A STRAIGHTFORWARD PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT ABOUT VIRTUAL REALITY AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

by Brent Wood

The world, not the planet, is becoming virtual.

Our idea of 'the planet' is already a virtual one, as the currently multiplying photos of the globe from space wordlessly attest. When we try to conceive of a 'global system' of any kind, our imaginations prove inadequate to the task. Hence the sublime experience aroused when we attempt to contemplate our earth in its entirety in one of our more peaceful, less procedural moments, as when a young adult cries at the beach on a summer evening over the fate of humanity.

We use giant matrices to model ecological and economic 'systems.' We abstract them from measurement, we logic through their equations, and we attempt to interpret our 'results' by comparing them with our ever-more-virtual experience. We call this process practical reasoning and it is generally assumed that it has some sort of pragmatic validity. After all, it's obvious that something has to be done about the current 'state of the earth.'

Just as obviously, though, the destruction continues. To the extent that we know this to be true, we in Southern Ontario have gathered it as much from our own experiences driving the 401 and finding garbage in Algonquin Park as from televised and statistical portraits of Amazonian clear-cuts. We correlate this data and assume we are making headway into the headspace of 'thinking globally.' It appears to me that we can make this assumption only to the extent that our 'world' has become virtual.

Virtuality is technologically-induced illusion. The primary question to be answered is whether virtuality is simply representation in the guise of sensory immersion, or whether indeed it is something more. If it is simply representation, then we will be able to follow the path worn by those who study representation - the semioticians and the theorists of modernity - in order to discover the implications for the future of *Homo sapiens* in their terrestrial interactions. If it is something more, then a new field will be open in the theoretical database, and other questions posed: what, then, becomes of our modern conventions of communication and the common sense they engender, and how can we understand the forms 'common sense' might assume in the future? For all the seeming esoteric quality of these questions, they are concerned with a very practical issue--our conception of our home, and therefore our relationship with it.

Our understanding of the meaning of the term 'the world' has evolved over the centuries from one in which time had been a primary component to one in

which time is simply an imposed dimension of measurement. Thus today 'the world' is immediate only. We have come to accept radical social and geographical change by flattening our concept of 'the world' such that its integrity is strictly Euclidian. Post-Euclidian models of the universe carry little currency outside theoretical practice, and our attempt to retain stability in our idea of home by compressing our world in time and expanding it in breadth, is likely one reason for this lack of currency.

As we tell ourselves to 'think globally,' we believe we have stretched the boundaries of our minds beyond our own home-work-and-home-again route. We do so, however, with barely the slightest clue that things might otherwise have been different. The conception of duration as the central motion of life, and of memory as inherited wisdom, have been displaced by the conception of duration as the distance between the beginning and ending of an arbitrarily defined event and of memory as what helps us pass exams and win at Trivial Pursuit. The North American Native practice of making decisions based on a world the duration of which is seven generations into the future, an idea to which it has been popular among environmentalists to refer, serves as nothing more than another number in our mental construction of functions based on elapsed time which highlights our conceptual inadequacy by providing yet another sublime experience for us to cherish.

The intense broadening of the world in Euclidian space, however, is obviously not a cultural worldliness born of active living in distant spaces or cultures. It does not seem a stretch to suggest that a North American of today has typically less first-hand knowledge of her or his physical environment that any of her or his ancestors did of theirs. When we imagine what it is to be a citizen of Canada, let alone a citizen of the world, that image-concept is formed from a hybrid of electronically and personally gathered experience. How could it be otherwise? Electronic eyes and ears are imperative to our 'understanding' of the world today. It would be irresponsible for us to ignore the images presented to us of places outside our physical reach. And so our image-banks have grown so that we can stitch together a mental simulation of a photograph of the world as it is - now, or what we imagine to be now.

Of course, there is no such thing as now. The flattening of the world is the root of a tension between a limiting conception and the unlimited reality. It is gathering momentum. We desire to limit our micro-worlds such that they can be experienced without reference to the fearful not-yet-to-be or the still more fearful once-was. The creation of limited worlds is the ever-sharpening focus of the application of technology to everyday life and to science. Our shopping malls are micro-worlds limited in thought, material and physi-cal scope. So too are the SkyDome, automobiles, laboratory experiments, audio, video, Whitby housing tracts and computer simulations. We accept limited worlds because they are experiences we find manageable. We find the experiences they engender manageable because they spare us the uncomfortable memory of the dead and the unimaginable world after our own death. Gradually, the importance of duration has been eclipsed by a technologically-expanded Euclidian present, and we have barely noticed.

The day-to-day components of life are thus one-by-one becoming virtual. Eventually the intermingling of virtualities brings about the illusory perception of an infinite reality. The perception of a virtual infinity is akin to the vanishing point in a landscape painting, or the effect of motion in film, where the speed of changing images creates the illusion of life. The mixing of these effects is the basis for what we call Virtual Reality. It is also, on a large scale, the basis of the virtualization of the world.

The motion of virtuality-machines is machine-operation-at-a-distance. The wave energy transformed from one end of any defined system to another increases in unpredictability with transformations experienced. Even when humans manipulate equipment themselves, the sensory feedback as it travels from one end (the motivating end of the procedure) to the other (the motivated human end) becomes increasingly illusory itself as unpredictability rises. Thus, neither what we predict, based on precedent, is going to be the result of a technological intervention nor what we perceive to actually be the results of the same intervention are reliable reporters of whatever actual effect there might be. Only through indirect means can we get more accurate reporting.

This observation assumes importance when we attempt to create a limited, controlled future space for ourselves as do the back-casters. We have become so inured to our artificial patchwork of abstract space-without-time that we begin to imagine that the element of change that is always present in the infinite universe is itself merely something to be minimized and managed as part of the greater limitation process. In the back-casting process, a scenario is imagined by re-shuffling our abstraction-patches into a favoured pattern, then logically computing the operations required to control physical variance over time such that the imagined scenario actually arises. The process is not new, but its application to single-future-creation for groups and systems whose defined boundaries are far beyond the scope of human conception is. The illusory nature of the baseline world-picture and the results of the mechanical operations prescribed by such a process are discounted with a dangerously naive confidence.

On the other end of the spectrum, it has long

been apparent that art can be brought into being through the exploitation of chance. In fact, chance can be the very medium of art if the artist is sensitized to the unpredictability function of the tools applied. While many point to Cage's compositions as the highest example of this process, all active art in fact grapples with chance to some degree in its workings. The object of the painting, says the painter, is not to reproduce the

must therefore be directed into itself through indirect exploration, to clarify its own character, rather than outward to expand the knowledge base for further virtualizing intervention.

The virtualization of the world includes the virtualization of humans. As humans become virtualized, the inter-human relationship becomes virtualized, on every level from our interior relations

visible subject but to suggest its invisible truth. The workings of the image in the minds of its viewers long after the initial viewing is the essence of the painting, and its combining and re-combining with other images from the future and the past constitute an aleatory operation. The insights received from such a process are tribute to the artists' intuitive grappling with the unpredictability of mediated human interaction. Chance is thus a viable indirect means of discovery.

It is of the utmost importance that the investigations of both the scientist and the artist take into account the rising virtual content in the life-experience of humans. As virtual content increases, art, if it is to continue to be rooted in the indirect revelation of truth, must engage with the virtual without hesitation. The art of virtualization must therefore lie in the skilful and intuitive manipulation of chance in the application of the technology to human. The most effective virtual art will further manipulate the relationship of the interaction between human and virtual world and the interaction between the human and virtualization process at large. Effective theory is therefore also art. If there is to be any human knowledge of the virtualization process, our search for truth through investigative sciences

to our relations with intimates to familial relationships to tribal to universal. It is obvious that today the grouping of actual discrete human beings is accomplished almost always through technological intervention. The evolution of the cyborg is therefore the end of the notion of individual will. Televisual reality-production and the resultant inter-human relationship is the most obvious, but far from the only, example of this. Even the use of the medium to mitigate against its own effects is only minimally effective, since the medium's limitations are its very essence.

Our idea of planet is a virtual one and has been since its modern inception. In many ways, the disjunction of planet, world and time that has occurred through technological sensing and scientific reason are more illusory than the medieval view they supplanted. We see the planet as we do only as a result of technology. That technology includes mechanical eyes, ears, fingers, nerves, central processing units and display screens. Our idea of the planet is thus more the machines' idea of the planet than a human idea. It is acceptable mechanically and it is made acceptable to us for certain purposes. The inadequacy of our reflective imaginations to conceive a world-system is indicative

of the operations of a predisposition of such an idea. The idea of a planetary biosystem is a virtual one. Our idea of the planet is therefore the idea held by a cyborg.

A pivotal problem now arises for environmental discourse and activism. If machines are an integral part of the evolution of terrestrial life, in terms of evolutionary theory, our idea of the planet ought to be, therefore, for the best of the machine aspect of the social cyborg. If machines are not part of the evolution of terrestrial life, or if the notion is utterly meaningless in reality and evolutionary theory still has some merit, then our idea of the planet is either damaging to the biotic base of life or is a part and manifestation of that biotic base. It is impossible to know whether the technologically-apparent destabilization of this biosystem is real or not, or if it is, what control human will might have on it.

If machines are in fact an integral part of the evolution of terrestrial life, we will have to face the fact that technology may be in the business of actively altering the human to become at one with technology itself. It is not difficult to look about everyday life in Southern Ontario and understand this to be so. If the individual now only has meaning in a technologically-mediated universal decision-making environment only as an object of technology, then all appeals to human suffering, present or future, will henceforth be pointless as motivation for intervention, human or technological, in the technological degradation of the known biotic system.

Addressing this problem with something other than virtual image-concepts or blind faith promises to be a difficult task indeed. Following the earlier suggestion of this essay, it appears that any applicable intuition must be arrived at obliquely, through an artful application of science. I would like to conclude this lengthy but humble observation with a series of questions to be considered in such an application.

    1. Is what we think of as biotic the sufficient root of virtuality, or does virtuality precede biotic development in some form? That is, is virtuality an extension of communication in the sense of Derrida's notion of difference?

Or, in two parts,

    2. Does biotic life contain the seeds of consciousness? and,

    3. Does consciousness contain the seeds of virtuality?

    4. Is the non-biotic the sufficient root of the biotic, or do other dimensions, aspects, of the world pre-exist life?

    5. If the spirit world can be said to exist and have a relationship with the real world, then what is the relationship between it and the virtual world?[1]

Notes:

1. While no citations have been explicitly made in the above essay, the following incomplete "bibliography" may be useful to anyone interested in the ideas presented.

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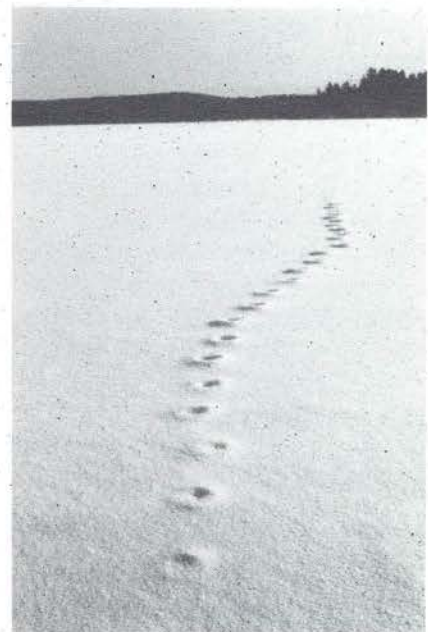
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