

Section One: Simulation & Power

McLuhan, Baudrillard & Foucault

In this section I intend to focus on notions from three prominent theorists, whose thought may enable us to better conceptualise cyberspace and specifically virtual worlds. In the process of conceptualising simulation, I will explore the media theories of McLuhan and Baudrillard, who attempt to offer an explanation for our present situation in terms of addressing the global telecommunications that have become symptomatic as we approach the millennium. In order to conduct an investigation into notions of power in cybersociety, a Foucauldian framework will be utilised.

This theoretical framework of simulation and power will inform Section Two, which indirectly deals with the evident connections between theory and object. Rather than discuss a generalised cyberspace made up of different elements, the second section focuses on 'avatar' worlds as the object of theory, and attempts to interpret their significance in the theoretical light of simulation and power.

A McLuhanite Perspective on Information Space

Marshal McLuhan was undoubtedly the greatest media theorist of his day, bringing about a true revolution in media thought. By assimilating contemporary ideas and laying foundations for future theorists to develop, McLuhan's discourse is a brand of technological optimism, which examines the effects of electronic media on human systems. The unique visual style with which he presents original texts further increases the impact of his work through illuminating how text itself is a visual medium, emphasizing the role of the eye in perception. In his later work, McLuhan sees the media as an extension of humanity, which is a concept we are primarily interested in here. He asserts that all media extend human faculty (McLuhan & Powers, 1989), using the image of global electronic networks as an extension of the central nervous system. In this metaphor the electrical impulses the brain sends to nerves extend into the global communication network. Conceptually the World Wide Web as an extension of the central nervous system is an excellent metaphor for comprehending both the structure and psychological implications of cyberspace, where time and space are meaningless as a single mouse click can take you half way around the world. McLuhan's theories position the web as a global village square where people meet and exchange information.

Perhaps the height of McLuhan's profound thinking was that mankind is accelerating towards a robotic future through human consciousness projecting itself into the global environment via electronics (Ibid., vii). That is to say, the image of electric media as an

extension of the human nervous system is a highly useful metaphor for thinking about the social effects of a global computer network:

“...The electric media are a physical extension of our own organic nervous system, which is literally constituted by electrical impulses. When you put an electric system, or field, around you, you enlarge your own nervous system. Just as a wheel extends your foot, the “wired planet” now extends our nerves...” (Forsdale, 1988, 21).

Thus McLuhan means any extension of man when he uses the word ‘medium’. A book is an extension of the eye in the same way a car can be thought of as an extension of the leg or clothes are an extension of the skin. He posits that the media of a given society plays a fundamental role in defining it and determining behaviour. This is evidenced (Stearn, 1968, 25) by noting that the warm clothes worn by Eskimo’s mean they can go for weeks without food when necessary through retaining their body heat. However a tropical native living on the equator need not wear clothes as his environment provides heat, however he can only go a day or two without food as he has no means of retaining body heat. Howard Luck Gossage uses this example to illustrate both the clothes as extension of skin metaphor and McLuhan’s use of ‘medium’:

“For a naked tribesman, the jungle is his clothes. When one of us runs around naked in a heated room, the room itself is clothes, an extension of our skin, a medium” (Ibid., 26).

This brings us to the next point of importance here: that as an extension of man, any new medium constitutes a new environment that controls the behaviours of human participants within it. This can be illustrated by considering some of the virtual worlds discussed later in this thesis. To enable communication within the world participants take the form of an ‘avatar’. This is an audiovisual body inside a virtual world that provides a degree of anonymity, protecting the user from repercussions. Thus participants are commonly less inhibited than in face to face communication. Gossage uses an example of the print medium here to illustrate how thought patterns can be affected through media conditioning:

“...the environment imposed by the medium of print itself: one word after the other, one sentence after another, one paragraph after another, one page after another; one thing at a time in a logical, connected line. The effects of this linear thinking are deep and influence every facet of a literate society such as our own” (Ibid., 27).

He contrasts the linear preconditioning of literate societies with ear-oriented, pre-literate societies tending to both receive and transmit simultaneously, offering the fact that “most of the best” chess players come from pre-literate societies as evidence. Although this is inconclusive at least and a generalisation at worst, he may have something to hear within the project of McLuhanism as decentered, non-linear thinking is the product of acoustic space.

McLuhan uses the term's 'visual' and 'acoustic' in his definition of spatial media. Visual space is a typically western, linear construct emphasizing left hemisphere operation of the brain relating to the world as perceived by sight. Western logic is ordered around sequential relationships, logic made visual by the human eye in order to make sense. Acoustic space on the other hand projects a more three dimensional model of right hemisphere, decentred thinking relating to the sensory operation of the ear.

“Acoustic space is built on holism, the idea that there is no cardinal centre, just many centres floating in a cosmic system which honours only diversity...” (McLuhan & Powers, 1989, x)

This mode of decentered thinking is an important stage in McLuhan's exposition of new media technologies. He talks of differing societies coming into abrasive contact on a global scale of value collisions here, preparing the ground for implosion theory which I'll discuss elsewhere in this chapter. Information systems are becoming man's very nature as the world shifts between visual and acoustic space. McLuhan and Powers (1989) attempt to illustrate the way in which world culture is repositioning itself to accept the mode of the dynamically many centred in terms of visual and acoustic space.

“Some neurologists and sociologists have claimed that hierarchical reasoning is a sensory preference of the left hemisphere of the brain; and, audile-tactile space a sensory preference of the right brain, the dwelling place of primitive man's intuition of

myth...Current shift from visual space to acoustic space technologies in society is accelerating” (Ibid., 35).

Writing arguably his most famous text (Ibid.) from the early days of the Internet before it became popular and widely available outside the United States, his model of acoustic space parallels the world of the ear with information space. To become aware of the increased sensory significance placed on acoustics, and gain a spatial understanding of many centres, close your eyes and listen to the world. Different sounds come from all directions at once. In the first chapter, McLuhan uses the Linear Shannon-Weaver communication model (where a message passes from the encoder through ‘noise’ to the receiver who decodes it), to illustrate the difference between right and left hemisphere thinking. These differing hemispheres of the brain offer different ways of processing information. Linear thought belonging to the left hemisphere of the brain is the more frequent model for the Western world, as our linguistic system has programmed us to think like this. However McLuhan’s rightbrain model is more suited to the information age as its decentredness fits the structural nature of cyberspace which, although in its infancy at the time of McLuhan’s prophetic theorising, is the logical extension of information moving at the speed of light in a universe of simultaneity.

In an interview with Professor Louis Forsdale published in the Antigonish Review McLuhan talks frankly about acoustic space:

“The new electric environment of simultaneous and diversified information creates acoustic man... His environment is made up of information in all kinds of simultaneous forms, and he puts on this electric environment as we put on our clothes, or as the fish puts on water...” (Forsdale, 1988, 24)

He goes on to explain how acoustic space, being created from our ability to hear from all directions at once, is a world of electronic interplay and resonance. This is the world of the global media which McLuhan correctly predicted the decentralising nature of, noting the transfer of power from the centre to a position allowing greater local autonomy, with each point in the network being as central as the next.

“As man succeeds in translating his central nervous system into electronic circuitry, he stands on the threshold of outerring his consciousness into the computer” (McLuhan & Powers, 1989, 94).

This statement appears to challenge the very ontology of our technological society, as with his consciousness inside the network man's nature of being and thought patterns run the risk of becoming computerised. As all events in the global media village are simultaneous when transmitted at the speed of light, there is no time or space separating events. Thus information and images implode together. As man himself becomes an ostensible part of the network McLuhan predicts that he will implode upon himself, as not having been designed for simultaneous existence and receiving data at the speed of light, there are no natural and physical laws to balance him. Taking consciousness as a

projection to the outside of an inner synesthesia, McLuhan notes that in the age of implosion electronic man will wear his brain outside his skull and his nervous system on top of his skin (Ibid., 94). This process is an accurate metaphor to describe cyberspace, as with his body in one place, man will experience the schizophrenic disembodiment of having his mind float into the electric void.

“Caught up in the hybrid energy released by video technologies, he will be presented with a chimerical “reality” that involves all his senses at a distended pitch, a condition as addictive as any known drug” (Ibid., 97).

It is interesting to note here that a condition known as Pathogenic Internet Use (PIU) has recently been acknowledged as an official addictive disorder (Schuman, 1). Dr. Kimberly Young, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, Bradford USA, has written a paper classifying Internet use as addictive in the same way as drugs. The report identifies that perceived anonymity is the main attraction to electronic communication:

““The ability to enter into a bodiless state of communication enabled users to explore altered states of being that fostered emotions that were new and richly exciting”” (Ibid., 2).

The report finds that new emotional creations become problematic when they transfer over into real life. The “chimerical reality” McLuhan talks about necessarily involves an

interface between human and machine, which can be looked at here in the sensory deprived realities of disabled people. Consider the difference between an 8-bit (low definition) and a 16 bit (true speech quality) sound card. Hearing impairment can thus be used as a vehicle for the comparison between our body systems and computer systems, mobilizing the concept of McLuhan's computer networks as extensions of the central nervous system. On assessing the applicability of this theory to cyberspace, one has to note the sheer power of this metaphor in terms of the wired population themselves actually being the network. This helps us to think about the moment of interface as joining up with a collective consciousness. Developing a truly post- McLuhanite theory, Dr Marcos B. Viermenhouk, head of the Institute for Evolutionary Studies at Johannesburg's Witswatersrand University, posits that humanity has developed into a fungus like macro-organism. In an interview with David Williams (http://www.wired.com/collections/virtual_communities/4.04_macro_organism1.html), Viermenhouk explains that human beings have ceased to evolve as individual organisms. We now evolve collectively through complex social structures in cyberspace as a macro organism. He illustrates this with examples from evolutionary history:

“Observe lower social organisms – bees, for example. A hive of bees is not a collection of individuals but, rather, a simple macro-organism... In order to develop a complex macro-organism, there must be a way to convey and store detailed information... The Internet provides a big leap forward. As an organism grows more complex, it requires a sophisticated means of transferring data between its constituent entities. The Internet is little more than the nervous system of our human macro-organism” (*Ibid.*, 2).

This mobilisation of McLuhan's global network as extension of human nervous system is a colourful illustration of how a macro-organism might function. However I do not think we can take this notion any further than a metaphor addressing the conceptualisation of cyberspace here, as although it speaks about the social formation of technology the psychological connotations deserve greater consideration than I am willing to give them here. Dr Viermenhouk has written a book on the subject though and this is one such point that may be addressed for further research.

So far then, within the discourse of McLuhanism I have discussed the World Wide Web (WWW) as an extension of the nervous system, in the same way that clothes are extensions of the skin. This is a useful conceptual tool for thinking about the relationship between cyberspace and humanity. This was then developed into thinking about the medium itself as an extension of man. The notion of right and left brain perception was included to explain the notion of acoustic space, which is another important aspect of discussing human and computer systems. Perhaps inevitably it is a factor of humanity that PIU addiction to technology is evident in society, which McLuhan did successfully predict. As a consequence rather than an affect of this, the notion of a macro organism again provides us with a powerful conceptual aid in thinking about social technology. I consider these elements of McLuhan's theory to be important in relation to simulation, as they attempt to explain how humanity and technology are now inextricably linked together. Rather than use the language of technical jargon, the inevitability of a future involving media simulation is explained here in human terms.

Although McLuhan had sadly died before the global network of today was fully realised, his later thinking provides a conceptual building block for Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which I will argue is epistemologically flawed and therefore unreliable. From McLuhan's base theory about the effects of the media on society, Baudrillard has projected his own thinking without fully considering the self-negating character of his discourse. Even if the theory is itself flawed however, it will aid our discussion here to understand why it is so. Thus I will proceed with a Baudrillardian analysis of cybersociety.