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**SCENOGRAPHY AND SYNESTHETICS: NEW MEDIA AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**

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Summary

To work effectively with new media, artists need appropriate principles to understand the nature of the space and the nature of the experience their work is to present to its audience. I will suggest two notions which may be useful when thinking about new art forms: firstly, scenography, as a way dealing with how aesthetic space is created and organised through the use of new technologies; and, secondly, synesthetics, as a means of considering the aesthetic experience offered by synthetic qualities of new media

I am not sure how grateful we should be to William Gibson for coining the term 'Cyberspace'. As a neologism, the term itself is, of course, cleverly catchy. Gibson's phantasmagorical visualisation of Cyberspace leads, however, to a confusing presumption that what Cyberspace describes is a homogeneous dimensionality which can be entered and which will contain everything that can be represented and stored as digital data. Hollywood contributes to the confusion by making its representation of Cyberspace accessible via Virtual Reality hardware. VR and Cyberspace seem, as a result of this imaginative simplification, to be indistinguishable.

The appealing vision of Cyberspace as a navigable 3D domain wherein everything will conform to an illusionistic, perspectival model confuses the truly complex nature of this space. Computer technologies and networks enable different informational and representational modalities to actively interpenetrate one another and to exist co-extensively. Cyberspace, if it is to be thought of as a space at all, designates the locus of this complex interpenetration and co-extension. But Cyberspace is not a space one can actually or even virtually be in, for Cyberspace is a space of telepresence: connectivity rather than dimensionality is its essence. Telepresence is only possible at points of connection, not within an imagined space between these points; when I speak to someone on the other side of the world by phone, communicationally there is no space between us. Likewise, there is no communicational space between individual terminals and servers when they are connected through the Cyberspace that is the World Wide Web: there are only communicational lags or delays as pages or sites download. Waiting, rather than moving, is the experience associated with navigating the Web.

Through the communicational and informational nexus which actually corresponds to Gibson's Cyberspace, I can experience the perspectival dimensionality of VRML sites and 3D worlds, interact socially, play out fantasies and receive sounds, music, as well as photographic and video images. Through Cyberspace, and by means of the computer generally, I am presented with a complex of representational modes. While I can respond to each of these modes individually, it is the complex itself that is far more interesting. This complex reaches beyond the screen and into the realm of my experiences.

In this paper I would like to offer a two-way approach to negotiate the artistic and aesthetic complexities that computer-based technologies are spawning. I will suggest, firstly, in the Western context, the value of connecting digital art with the vast corpus of Western art and aesthetics; and secondly, the importance of conceptualising the unique and radical aesthetic implications of computer-based technologies. To undertake this two-way approach, I will propose two notions: scenography and synesthetics.

Computer-based art works will need to generate rich and complex experiences in order to take full advantage of what the computer can offer. The physicality of the actions/reactions that a 3D first-person point-of-view game like DOOM stimulates, would be an extreme if simplistic example of the potent experience a digital interface can generate. Often a player's entire body moves in response to the urgent kill-or-be-killed reactions that screen events require, yet only movements directed to the mouse, joystick or keyboard have any effect on what happens on screen. The kinaesthetic aspect of such games is very much a part both of the player's experience and of the way the game itself engrosses the player. Even though the kinaesthetic element need not be so exaggerated with other computer-based experiences, it can nevertheless be considered as one component of an overall organisation of the experience offered a player or participant.

But how are artists to contemplate the overall organisation of an art work employing an array of media to create a dynamic experience? A key for answering this question is to consider to what end the art work is directed. And a way to do this is to think of the work as a scene intended to involve a viewer or an audience through the impressions it makes and the experiences it induces. Here, though, 'scene' and is not to be understood in pictorial or theatrical terms. The scene is better thought of as an occasion for experience - the occasion for the perceptual, cognitive and affective experience of the viewer - rather than as just the setting of the representational components of the work itself.

A concept dealing with scenic organisation of interdisciplinary art work has existed in Western thought since Classical antiquity. It is the concept of scenography. Scenography, even at its origin, related to the conjunction of different spatial orders associated with architecture, theatre and painting. The Renaissance formulation of artificial perspective re-established the scenographic nexus of architecture, painting and theatre. The delirious elaboration upon perspectival principles and the exaggerated emphasis on theatricality in art, which became paramount during the Baroque, can be regarded as scenography run rampant but always in control of the effects it unleashes.

The concept of scenography can accommodate the scenic organisation of art made using new technologies and media, just as well as art based on traditional media. The organisation of an art work which scenically addresses all levels of experience can draw a viewer into the thinking behind the work. Even DOOM offers a simple example: The most striking impression this game made upon me was seeing on one level of DOOM II the endlessly twitching body of a guard impaled lengthways upon a spike. All other sprites in the game, I could turn to mangled gore. Shooting this skewered sprite to put it out of its misery did nothing; its spasms only continued. This experience intimated to me the existence of an active principle of cruelty inhabiting the game independent of my own relation to it. Undoubtedly, this detail stood out against the all the manic action/reaction which is almost exclusively the experience the game offers: I could not act in relation to the spiked guard, only react. And in terms of my reaction, this insignificant detail would have as much scenic potential as the game as a whole: the transfixed sprite's spasms perversely mimicking my kinaesthetic reactions in front of the screen.

While a navigable illusionistic space provides the setting for the gameplay of DOOM and its like, scenography is not at all predicated upon spatial illusion. A navigable 3D space may offer an immersive experience, but immersion need not be thought of in literally spatial terms. Every particular interface encountered in normal computer-based communication - word processing, electronic mail, Web browsing, video conferencing - can be utilised scenographically to create the impression that the user's computer itself, with its data storage and network capacities, is the illusionistic framework of a game or an art work. The analogy between computers and theatre has already been proposed. Scenography offers more than an analogy. While the theatrical analogy may be useful for the thinking of software engineers, for artists it is more important to appreciate what a computer is and does than to proceed simply according to analogy.

The computational power of computers and the mathematical algorithms they perform provide highly sophisticated means of generating and manipulating perceptual and representational material. Of course, an artist must understand the technical principles upon which a representational model is based, however, art will always exceed these principles as an artist elaborates upon them. Making sense through making things apparent to the senses: this is the essence of art. No Renaissance artist produced a painting using perspective alone, and no artist using digital technologies to create complex integrations of sound, image, and text is doing so solely by computation. Scenography configures all such elements toward the end experiences an art work is intended to produce on its audience. But new media offer new aesthetic experiences, so to be most effective, scenography would be well complemented by a means of dealing conceptually with the aesthetic experiences latent to new media.

Even with still digital imagery, the possibility of capturing and manipulating a diverse range of material can result in representational complexes which draw the viewer from one mode

of representation to another by blurring any discernible distinction between them. The 'death of photography' pronouncement which reached a crescendo several years ago, failed to recognise that, though losing its privileged representational role, photography, with its indexical and iconic capabilities, would henceforth service a more sophisticated, representational complex.

Artists are currently enjoying the opportunity to digitally tamper with photographic images, particularly those of the body. Unlike photographic retouching, digital manipulation allows for the cloning of photographic material itself to achieve, in a single image, a photorealistic simulation and dissimulation of the body: the result is an unstable co-presence of evidently different but no longer distinct modes of representation. Even in the specific case of digital photography we can begin to recognise one of the most powerful developments in the field of representation that the computer makes possible: the digital image can both simulate and dissimulate, both show what it is like and show what it is not like. The image of a body with a key bodily feature removed or multiplied does such an image continue to just simulate the human body? - not entirely: and where it ceases to simulate the human body, it simulates only itself. It is beyond this representational point an index and an icon only of itself. This power, which new media offer, to simulate and dissimulate, I wish to consider under the notion of the synthetic.

World wide webs, virtual realities, designer drugs, plastic surgery, neural networks, biogenetics, everything in the world becomes malleable, plastic, protean, no longer do distinctions between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic provide clear reference for the way in which the world seems to us. Cyborgs and biochips have displaced robots and electronic brains in popular imagination. The synthetic blurs the distinction between natural and artificial. The natural and the artificial exist in a relation of simulation. The synthetic, however, need not be like anything, need imitate nothing. It is most powerful when it models itself.

The computer offers an enormous capacity of synthesis, of bringing together elements from disparate media. In addition, the computer can be used to synthesise elements from scratch, out of nothing but the operator's skill and imagination, and in this way contributes to the increasingly synthetic character of the world in general. Artistic engagement with the synthetic nature of new media is hardly surprising, for art has always involved synthesis - of materials, ideas, representations and meanings. Now, however, we are no longer thinking of just an art of synthesis, an art synthesising various elements into a singular composition, when new media are employed we must think of an art of the synthetic: an art of synthesis, of simulation and of dissimulation.

Through recognising the role of the synthetic in its own creation, art produced using new media participates in a reconception of our relation to the world, a reconception stimulated by the effect of new technologies. Perhaps the most startling example of the synthetic power of technologies to simulate and dissimulate would be a biogenetically engineered organism: not simply a hybrid which would bear traits of the organisms which provided its genetic stock, but an organism whose genetic code is constructed at the genetic level. This organism would live naturally enough, yet its existence would be unnatural: its genetic make-up artificial, the result of artifice. Here would be a most astonishing manifestation of the synthetic: synthetic life; life which both simulates and dissimulates life as it occurs naturally.

If there is to be an art of the synthetic, an art which can harness its power, there needs to be an aesthetics which can grasp both simulation and dissimulation: an aesthetics of the

synthetic. To designate this aesthetics, it seems appropriate to collapse that word - 'aesthetics' - and the word 'synthetic' into one word. Synesthetics.

Synesthetics designates an active engagement with the synthetic qualities of new technologies and composed of new materials and media - the rich optical effects of raytraced 3D models; a digital photorealism that is not entirely photographic; independent behaviours of sub-programs written in object-oriented languages - in short, an active engagement with complex qualities which can no longer be measured primarily by how well they simulate reality. Synesthetics does not involve the sensory confusion association with the condition known as synaesthesia; instead of confusion, synesthetics embraces complexity. As the aesthetic experience offered by synthetic art works becomes sufficiently rich in its own right, no longer need such art conform to laws of imitation or simulation. The very unlikeness of this new art - the extent to which what it presents exceeds both imitation and simulation - will become an essence of its aesthetic appeal.

The notion of Cyberspace may represent in popular imagination the globalising synthesis that computers and computer networks are bringing about. The notion of Cyberspace, however, aligns synthesis with confusion. Confusion combines all its elements into one undifferentiated mixture; synesthetics entails complication and complexity, not confusion. Synesthetics offers a way of aesthetically engaging with the complexities of new media and complexities of the experience of art created with these media; scenography serves as a procedure of organising them for experience through art. I propose the notions of scenography and synesthetics in relation to new media art, not as fully developed concepts, but as means of designating for consideration both the scenic and synthetic capacities of these media, and through them exciting complexities these media constitute.