spatial properties may contain information from which knowledge can be derived. But in its rhetorical form this is a knowledge which has as its starting point the void of fascination, a discovery that presupposes the authority of a far reaching ignorance, what Blanchot (1947) calls "a way of apprehending being whose condition is the reign of absence of being, an absence that seeks to be everything and become real in the dual and paradoxical form of absence and absence of everything" (p.72). He goes on to critically ask "in this universe of enchantment and fascination, what becomes of the contribution of individual beings, their ways of understanding themselves and each other, and of living ?".

Here our phenomenological reading of the imaginary and the real can be complimented by a cultural narrative. The return to what Weber called the charismatic spirit and its link to cyberspace is helpful in understanding this process of existential enchantment with bio-technologies. There has been a veritable celebration of certain everyday urban rituals and their concommitant existential passengers of the postmodern landscape in recent cultural studies literature. Carnivalesque, the flaneur, panic sex, unruly bodies, nomadic parasites, bodies without organs and hybridization are all chic terms which spring to mind in defining the postmodern terrain of the new cultural politics. These are complimented by their cyberspace equivalents of space-cadets, cowboys, hackers, sundogs and techno-geeks. What each of these loosley connected terms have in common is their emphasis on the adventurer-hero as a romantic searcher of authenticity. We examine the frontier language as a

search for authenticity more closely below, but for now to further paraphrase Blanchot we can ask are not the enthusiasts of cyberspace, who cast a spell on us in order to become our partners in the cyber game, obliged in their turn "to fall prey to this fascination, to be fascinating because they are themselves fascinated, incapable of controlling themselves even when displaying the greatest mastery and lucidity" (ibid). Like E.P. Thompson's Chartists, cyberspace might be terribly good for cybernauts even though they never get to go to cyberspace.

At the heart of discussions about the political, social and reflexive potential of cyberspace and particularly of full blown embodied virtual technologies is the idea that these have a transformative capacity to disclose or reveal new political possibilities for human identity and social relationships. For example, the Critical Art Ensemble (1994) celebrate the emerging electronic media and virtual reality as exemplary instances of power as nomadic. They claim that "the electronic voice is potentially the most powerful in the exercise of free speech" and that "electronic work addresses questions of identity, environmental catastrophe, war and peace and other issues associated with activist representation" (p.121). Their political reading of sedentary power notes that "technology is the foundation for the nomadic elite's ability to maintain absence, acquire speed, and consolidate power in a global system" but rather more optimistically that "new tactics and strategies of civil disobedience are now possible, ones that disturb the virtual order" (p.142). However, Simpson (1995), regards this technological leap of faith, like all others, as a response to our finitude, that is, "to the realization that we are vulnerable and immortal and that our time is limited" (p.14).

Cyberspace as a Technology of Disclosure

In Heideggerian terms those who point to the promise of cyberspace technologies adopt a position of overcoming or "a way of being towards" which can radically reconstruct new identities and forms of difference. They are accorded the status of positive value and creative difference of potential and actual Being. This is hardly suprisining given the Deluezian deriviatives of recent cyberspace literature, which regards force as a creative ontological opening which moves from "virtuality" to actuality. Indeed, as Gillian Rose (1984) has noted in her essay on the New Bergsonism "'Virtuality' is an alternative translation of the Greek dynamis to the conventional Latinized 'possibility' or 'potential'" (p.101). Thus virtuality and its associated technologies, as creative singularities or spaces of intensity, overcome what Deleuze calls negative consciousness and disorder.

It seems to us that it is not merely a matter of ascertaining how little or how much these new technologies can offer in the way of increased opportunities, such as, greater authenticity in social relations built on trust and exchange, or whether these can be quantified as deeper expressions of political democracy, in the sense that greater public access to information will significantly empower people as citizens and thereby extend their rights and responsibilities. Clearly, whilst these are important considerations for evaluating the likely impact of new electronic and bio-interactive media, we would argue that a more important and prior set of ontological questions should first be addressed which focus on the sense of the disclosing potential of cyberspace itself. That is, what theoretical assumptions are made for the acts and the project(ion) of cyberspace disclosure as a mediating phenomenon for new political and social arrangements ? Put simply, what presuppositions are at stake and what is meant by or seized hold of through the concept of spatial disclosedness as providing the ground and the foundation for the possibility of the discovery of new political and cultural forms ?

These questions rest on a common-sense understanding of knowing-how and not on a propositional knowing-that of things that cyberspace can disclose to us ? We suggest that the foremost consideration is the question of how cyberspace can disclose new human possibilities is an ontological issue of making sense of how things are possible and not explaining how they work. We have noted in a previous discussion that an engagement with cyberspace is often given by both social theorists and technophiles alike as an exaggerated poetics of space or a

creation without a prior grounding, pace Bachelard, and we went on to argue that this is in effect a reduction which is projected through and on to new bio-technologies in terms of what Husserl calls "wonderment in the face of the world". It seems to us that we can learn more about this phenomenon of the in-potentia of cyberspace through a closer reading of Heidegger's concept of disclosure.

Much of the literature on cyberspace which gives the new electronic technology a positive value reads its potential in terms of a capacity for change and transformation, not as an activity of disclosing in itself. In this sense affirmative commentaries on cyberspace amount to a form of cognitivism which posits the relationship between social and technological phenomenon in terms of what Heidegger refers to as "occurrent elements". That is, as a capacity for basing all forms of transformation upon the supposedly self-evident and directly intelligible ways of being of occurrent technology plus occurrent mental predicates. There is, however, a deeper sense of articulating the in-potentia of cyberspace, which comes very close to Heidegger's own understanding of ontological disclosure and discoveredness. Cyberspace as a territory of spatiality generated by bio-technological advancement is often set out as a shared clearing, a local situation and a "there" in which objects of potential can be encountered.

Here discovery through cyberspace can be read as being entirely consistent with the way in which things are discovered by Dasien, which for Heidegger, is fundamentally the activity of disclosing. The problem for cyberspace enthusiasts, however, lies in the kinds of claims that are made for the potential space of new technologies of disclosure and it is here that they depart from Heidegger's conception of Dasien as a derivation of truth. In his discussion of existential untruth as the opposite of disclosedness Heidegger tells us that the former is based on some kind of concealment. As Dreyfus (1994) notes this existential untruth is linked to Heidegger's notions of primordial evidence and falling :

> "Primordial evidence is for Heidegger experiencing something present just as it is. If, however, we try to stabilize such evidence and preserve it in language beyond the time and place in which it occurs, we lose this primordial relation." (p.274)

But the disclosedness of space in affirmative accounts of cyberspace also suggest movement, a more radical "crossing over" and a processes of reflexive transition. These are not just transitions from one state to another, or from the quality of one experience as it is turned into or replaced by another, but something of an quasi-ontological "cross-over" which entails the related but seemingly contradictory notions of withdrawal and open-ness. The juxtaposition of the French repli as "withdrawal" as in the French expression "replie sur soi-même" with depli as "opening up" or "unfolding" best captures what we have in mind with this phenomenological movement. Implicit in cyberspace language is the idea that cyberspace both "opens up" new frontiers and possibilities in the act of disclosure and that we must simultaneously "withdraw" from the real and into cyberspace as a way of deteritorialising, re-presenting or recoding. We temporarily or permanently hide in the enclosed womb of cyberspace. Withdrawal can also imply disappearance from the social world. For instance, in The Electronic Disturbance (1994), the manifesto for cyberspace, Heidegger's definition of disclosure is paraphrased to promote the idea of active retreat in the face of cyborg technology :

> "Anxiety in the face of cyborgs must not be confused with fear in the face of virtual demise. This anxiety is not an accidental or random mood of 'weakness' in some interface; but, as a basic state-of-media of Cysein, it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Cysein [Dasein] exists as sliding Being towards its disappearance." (p.146)

This might be seen by some as a retreat from old solutions or sterile remedies of dominant world-views and

letting things be seen in their uncoveredness. To be closed off and covered up "in the real" belongs to what Heidegger has called Dasein's facticity. Cyberspace becomes a "potential (em)bodied space" for letting something be other than it already is. Again the Critical Art Ensemble illustrate this point of letting things be other than they are and proclaim the potential for virtual technologies lifting the ideological veil :

> "Reality engines came to screenal man naturally and as a matter of course... We are thus prepared to find that screenal man transposed the structural conditions of his own data nets into the virtual world, and we may attempt to reverse the feedback and put back into the human mind what reality engines teach as to the nature of things." (p.145)

It is with these two related presuppositions which join theoretical thinking to a hypothetical ecology of spatial experience in which the promises held out for cyberspace can be situated. By joining frontier language with Stoical ascetic metaphors, we have with cyberspace, a heady mixture of suggestiblility and enigma for the restructuring of cultural experience. But what exactly do we encounter in these two significations of the potential space of social relations and the positive alignment of new technologies with cultural politics ?