

# LUST & Wanderlust

## SEX & TOURISM IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Creative responses to the new technologies of virtual reality (VR) will rest with those for whom the burden of the world has become unspeakable. In the hands of the disenchanted – the artists, the intellectuals, and the philosophers – VR represents a challenge, an opportunity, but ultimately a necessary expression of experience in the electronic era. A final overture towards the reconciliation of technological utopianism with the human spirit.

Life is a travelling to the edge of knowledge – and the leap taken from that point. Boundaries are made by those who cross them. When art, literature and music no longer offer the viewer, the listener, or the reader a compelling alternative, escape, or *meaningful reflection on what has traditionally been defined as the sensory world*, new creative forms will be developed to take their place.

We are moving from an age of collaborative computing into an age of pervasive computing. Electronic technology represents for us the development of an external central nervous system. And inevitably, our hearts will truly beat within the machine. The symbiotic relationship with electronic technology is a very intimate one, and bears close scrutiny. In particular, the media of VR represents an undisguised extension of our needs and desires and abilities. Applications of these technologies, whether for medical imaging, computer-aided design, or interactive virtual environments, *will suffer if not informed and guided by a recognition and respect for the sacred*. Ritual must be incorporated into a media which threatens to be overwhelmed by the profane – linear comprehension and manipulation of pure information.

The World Travel and Tourism Council has reported that world travel generates a figure equalling 5.5% of the planet's gross national product, making tourism one of the world's largest industries. Pornography and other sex-related industries generate similar or higher revenues. The most successful application of interactive virtual reality technologies is likely to be in the sex and tourism industries, and there is an obligation to incorporate thoughtful analysis into our development of these media for these purposes. Lust and wanderlust must be reclaimed.

Our experience of the real world has become contrived. Instant sexual gratification and telecommunication technologies are both aspects of our *increasing obsession with the dissolution of time and space*. Aiming to overcome the mental disturbances caused by distance and time, by all forms of absence, separation, disappearance, interruption, withdrawal and loss, we have destroyed spontaneity. In making the absent symbolically present we have lost sight of that which we held dear.

Traditional tourism is increasingly dominated by virtual experiences. Investigating the possibilities for travel in the context of my trip to TISEA, I was offered, by several different travel agents, carefully packaged land-modules, incorporating the 'Aboriginal experience', the 'Great Barrier Reef experience', and the 'Outback experience'. You pay your money, you get these experiences. What has become artificial is our deliberate and programmed exploration and exploitation of the real world.

What I will call authentic experience is increasingly being replaced by vicarious experience, or experience mediated by

electronic technologies. We have been learning and teaching one another to undervalue and mistrust personal experience and to prefer the realities created by and through electronic technological media such as television. In life after television, technologically induced experience is the next logical step, and pornography and tourism are the first obvious applications of simulated experience.

The thrill and adventure of escape into electronic space. Wanderlust. In real time (30 frames per second, that is) the passage of time is marked by entropy and by movement through space. And yet, time bends and stretches and stops for those who navigate physical distances. How much more elastic will it be for those who jack into the neural net? It is conceivable that travel undertaken with genuine curiosity, appreciation of adventure and for the purpose of self-discovery, may become possible once again. What has become only a remote possibility in travelling through real time, becomes a very definite if not mandatory condition in cyberspace: every traveller must create the country in which they travel.

'Why are your cheeks so starved and your face drawn? Why is despair in your heart and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey; yes, why is your face burned with heat and cold, and why do you come here wandering over the pasture in search of the wind?' (Sanderson 1975, 103). These are the questions asked of Gilgamesh at every stage of his journey in the first work of travel literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (transcribed 1900 BC). Unlike contemporary travellers, the ancients saw travel either as a suffering/penance or as a means to acquire experience and knowledge. Anthropologists find the metaphor of human travel or passage used to describe the structure of life, and the meaning of death.

Tourism today inspires irony, not metaphors. Today, travel is associated with freedom, independence and pleasure. And yet, for all the value which we attribute to travel, it is tourism which we generally experience. Sociologist Valene Smith defines a tourist as 'a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change' (Smith 1977, 2). There is a certain desperation obvious in the

planning and endurance of a holiday. Very often the goal and purpose is to see as many different things in as short a time as possible. Claude Levi-Strauss sees this attitude as the end of meaningful travel:

Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories. I can understand the mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness. They create the illusion of something which no longer exists but still should exist (Levi-Strauss 1975, 285).

Unexplored frontiers fit for conquest within the North American continent have diminished since its 'discovery' by the Europeans 500 years ago, and its subsequent colonisation. An attempt to recreate the pioneer spirit which has dominated the history and culture of North America and to recapture the thrill of exploration and discovery, has led to enthusiastic public support of such enterprises as the US space program and Operation Desert Storm. We invest much more than capital in the development of new technologies. The technological utopianism of the 1950s is resurrected with each attempt to manipulate the dimensions of time and space which we feel bind us.

'Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can' (Eco 1986, 44). This is Umberto Eco's observation in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, written after several months of intensive research – in the amusement and theme parks of the southern United States. Although Eco is not reflecting on VR as we perhaps would define it, the phenomena which he describes and analyses are simulated 3-D experiences or environments, making up for what they lack in interactivity with the total theatre effect achieved by Walt Disney's 'Audio-Animatronic' technique. Populating convincingly realistic sets with robots endowed with the characteristics of the actors on which they were modeled, Disney sets the

standard which VR technicians must emulate or surpass.

In Disneyland or Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, it is possible to fulfill what marketing experts have determined is our secret and ultimate desire – to visit and live in the movies – to feel that we are part of the show. A relatively passive, well-regulated and above all safe experience is guaranteed. Comparing a Disneyworld simulation with a genuinely interactive 3-D VR experience does justice to neither. For there is fulfillment in the Magic Kingdom, just as surely as is promised in a visit to a virtual world.

Step into cyberspace and the world becomes new again. The virtual world of mathematics and physics where theories and properties occupy a space, is tangible and manipulable. The dichotomy between tourism and travel begins and ends with wanderlust, a sense of purpose beyond movement for movement's sake itself. Today, immobility is the only sin or crime. Movement and progress have become equated with prosperity, success and life itself.

As we approach the threshold of the 21st century, the foundations of political, economic and physical sciences across the globe are being rocked by a restlessness. The instinct to retreat is surfacing, a grasping backwards in terms of values and morality. Increasing dissatisfaction with scientific methodology, 'self-propelled' science (that is, the belief that science can solve any problem it creates with more science), and technological determinism (the belief that what can be done, must be done) will be weighed against the reality that, as Nicholas Negroponte of MIT's Media Lab has phrased it, 'once a new technology rolls over you, if you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road' (Brand 1987, 9).

Virtual reality is not new. It is not coming, it is here. It has been funded and developed by the military over the past 15 or more years. And it is finding its way into our amusement arcades in suburban malls. A strategy for dealing with this technology must start now.

Where will we go when we are unlimited by three-dimensional linear time and space, and what will we do when we get there? If I have lost you at this point, the expression 'teledildonics' will probably bring you back around. Will VR technologies contribute intimacy or a simulation of this experience to

our exploration of cyberspace and our interaction with whoever we meet there?

Electronic bulletin board services (BBSs) were the first incarnation of an interactive virtual space. Revolutionary in the 1970s, they have now gained a reputation as an excellent source of pornographic (low resolution) images. In the US the anonymity of BBSs has enabled a network of pedophiles access to a virtual database of potential victims: their ages, successful techniques for manipulation, and opportunities for molestation based on previous assaults. The victims are young children – this is clearly not man/boy love but the systematic sexual abuse of children of both sexes.

There is something about the mediation of technologies which, some would say, makes us less human. Whether in reaction to a sense of loss of control to the mediating technology, or to a sense of empowerment from it, aggression is the most prevalent and troublesome response. Relationships initiated and developed in this electronic space rarely lead to real meetings. Telephone sex, at least, reintroduces the human voice into an impersonal experience.

The computer's allure has always been more than utilitarian or aesthetic. The patriarchal appreciation and acceptance of new electronic technologies have always contained an element of the erotic. For this reason it has been possible and, indeed, necessary to link the inspiring power and potential of new electronic media to women. Also, the women's movement picked up speed at about the same time as electronic technology. Popular culture's representations of the powerful woman, the bitch/goddess, have been adapted to reflect male high-tech fantasies. In her latest incarnations, whether androgynous or exceedingly voluptuous, these powerful women have technology by the balls. The influence and power they wield is evil, technological, and, of course, seductive. True to the patriarchal mythology, woman is the incarnation of danger, this time both sexual and technological.

'Teledildonics' is the logical culmination of these theories. Ignoring the close and very dangerous relationship that exists between patriarchal culture and technology, there is, as Paul Virilio puts it, a deliberate and carefully orchestrated, 'disappearance of woman in the

fatality of the technical object' (Virilio 1991, 91).

In a recent interview in *Mondo 2000*, Brenda Laurel offers the scenario of a woman's group, in the context of a computer conference a few years ago:

The girls were complaining about how much discrimination they'd suffered, and they couldn't get on the mainframe, and people turned off their password – the usual rants. And this one man, who I won't name, who's a brilliant programmer and a good friend said, 'Well maybe the reason that we were in computers was to get away from you'. That had a huge impact. Somebody finally had said it (Laurel 1992, 84).

More and more women are finding their way into the development of VR, and I believe this will have a positive impact on the applications of this technology, particularly as the general public will first 'experience' it. One company which develops virtual reality systems has done research on gender differences, in terms of what people want when they step into a virtual world. Women need a reason to be aggressive. Men only need a place. That is changing. I hope it is only a small minority who want to limit virtual worlds to interactive arcade-style video games, where virtual murder and rape are the ultimate objective. Tactile feedback systems are being developed, it is true. Eventually you will be able to put on a bodysuit and have sex in cyberspace. I'm just not sure that very many people will be interested in that application by the time it is available. So many other amazing applications are also just around the corner.

Seized upon by science fiction writers, the idea of 'virtual' reality has its roots and its key in physics, philosophy and visual art. Susanne Langer, an American philosopher of aesthetics, developed a theory of symbolism in her most famous book *Philosophy in a New Key*. In a subsequent book, *Feeling and Form*, she set out to develop a systematic, comprehensive theory of art, applicable to a wide range of media. In this book, first published in 1953, she borrowed an expression from physics in order to describe the achievement of complete artistic success. 'Virtual space', she wrote, 'is the primary illusion of all plastic art' (Langer 1953, 72).

Langer's theory proceeds to describe the virtual space that all forms of art attempt to present as the ultimate *object* of art, therefore lacking subjectivity:

Yet its limits cannot even be said to divide it from practical space, for a boundary that divides things always connects them as well, and between the picture space and any other space there is no connection. The created virtual space is entirely self-contained and independent (Langer 1953, 72).

However, VR systems being developed today replace images and mere representations with places to be explored and objects to be manipulated. No longer required to imagine the space behind the mirror, the viewer is invited and actively engaged in the creation of the alternate reality.

The state of dreaming is, perhaps, the first and primary expression of virtual imagination. This phenomenon of creating and participating in private alternative realities takes place during REM sleep, which has been found to be an important stage for consolidation of learning. Hallucinations, visions and speaking in tongues, whether induced through drugs or other artificial stimulation of the brain, demonstrate the collision of two or more worlds, the intrusion of the 'virtual' into the 'real'.

Fiction is the literal creation of virtual worlds. Cinema is the public and collective visualisation of these worlds, and to a certain extent video, television and cinema successfully engage the viewer beyond mere suspension of belief. Whether through the intimacy of the television screen or via the effect of the projected movie in a darkened theatre, this visualisation of virtual worlds has, for many years, provided a satisfactory and effective release and relief from the everyday. Extraordinary means, however, are called for in extraordinary times.

'What's on this afternoon?' he asked, tiredly.

She didn't look up from the script again. 'Well, this play comes on the wall-to-wall circuit in ten minutes. They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some boxtops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The homemaker, that's me, is the missing part. When it



comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines. Here, for instance, the man says, "What do you think of the whole idea, Helen?" And he looks at me sitting here centre stage, see? And I say, I say...'. She pauses and runs her finger under a line on the script. "I think that's fine!" And then they go on with the play until he says, "Do you agree to that, Helen?" and I say "I sure do!" Isn't that fun, Guy?"

He stood in the hall, looking at her.

'It's sure fun' she said.

'What's the play about?'

'I just told you. There are these people named Bob and Ruth and Helen.'

'Oh.'

'It's really fun. It'll be even more fun when we can afford to have the fourth wall installed. How long you figure before we save up and get the fourth wall torn out and a fourth wall-TV put in? It's only two thousand dollars.'

'That's one-third of my yearly pay.'

'It's only two thousand dollars,' she replied. 'And I should think you'd consider me sometimes. If we had a fourth wall, why it'd be just like this room wasn't ours at all, but all kinds of exotic people's rooms. We could do without a few things.'

'We're already doing without a few things to pay for the third wall. It was put in only two months ago, remember?'

'Is that all it was?' She sat looking at him for a long moment. 'Well, good-bye, dear' (Bradbury 1953, 20).

Before the existence of the technology that would make them possible, Ray Bradbury described virtual worlds in his novel *Fahrenheit 451* as well as in his short story 'The Veldt'. As access to these technologies became more widespread, but certainly before they were publicly introduced, writers such as Philip K Dick (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and *We Can Remember it for you Wholesale*) presented their visions regarding the potential and future of these technologies.

Hollywood, a well established indicator and manufacturer of popular culture, has recognised the possibilities of VR in the research, development and design of electronically simulated environments and

experiences. An increasing number of films and television shows include some aspect of electronically mediated or simulated time/space travel. And, not surprisingly, it is the more sensational and dramatic aspects of this new technology that Hollywood has chosen to highlight.

They have adapted the texts of Philip K Dick, in movies such as *Bladerunner* and *Total Recall*, and most recently a completely rewritten Stephen King story *Lawnmower Man*. And, in their transformation of science fiction movies from futuristic prophecies and romantic adventures on the fringe of popular culture, to mainstream, violent, nihilistic techno-pulp, they have let slip two essential motivations: lust and wanderlust.

Hollywood would have us believe that sophisticated applications of VR technology are imminent. Off-the-shelf virtual environments are currently available for recreational purposes. However, until the computer graphic imagery generated can keep pace with the level of interaction and detail (the resolution of film or video) which we have been led to expect, VR environments will remain in the suburban mall, as arcade games.

Displacing no one physically, the boundaries of cyberspace are defined only by imagination and electronic intelligence. Face-to-electronic-face, we will manufacture, participate and interact with a wide range of sights, sounds and presences. What has always existed in the collective 'mind' of a culture – an understanding and acceptance of rules/truths and the role of myth – faces imminent revelation in cultures where electronic technology will make it possible to visually articulate and manipulate the spaces which are common to us all. Layer by thin, precious layer, psychoanalysis and related sciences of behaviour, extending into hermeneutics, structuralism and other theories of language, have exposed the lengths to which we extend ourselves in order to construct social and psychological representations of reality which make it possible for us to cope in the physical, sensory world. Mobile, portable technologies, capable of the digitisation, compression and instantaneous transmission of information into suitably equipped hands, have virtually conquered or destroyed two such constructs: space and time. Our ability to survive because

of, or in spite of, this new structuring of dimensions, depends in part upon our ability to incorporate parallel, alternative realities, into our cultural and individual visions of 21st century life.

Perhaps the reason that fiction no longer does the trick is that our development of VR technologies is actually inspired by a craving for the real. Sensory experience in our media-saturated world has become second-hand at best. Authentic experience is increasingly replaced by vicarious experience, or experience mediated through electronic technologies. In our determination to separate and define authentic experience, perhaps we are driven to conjure or evoke it through different eyes. Is the reality which we are seeking to simulate the environment in which we exist and interact? Or are we seeking to simulate the act of 'experiencing' itself?

If this is the case, then the application of virtual reality technologies in the 'recreational' industries of pornography and tourism, can be understood as a deliberate, if unconscious, attempt to recapture the experiences of lust and wanderlust.

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