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## **The power of illusion**

*Virtual realities and dystopian science fiction*

My present research project was sparked by a number of science fiction films produced during the 1990's: *Strange Days*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ*, and *The Thirteenth Floor* – films which all deal with counterfeit or virtual realities, produced by advanced technology. *Strange Days* toys with the possibility of recording a person's entire input of sensory data on tape. In *The Truman Show*, a young man gradually comes to realise that his entire existence is fake: his family and friends are actors, that his hometown is a giant television studio. *The Matrix* presents the world as a gigantic computer animation, fed directly into the brains of a humanity cultivated as a source of energy for a race of sentient machines. Both *eXistenZ* and *The Thirteenth Floor* place computer-generated simulated worlds inside each other like chinese boxes.

The apparent interest among backers to finance scripts of this kind, and the commercial success of at least two of the productions, would indicate that the explosive growth of media and information technologies has brought some of the problems inherent in the concept "reality", traditionally negotiated in religion and philosophy, into the main currents of cultural consciousness. They can be regarded as more readily accessible expressions of an awareness which, since at least the 1960's, has been articulated by a number of academic critics and short-handed in some salient phrases: "the society of the Spectacle" (Guy Debord), "the electronic nervous system" and "the global village" (Marshall McLuhan), "the hyperreal" (Jean Baudrillard).

But in spite of their glaring contemporaneity, these films in fact continue, with surprisingly little innovation, a long line of dystopian speculation which started at roughly the same time as the technological reproduction of "reality" became a mass-market industry. It is this tradition which is the main object of my research and forthcoming book, focusing on a number of sf narratives from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1980's which revolve around the possibility of a generating, through science and technology, a set of physical stimuli which produce a subjective experience of a phenomenally complete physical reality. My investigation includes E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops", Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World", Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, as well as a number of lesser known works of genre sf.

The virtual reality as a theme in sf is often enabled by, or associated with, other technological and scientific fields; mind-altering drugs, neuroscience, behavioral conditioning, cybernetics, statistics and genetic engineering – association which should also make clear that it has largely been conceived as a means for psychological and social control. In dystopian sf from the 1930's and onward, this potential is rendered in three main types of narrative which correspond to specific technocultural contexts: the virtual

reality as a more or less addictive means of escape from the pain and tediousness of ordinary existence; the virtual reality as a confined environment which presents itself to its unwitting inhabitants as reality itself; and the virtual reality as a parallel universe of digitally rendered forms and architectures, accessed through direct computer-brainstem interface. Obvious classical and literary precedents aside, the first of these story forms has been articulated under the influence of visual mass media entertainment, while the latter two have developed in the wake of post-WW II technoscientific developments. Their complementary and often interfused functions have been addressed through an ideological spectrum which stretches from a pessimistic humanism to an ambivalent “posthumanism”, but seldom with undiluted enthusiasm.

Rather than dwelling on the specific details of the various forms of virtual realities projected in these works, I discuss them in fairly wide historical and conceptual contexts, including gnostic idealism and protestant iconophobia, hermeticism and the aesthetics of romanticism. This kind of approach may possibly be a disappointment to those intent on finding out how specific IT innovations have been anticipated and appraised in the sf tradition. Hopefully, however, it will seem all the more relevant for those interested in how the meaning and significance of these reality machines is produced in a culture in which such dichotomies as authentic – fake, nature – artifice, original – copy, reality – illusion, have been explored and debated with great passion and determination from classical times. For all their topicality and genre-bound narrative formulas, these works continue a long and tangled debate conducted in philosophy, religion, and literature about how the representation – visual or verbal – affects our knowledge of the real. A main purpose of my study is to bring the dystopian spectres of the so-called information age into a deeper historical context than is often the case in sf criticism.

A principal focus in my research, which the deep historical perspective is intended to sharpen, is the political significances of the theme of an *ersatz* reality in sf. The ability to confuse or transgress the boundaries between “reality” and “illusion” has always been recognised as inherently political, since the defining of the real always has been a political privilege. A quick survey of some of my main observations will illustrate this point.

The political power of the illusion was recognised by Plato in *The Republic*, in which all poets and painters are banned from the ideal state since they steer the mind away from pursuit of the highest real, and cloud reason with passions and phantoms of the imagination. And the simile of the cave, also in *The Republic* and arguably the *Ur-text* of all media dystopias, also carries a political subtext. The people locked in the cave and presented with a puppet show are prisoners since birth, with “their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move”. The chains, of course, are metaphors for our servitude to the world of the senses. But the predicament of the underground dwellers, with head and legs in chains, is also strongly suggestive of punishment, and as a matter of fact a stockade-like device, possibly involving iron collars, was frequently employed as a penal method in classical Athens.<sup>1</sup> So, already in that text,

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle S. Allen. *The World of Prometheus. The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens*, Princeton 2000, p. 200 f.

metaphysics is bound up with politics, however unintentionally. To a modern reader the simile states implicitly that whoever controls what I see, hear, smell, taste and touch, also controls what I think. In this view, the narrative emerges as a piece of science fiction, as much as a metaphor for man's existential ignorance.

Plato's elitist worry of how "the weak mind of man" is seduced by the power of the illusion is recognisable in Christian, and especially protestant condemnations of the too-lifelike religious image which, according to such authorities as Calvin and Erasmus, encouraged ignorant minds to confuse the sacred reality with its representation. One reformist writing in the 1560's summarised the problem: "the livelier the counterfeit is, the greater error is engendered" – well understanding that the error was first and foremost a problem for the uneducated.<sup>2</sup> This attitude was reinforced in neo-classical and romantic aesthetics which relegated the mere imitation, as exemplified by the 19<sup>th</sup> century virtual reality medium known as the panorama, to being a trivial and possibly harmful form of deception for the masses.<sup>3</sup> In Protestant and Romantic sources we also find the complementary notion, so integral to recent exercises in cyber-dystopianism, that direct contact with unmediated nature and with other people is necessary for depth of experience, for intellectual and moral integrity, and hence for political autonomy.

Following the rise of liberal individualism, images connoting disempowerment and disenfranchisement in describing the alleged effects of illusionist media become legion among critics and opinion-makers: degeneration, infantilisation, enthrallment, addiction, etc. A literary response to this emerging problem is J.K. Huysmans' *Against Nature*, which depicts how a degenerate nobleman suffers psychological and physical shipwreck due to the excessive consumption of technologically generated virtual realities. In Forster's seminal dystopian story "The Machine Stops" (1909), the author, in the vein of protestant humanism, warns us that the excessive dependence on information and communication technologies (ICT) entails moral, intellectual and physical demise, since they force us to depend on technology and – most importantly – to neglect the imperatives of our bodily existence.

But it was really only with the rise of the film medium, especially sound film, that the appeal of the perfect illusion became singled out as a potential tool for pacification of the populace. The theme was influentially articulated as the "feelie"-technology in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1934), but by then it had already found its definite and eventually clichéd form in the 1930 pulp sf story "The city of the living dead", in which the world's entire population flees into electronic wombs, fed with engineered hallucinations of their choice.<sup>4</sup> Further examples of this scenario abound.

After WW II, the rise of commercial television gave an immediate topicality to the theme of the *ersatz* reality as a means for political pacification, e.g. in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* or Shepherd Mead's

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, Volume I. Laws Against Images*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 408.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bernard Comment, *The Panorama*, London 1999, p. 86 f.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Manning and Fletcher Pratt, "The City of the Living Dead", *Science Wonder Stories*, May 1930, reprinted in Donald A. Wollheim and George Ernsberger, eds, *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Avon Fantasy Reader*, New York 1969, pp. 136-161.

*The Big Ball of Wax*. Meanwhile, new conceptions of the theme appeared in response to new technoscientific developments, which initially had little to do with mass media or the entertainment industry: cybernetics, systems and information theory, computer science, and social and behavioral sciences. The political significance of these fields was, however, no less conspicuous than that of media technologies, as they presented military, government and corporate bodies with hitherto unparalleled means for prediction and control. In Frederik Pohl's paradigmatic "The Tunnel Under the World", Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* and Daniel Galouye's *Simulacron-3*, the counterfeit world is an experimental setting presented to its unwitting inhabitants/guinea pigs as reality itself by scientists who have been co-opted or corrupted by military and corporate bodies.

As the work of Philip K. Dick so amply illustrates, the Cold War apparatus of prediction and control seemed determined to evoke ancient metaphysical spectres in more questioning minds. Specifically, the paranoid imaginary commonly associated with the American 50's (which, of course, was not confined to sf) followed a gnostic patterning in striking detail, although in secular terms. As America was "recasted" into a smoothly running machinery of bureaucratic and corporate efficiency, Gnostic myth was almost by default projected onto public or semi-public bodies, which assumed the role of demiurges mobilising enormous resources to keep the citizenry submerged in a state of illusion, amnesia, and ignorance.<sup>5</sup> *The Matrix*, it might be noted, stands considerably closer to this characteristically Cold War form of sf than it does cyberpunk.

In this context, it should also be observed that the cyberpunk ethos rather inverts the gnostic patterning, by wresting, as it were, the demiurgic technologies from the hands of archonic public or corporate bodies into those of self-serving individuals. Looking for classical antecedents (which there always are) we might compare this development to the hermeticist beliefs which flowered during the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> Hermeticism can, somewhat irreverently, be described as the optimistic flip side of gnosticism, with which it shares some of basic tenets. They both insist on the individual's duty to liberate him- or herself through *gnosis*, or spiritual knowledge (as distinct from mere faith), but where gnosticism regards all matter as evil, hermeticism propagates its mastery, through magic and technology. The eminent humanist scholar Marsilio Ficino, who translated the hermetic core texts in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, saw the ability to create convincing artistic illusions and simulacra as harbingers of our eventual rise to the status of semi-divine creators, and brings forth anecdotal and mythological evidence:

Praxiteles shaped a marble Venus for an Indian temple which was so beautiful that it could hardly be kept safe and undefiled from the lascivious ones who passed by. Archytas of Tarentum made a wooden pigeon with his mathematical skill, poised it in the air, filled it with breath and thus made it fly. As Hermes Trismegistus reports, the Egyptians made statues of the gods which were able to talk and to walk. Archimedes of Syracuse made a heaven of brass in which all the movements of the seven planets could be truly performed as in the heavens, and the whole thing moved like the heavens. [---] Thus man imitates all the

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Lary May, ed., *Recasting America. Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> See Erik Davis, *Techgnosis. Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York 1998.

works of the divine nature, and perfects, corrects and improves the works of lower nature. Therefore the power of man is almost similar to that of the divine nature, for man acts in this way through himself. Through his own wit and art he governs himself, without being bound by any limits of corporeal nature; and he imitates all the works of the higher nature.<sup>7</sup>

Once man has come into possession of more powerful means for pursuing his creative genius, Ficino concludes, Archimedes' brass heaven will be superseded by a genuine simulacrum of the heavens themselves:

[S]ince man has observed the order of the heavens, when they move, whither they proceed and with what measures, and what they produce, who could deny that man possesses as it were almost the same genius as the Author of the heavens? And who could deny that man could somehow also make the heavens, could he only obtain the instruments and the heavenly material, since even now he makes them, though of a different material, but still with a very similar order?<sup>8</sup>

In his remarkable faith in technology to propel man to a position of *Deus Creatrix*, Ficino is reminiscent of some of the more extreme cyber-advocates, e.g. the philosopher William Fredkin, who seriously proposes the coding of the entire planet into a computer simulation. One is also reminded of several non-fiction envisionings of the future of cyberspace, e.g. Mikael Benedikt's view of a "new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines".<sup>9</sup>

Not being very widely read in cyberpunk, it still seems to me that it has delivered few undilutedly optimistic visions of our posthuman or cyborg future which match the ambitions of people like Fredkin (Vernor Vinge's seminal "True Names" being a noteworthy exception). The most influential cyberpunk work, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, is pointedly ambiguous as to the actual gain of either adopting a cyborg corporeality in this world, or leading a disembodied existence in cyberspace. In fact, Gibson connects to the humanist reaction towards ICT, e.g. in his portrayal of Case, the outlaw hacker cowboy, as "a white-faced, wasted figure, afloat in a loose fetal crouch", which can be compared to Forster's image of a media-addicted woman as "a swaddled lump of flesh ... with a face as white as a fungus", tooth- and hairless to boot.

The enticing parallels opened from dystopian sf into classical systems of belief and antiquated technologies certainly efface some of the cutting-edge topicality of much sf dealing with the notion of an *ersatz* reality (a point certainly recognised by Philip K. Dick). Both the fears and the hopes stirred by the "total illusion" seem partly of an almost universal nature, reflective of an abiding knowledge that the definition of "reality" is a political privilege – whether this privilege is attributed to God alone, or to demiurgical artists and engineers. Also, the problems raised in the trajectory stretching from, say, "The Machine Stops" to *Neuromancer* can seem to be endemic to modernity as such, a consequence of ICT regardless of nationally and culturally specific conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology (Theologica Platonica)*, 1482), trans. Josephine L. Burroughs, cited in Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Ficino and Pomponazzi on the Place of Man in the Universe" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5 (April 1944), p. 233.

<sup>8</sup> *Ib.*, p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Benedikt, ed., *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1993 [1991], p. 1.

I believe, however, that in order to fully assess the significance and relevance of sf dealing with virtual realities, it is important to consider the fact that, after WW II, they are found almost exclusively in US science fiction. This should come as no surprise since the production and consumption of *ersatz* realities has been pursued most forcefully in the United States than anywhere else. The American fascination with the iconic representation or simulation of physical, spatial reality is in evidence not only in the centrality of film and television in popular culture, but also in a long running fascination with such attractions as wax museums, panoramas, and theme parks.<sup>10</sup> The spectre of a “reality machine” is thus deeply reflective of a characteristic tendency in American culture, which unites otherwise disparate sociocultural spheres: a craving for the perfect imitation, the simulacrum which is as detailed, as complete, as *real* as reality - or even more so.

Previous commentators have related this idiosyncratic cultural feature to the surplus logic of consumerist capitalism. In 1961 the conservative historian Daniel J. Boorstin complained that “the making of the illusions which flood our experience has become the business of America”, and went on to accuse his nation for nourishing “extravagant expectations”, with a constant demand for ever new pleasures, sensations, and occasions for self-fulfillment. Boorstin states that Americans “have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and better and more vivid.”<sup>11</sup> The onslaught of information technology from the late nineteenth century and onwards, including photography, telephony, radio, and television, had perverted his fellow Americans relationship to both nature and history, placing the edited and idealised replica ahead of the original in ontological status: “The Grand Canyon itself became a disappointing reproduction of the Kodachrome original” – an observation which anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s theories of the simulacrum.<sup>12</sup>

Fascinated rather than incensed or concerned, the Italian semiologist Umberto Eco observes in his 1974 essay “Travels in Hyperreality” that “America [is] a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented.”<sup>13</sup> Eco is less concerned with media and information technologies than with physical simulacra like wax museums and models, but his observations are no less relevant for the former. He locates one of the triumphs of this striving in Disneyland, “the quintessence of consumer ideology”, where the “perfect likeness” transforms into a hyperreality which exceeds the original due to its technological nature.: [H]ere we not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing. Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880 – 1940*, Chapel Hill and London 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream*, Atheneum, New York, 1962, p. 5 f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ib.*, p. 13 f.

<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ib.*, p. 46.

But as sf narratives written from the early 50's and onwards reflect, the American adeptness in producing simulacra is in evidence not only in the world of advertising and entertainment, in more or less obvious collusion with a consumerist ideology. It is also a prime tool for knowledge production in education, scientific research, and military strategy in the form of the simulation and the experimental setup. In spite of the obvious institutional and sociocultural distances between these two spheres – as it were, between Disneyland and the RAND corporation – they share a common object in using technology to produce simulacra which are somehow superior to the reality being modelled; more real, or more true. James Der Derian, in ironic recognition of the American craze for acronyms, has coined the term “mimemet” – the Military Industrial Media Entertainment Network – to describe these affiliations, which for the last couple of decades have been epitomised in the increasing use in Hollywood of computer simulations, a technique originating in military research.<sup>15</sup>

But this happy merger not only demonstrates how virtually boundless are the possible uses of computer technology, but is also indicative of a deeper cultural pathology for which Eco's off-handedly coined term “reconstructive neurosis” is highly appropriate. Whether enacted in a context of mass-market entertainment or military strategy, we would seem to be partly justified in ascribing an ideology of domination and control into the very fact of the simulation itself. For purposes of entertainment or national security, it is a means for exercising control through the containment of the randomness and complexity of original reality in forms chosen and organised according to a specific agenda. The more “real” the illusion becomes; the more detailed, immersive, multisensory, etc., the more limited becomes the individual's freedom to organise sensory perceptions according to an agenda of his or hers own, and hence, to maintain autonomy.

But in order to pinpoint the specifically American proclivity in the arts of the illusion it is also tempting to understand the engineered illusions as a recognition of technological mastery itself. As the Florentine hermeticists discovered, not triumph over brute nature can be greater or more decisive than to replace it with its replica. With this significance taken into consideration, the American “reconstructive neurosis” cannot be written off as mere reflections of an aesthetic immaturity – a position hailing back to Aristotle and commonly held among European intellectuals, implicit in Eco's witty aloofness – but is expressive of a historically specific experience. The “taming of the frontier” could not have taken place as swiftly and decisively without the aid of cutting-edge technology, i.e. the steam railroad or the Winchester rifle. And unlike the European nations' colonisation of African and Asian countries, the American unsuccessfully opposed expansion westward led to stable and lasting establishment of national territory.

One can also see the reality industry, or at least certain aspects of it, as a symbolic manifestation of freedom and independence from the European past. “A utopian faith in technology reinforced a

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<sup>15</sup> James Der Derian, *Virtuous War. Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, Boulder and Oxford 2001. See also Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World. Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1996.

longstanding American ideal of creating a new world”,<sup>16</sup> notes one historian, and the virtual realities of the “mimnet” no doubt make for new worlds which are originally and exclusively American, unburdened both by the guilt-ridden colonial struggle for territory, and the mental shackles exerted by the nation’s European roots.

On the level of the symbolic ordering of reality which takes place in the political unconscious, then, the incessant production and consumption of simulacra can be seen as a celebration and reaffirmation of a continuous American striving to conquer both nature and unwanted aspects of its own history. If, finally, we consider the symbolism of the virtual reality, the dream of mathematical order and coherence it imposes on the world, in a context of present day international relations, we may discern a not too dissimilar utopia of global stability and coherency in US foreign policies after September 11. But such tentative associations surely belong in a separate discussion.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian, *The Machine Age in America: 1918-1941*. Quoted in Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity. The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham and London 1993, p. 4.