

FROM CYBRIDS TO CYBORGS: IN SEARCH OF VALUE IN SCRIPTED VIRTUALITY

Madhu C. Dutta

Wentworth Institute of Technology
Department of Architecture
550 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02215, USA
duttam@wit.edu

Abstract

The juxtaposition of the temporal element on traditional architecture has created the possibility of a non-hierarchical, “nomadic” space (-Deleuze) which calls for an intriguing phenomenological experience of the inhabitants, in relationship to their architectural space. The paper explores some current theories which propagate these ideas of virtual reality/realism in an attempt to understand the contradictions and connections they make with the “tangible” world. Drawing from Kant’s position that “Nothing that is predicated on its real existence is considerable” the author searches for a more universal understanding of what these virtualities want to be- in this era of diluted tactility. The reason for such questions is not an attempt at ad hoc compartmentalization of these ideas, but more to find a place and meaning in the inevitable evolutionary pattern. In conclusion, the author postulates that it is only when these scripted virtualities are conditioned through such frames of reference will they cease to be merely “temporal” spaces.

1. Introduction

We live in an impatient age in which the notion of temporality is gaining critical acceptance. It has become an accepted phenomenon that the spaces we inhabit are “time-based” to a great extent. Moreover, the traditional notion of space as a physical constant has been diluted considerably, replaced by the idea of “portal” to which we connect as and when the need arises. The architectural experience essentially becomes “nomadic” (Deleuze), thus losing the value of its “rootedness” establishing an intriguing relationship between the user and his/her architectural space.

The concepts of “Cybrid” (Anders), “Cyberization” (Benedict), “HyperReality” (Terashima), “Reflexive Architecture” (Spiller), “Liquid Architecture” (Novak), and “Hypersurface” (Perrella), *et al* have been explored as legitimate bases for an alternate digital reality. This research has shown that though there is validity in the avant-garde argument that this notion of temporal space has a reductionist tendency of “inhabitation” in the conventional sense, nevertheless, it opens up limitless technological and creative possibilities.

The keys to unlocking these possibilities may lie in blurred or erased distinctions between the real and the virtual (human as cyborg) or in parallel conditions mediated by the machine with strategic overlaps, (as in cybrid spaces). Most promising, however, are avenues outside of this either-or dichotomy, universal platforms of mediation in which utility, symbolism, politics, mores, history, mythology and other practical and subjective concerns receive full consideration, avenues here called “scripted virtuality”. This work seeks not to discuss digital technology *qua* technology, but rather to explore the socio-cultural implications and transformative potential of “scripted virtuality” – ultrasensory, meta-experiential digital reality.

2. Nomadic space v/s embedded space

By thrusting one's self into the (un)known without the (re)assurance of precedent (to nothing of the comfort of convention), the (dis)junctiveness of that thinness of time which is uniquely and solely ours is (re)enforced, perpetuating an absent present. – Stanley Tigerman

Traditional architecture is necessarily rooted in physical, material, and cultural space; its embeddedness is a function of the creative impulse of inhabitation and creation, engendering a multiplicity of subjective and tactile experiences. Conversely, digital architecture eschews these constraints, enabling a “nomadic” mode of de-territoriality. Nomadic space is necessarily fluid and individualized. Moreover, the nomadic space of digital architecture is a product of the interplay between the technological and temporal context, between the producer and consumer, a space in which the hierarchy implicit in artistic creation is easily and inevitably subverted. Embedded space is inhabited, experienced in a passive, reactive way; nomadic space is perceived and shaped, and is fundamentally extra-temporal, proactive, and mutable. Nomadic digital space reflects the “Superposition” postulated by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger, existing only in concert with, and remaining defined by, the nature of the seamless user interface. The endless permutations, the intrinsic polymorphousness of the “scripted virtuality” to which digital architecture lends itself renders this medium inherently rootless yet essentially contextualized.

3. Tactile inhabitation v/s visual inhabitation

The issue that one faces is: how does virtual architecture become a digital reality (and not so much an alternate one). However, with the introduction of the fourth dimension of time as

a valid parameter in the language of creative representation, the idea of inhabiting an architectural space in the conventional sense has changed considerably. There has been a paradigm shift from “tactile” inhabitation to visual inhabitation. This is true not only of architecture but also of almost all forms of creative and socio-cultural exchanges in life. The result is a privileging of visual and auditory over tactile stimuli.

The progression from painting to photography to videography to mixed media has enabled art to encompass and stimulate a greater range of sensorial – as well as other latent – perceptions. The idea of digital architecture as art for art’s sake has yet to find widespread legitimacy. Historically, there has been a reaction to almost every new idea of creation, broadly defined, when such creation has been divorced from a wider cultural context. The riots in Paris that accompanied the first performance of Stravinsky’s *Rites of Spring* in 1913 testify to this discomfort.

The same is true of virtual architecture – the technological advances have created rich possibilities to explore space divorced from the constraints imposed by tactility/materiality. Because virtual architecture is not limited to the use of static materials, it lends dynamism and stretches the notion of space as we have known it.

4. Map v/s territory

“You have been living in a dream world Neo. As in Baudrillard’s vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map, not the territory” (Morpheus, from *The Matrix*)

The desire to explore one’s intuitive realm without the physical/material/functional constraints of material architecture has created a portal to a larger unknown. Though this creative process is limited by the capabilities of the software program, the possibilities of the algorithms generated are almost kaleidoscopic in nature. This opens up almost infinite possibilities of solutions (locations) which are charted primarily through the intent of the architect. The intent is the primary catalyst in exploring/designing such spaces and creates a privileged space which exists in dialogue with its creator. The site then becomes that of the virtual screen which is characterized and constrained by the idiosyncrasies of the software programs and the ability of the designer. The framework that is engendered is very much akin to a map which one uses to go from the source point (concept) to the destination (intent). One can only find routes which are charted out (programmed)—so in a sense reading the map gives a sense not necessarily of the territory but only of the desired destination and enables not an experience, but at most a cognitive understanding, of the route.

In a holistic definition of architecture, however, such exclusivity breeds unrest as the inhabitants of architectural spaces cannot read the space beyond the manipulations of form. Connections that help to define and identify/acclimatize the space for the visitor/inhabitant rarely stem from the immediacy of the occupancy. A heuristic experience of space is derived not merely from its form but from its larger context, one which transcends the actual moment. In this context, the map is only a small subset of the

territory. Virtual space will only become digital “reality” (territory) when it becomes more than just a way of charting one’s route (map) and destination via the technological innovations for which the generation of physical architecture is merely an outcome of the path/process. It is a deeper and more expansive experience of the territory that will lend to the universal validation of scripted virtuality.

5. Scripted virtuality

“A phenomenon is not an appearance, or even an apparition, but a sign, a symptom which finds its meaning in an existing force.” – Deleuze

Scripted virtuality is not merely a nomadic digital experience, but also a synthetic register of memory. This sets it apart from, the looking for answers, in total immersive technologies, mediated conditions of machine and man, and alternate realities existing in parallel spaces.

The strategic introduction of particular “socio-spatial dialectics” (Lefebvre) into digital environments could empower the inhabitants of the space to create a more heuristic cognizance of virtual worlds. Such scripted virtuality would bring about a democratization of artistic production, a leveling of the power dynamic between artist and consumer, insofar as the consumer becomes an integral part of a more holistic, bilateral creative process.

Scripting of a space can be so crafted that it can be reactive (with qualitative aspects of the space creating a user-reaction) and proactive (with the user interacting with the space to modify one’s environment) at the same time. The idea of a virtual world being simultaneously proactive and reactive creates something “more than” and goes beyond merely a set of “transcendent ideas” or “ideological superstructures”.

An illustrative example of this idea can be found in the playing of a video game. The “technology” is couched in a “story/memory” which is identified with certain life experiences, contributing to the immersive quality of the experience. However, (virtual) architecture goes a step further as it is not about viewing through a frame at all times (video game), but about inhabiting and identifying. In virtual scripting the idea is to bridge the gap between viewing and living – and the act is not restricted to sensory experience but rooted in memory and a wider platform of existence.

The rhizomatic, universalizing nature of digital reality creates opportunities for polymorphic temporo-spatial experience. Scripted virtuality inheres in and stems from the cultural context in which it exists, granting it a hypercontextuality that traditional architecture can enjoy only in a historical perspective. “Digital reality” is space without maps, in which the territory itself becomes the totality of experience, making it a truly sustainable cultural practice.

Digital architectural space in its contemporary characterizations needs to become a portable immersive map in which the inhabitants can project their aspirations onto/into the space in accordance with their belief systems. Instead of walking into an

amorphous, alienating environment, the user must be able to become spatially localized, thus allowing his/her connections/relationships with the space to be of somewhat coeval proportions as those of the creator. "The inhabitation of space should be able to lead to an intelligent crowd phenomenon in which people are organizing spontaneous events to leave traces in the system for others to see", (Espinoza) "enabling a community's collective memory to grow organically, allowing ordinary citizens to embed social knowledge in the new wireless landscape of the city." (Lane).

Scripted virtuality offers many advantages:

- Such worlds allow for a myriad of temporal events that could in effect shape the territory.
- There is a strong opportunity to explore the idea of simultaneity or parallel worlds within a single virtual construct. In traditional worlds a singular consensual reality is the driving force. In contrast a plethora of realities could thrive in a single public space.
- Traditional architecture loses its tangible quality in events of destruction or passage of time. To keep the memory alive it needs to be recreated in deterministic and representational models which when archived do not allow for evolution. However, in the case of scripted virtualities the medium allows for geo-encoded memories which can be archived and open to user-manipulation.
- Scripted virtuality can be seen as a mobile code which transcends hierarchical blockages, thus allowing for an ease of transferability in geographical as well as archeological space. This mobility deprivileges official centers and creates a transparency for free cultural action. Scripted virtuality becomes an anti-thesis to the idea that technology breeds homogeneity, providing a strongly validated stage for its creation.

In conclusion it is fair to say that the idea of scripted virtuality does not necessarily provide a framework for a digital utopia.

The concept of public space whether digital or physical can never be the ideal representation of a "global" community. What it strives to do is build connections to the world outside of its revolutionary technological framework, creating enough variance such that it is a palimpsest of instances of memory and experience at the same time.. Latour argues that we should investigate multiple dimensions so that "*we may be able to accommodate the hybrids and give them a place, a name, a home, a philosophy, an ontology and a new constitution.*"

Selected bibliography

1. Anders,P., Toward an architecture of Mind, in:Proceedings of the CAiiA-STAR symposium on Extreme Paramaters.New Dimensions of Interactivity, 2001.
2. Deleuze,G., Postscript on the Society of Control, in: Neal Leach-Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory, London, 1992, 59,3-8.
3. Deleuze,G. and Guattari,F., A Treatise on Nomadology, in: A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Brian Massumi (trans)University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1973,1987.
4. Der Derian,J., The Conceptual Cosmology of Paul Virilo, Theory Culture,1999,16(5).
5. Espinoza,F.;et al., Experience Deploying GeoNotes in an Open Wireless Network, unpublished.
6. Rheingold, Smart Mobs, The Next Social Revolution, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, MA, 2002.
7. Sampson,T., From Politics of Hyperspace to Free Action in Viralspace:unraveling the blockages of State-space and exploring nomadic potential in computational space, PhD Thesis, University of London, 2002.
8. Tapping, M., Virtual Reality and Beyond, PhD Thesis, University of Plymouth,2003.
9. Tuters, M., Locative Media as the Digital Production of Nomadic Space, Geography, 2004,89(1), 78-82.