

Orai and the Transdisciplinary Wunderkammer

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Abstract

Recent speculation in cosmology and the science of consciousness studies has been obliged to reconsider the concept of reality as an "absolute given" from which all laws can be verified. In string theory in particular, the dispute now hinges on the existence of ten or eleven dimensions in rippling membranes that discharge energy at the point of contact. In science of consciousness studies similar models have appeared in order to explain what one authority has called "the necessary moment of enchantment between planes of consciousness that produce awareness". Between the macro and the micro the daily experience of ordinary human beings has long needed the explanation of multiple realities in order to stabilise conflicting desires and constraints - the multiplicity of times and spaces that converge in a single individual have long been sifted between those that have a rational and scientific explanation (e.g. money, work, knowledge) and those that have an irrational basis (e.g. love, pleasure, and art). One convenient division of labour has been to assign the rational to the real and the irrational to the imagined. The inevitable realisation in scientific circles that the reality of the imagined has as an equivalent epistemological significance raises fascinating questions as it invites a sceptical reconsideration of the essential basis of knowledge.

While the radical shift in scientific thought provides the moment of profound satisfaction for those artists, designers and scientists who have long argued for a transdisciplinary world view, it also provides a moment of the greatest challenge as we begin to consider how knowledge might be extended, codified and distributed in a multiverse, and begin to reflect on the relationships between a text and a world to be understood when any given world is only defined by the temporary consensus dependent on an arbitrary episteme.

This short paper approaches the theme of Orai by first developing the claim that we exist in a multiverse of multiple realities by exploring some major turns in cosmology, and consciousness studies and then drawing on my own published work which deals with the quotidian multiverse. It then asks the question of how we might manage the new concept of "comings and goings, communication and contact as well as streets and traffic" at a time when the reduced world view that has provided the foundation of dominant opinion in the last half-millennium is unsustainable. In conclusion it proposes that visual analogy, in the sense that Barbara Maria Stafford and others have argued the term, points to both the new transdisciplinary strategies for research and education as it also places new responsibilities on the custodians of analogy during the half-millennium of the reign of reason - those for whom finding sameness in difference has formed an essential part of their methodology - namely artists.

The claim of this paper is that we live in a quotidian multiverse, that is a universe of many universes that occupy the same space and time, not as an exotic excursion into the realms of science fiction, but as an everyday experience that affects our social and economic interchange. The way that I want to argue this is by drawing on some of the startling work in consciousness studies as

well as some of the things that scientists at the edge of science are fretting about – eleventh dimensions, the end of time, quantum foam and so forth. To do all this in twenty minutes or two thousand words is a tall order – so tall that even I will not attempt it – at least not in words. Fortunately however there is a visual analogy that may achieve what several thousand pages may not.

The Image

There is a familiar trope in English documentary films about Britain in the early 1940s started by, I don't know who, but followed by nearly everyone who made 'realist' films after John Grierson. Intended to show both the change and the constancy of the rural landscape, a cameraman in the cockpit of a small plane films a train on the tracks below. Sometimes, in a moment of sheer visual bliss the shadow of the 'plane moving along the same line as the train makes a perfect cruciform as the two slip through the idyllic grasslands, frightening sheep and cattle (usually to a soundtrack of William Walton or Edward Elgar). Sometimes there is a cut and then a point-of-view shot of a train passenger, head tilted watching the plane – now eighteen degrees off the first eye-line. Invariably this cinematic trope is intended to invoke a lost or forgotten past that, in all probability, never existed. It is an effective visual invocation of nostalgic longing because the train and aeroplane perfectly match each others track yet inhabit irreconcilably separate dimensions. The destiny of their parallel existences speak of the 'if only' sentiment of unrequited love that makes the past an Edenic melodrama. For all the schlock it is the perfect analogy for what I have called the quotidian multiverse; local parallel universes that thrive according to a different logic, brought together by a grand theory of big things called classical physics.

Now that we all know the trick of history is to re-describe the irreducible melange of the past as a grab-bag of discrete events, this trope for nostalgia can resurface as the perfect postdigital analogue for the transcendental promise of more than three dimensions – hence the irrepressible moment of jouissance. This postdigital joy is most profound when viewed in its most analogical, that is when light is passed through photosensitive chemicals on a transparent base to throw an image on a screen. The chimera becomes a reflection on and of the brilliant homology between the X Y of the railway track and the XYZ of the aeroplane's space, and the XYZ of the viewer and the XY of the film passing (like an express) through the projector gate. For classical film theorists I am certain that this provides the paradigmatic example of primary identification with the apparatus. Secondary identification with the subject is finally achieved in this story of irreconcilable dimensions by the edit: a cut between shots in which the view from the plane is exchanged for the point-of-view of a rail passenger.

There is much that has been said about the ideological effects of this way of cutting up the real in order to re-present it as an alternative reality, but what can one say about the gap between the frames of the film that sometimes means nothing more than the next image is about to be presented, and sometimes means that we have changed our very world view? What terms do we have to describe the infinite no-dimensional gap between the frames as our consciousness is switched from one immaterial world to another equally immaterial world? What can we say in the postdigital about the gap between one shot and another in a time-image that insists on the discontinuous dimensions in veridical reality? Once we factor in our own perceptions we may well wonder how many dimensions there are in the experience described above. Don't expect to count them – its like trying to work out where the cursor is on the computer screen: we know its X and Y but never its Z.

This example may have the ring of the old structuralist about it, but aside from that, one of the things that it tells us is that the human apparatus consents to a meaningful world of three dimensions based upon poly-dimensional experiences. This suggests that the reality of the analogical image is premised on the coexistence of multiple dimensions. Moreover, explaining some of the moments of pleasure may have something to do with a previous knowledge of, or belief in, a poly-dimensional world in which the tenets of materialism and modernism, on which that sort of representation is based, are playfully subverted. For the contemporary viewer – the postdigital voyeur of the past’s nostalgia, this moment of pleasure becomes extended as we experience the recovery of the relevance of the principles of similarity, congruence and continuity in digital media in the persistence of analogue representation as the paradigmatic representation of multiple realities.

Recently in the study of consciousness we seem to have reached a difficult moment trying to reconcile the electro-chemical processes of the brain with the rest of the reality, especially how a thought turns into action and a stimulus into perception. Consider this in relation to work in consciousness studies on precognition and the possibility that we have perceptions of events prior to their happening, or that random number generators have been shown to change their pattern significantly prior to major emotional disturbances. Or that particular brain patterns are observed prior to the onset of events that are likely to arouse hostility. Consider the notion that the world only appears to be classical because that is how we can best describe it, and consider your own motives for reading your horoscope and those of your nearest friends. In this short paper this evidence of the existence of other universes may not be entirely persuasive but this reflection does seem enough to at least posit the existence of at least a desire for a parallel other that is both a mirror and a challenge to the most tangible reality of first hand experience. If all else fails and the idea of parallel realities is still illusive, consider falling in love.

The problem that a quotidian multiverse poses is that to account for neurological change prior to an unexpected emotional stimuli, for example, calls for a new kind of explanatory system in which the perception of reality, the representation of reality, and ideology do not fit so snugly as they have for centuries.

Orai

A quotidian multiverse also calls for new techniques of social-motion management as we move between the puffing steam engine and the observing aeroplane. When we realise that we treat them as though they were a continuous condition, particularly in the digitised image, we are forced to reconsider the meaning of Orai – “comings and goings, communication and contact as well as streets and traffic” with new tools. This radical shift in scientific thought (manifest as either reckless speculation or dogged entrenchment in the profession) provides a moment for achievement in those artists, designers and scientists who have argued, through their practice, for new kinds of knowledge and new sources of digital authentication of the self to be regarded on an equal footing with the old analogue.

At this distance there is now little doubt that the digital revolution was, from its technological and conceptual inception, always destined to be the postdigital in which similarity, congruence and continuity found new applications. At stake in the postdigital analogue however, is more than the recovery of the subject: it is nothing less than whose vision of paradise prevails. A struggle in which the idealisation of representation is in conflict with the dominant technology which disavowed daily experience as an undifferentiated circulation of metaphors for desire and

resistance. Things are different: we are now postdigital and biology has paradoxically not become more mechanical but much more aggressively organic. Where the digital proposed the perfect finite conditions for a perfect existence regardless of matter, (as for example in the human genome project), in the postdigital analogue (as for example in the ironies of genetic and wet biological art) human consciousness is regarded as almost infinitely malleable, able to shape its identity in response to local (and technological) conditions, aware all the time of the range of possible identities (digital and analogue) that are not developed.

What seems clear as we embrace the postdigital analogue – that is the post digital reality that is the object of our current analogous representation – is that we need new procedures, ones that are not obsessed with equivalence and difference but can finely accommodate the equivalencies of differences. The digital eventually gave us the moon shot and the machine in the garden, the postdigital analogue, on the other hand, points to a version of paradise that is not a finite discontinuous place or a non-homogeneous moment of time, not Eden in a nostalgic future, but a thick membrane in which local conditions, desire and resistance are constantly stabilised to form a whole identity.