

THE ABSOLUTE SPACE: The Impact of the Virtual*

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CYBERSPACE – A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the bank of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding.

William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984: 51.)

The following article is an attempt to characterise the current state of the empiric world through the light of the presence of the virtual. The virtual is hereafter regarded not only in the narrow sense as an effect created by the use of virtual technology, but also in a wider sense as a general idea or a specific cognitive (social or cultural) quality recently attached to (or merged with) the real. The idea of virtuality is certainly older (e.g. concepts or ideas about fiction often come close); the massive use of virtual technology (or technology that strongly suggests virtuality) can in this respect only be considered as something that enforced virtuality into becoming a culturally acknowledged cognitive quality. My purpose hereafter is to characterise how the cultural impact of the virtual has transformed the way western or westernised people perceive their 'selves' and the space surrounding them.

Cognitive, postcognitive

Today's western or westernised cityscape is in an epistemological crisis. In his book *A Dialectic of Centuries*, the composer, avant-garde poet and performance-artist Dick Higgins formulates the recent change in artists' approach through his cognitive and postcognitive questions. I prefer to interpret the cognitive questions as those which may arise in a cultural context where there is no strong possibility

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to the virtual as a general cognitive idea, whereas the (ontological) need to ask the postcognitive questions can be interpreted as the symptom of the presence of the virtual. The following groups of questions can also be applied as general dominants on a broader level of cultural research, for example as markers distinguishing the general cognitive tendencies of modernism and postmodernism:

The Cognitive questions

(asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958):

‘How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?’

The Postcognitive questions

(asked by most artists since then):

‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?’

(Higgins 1978: 101.)

Higgins’ quite playful approach has many good aspects. First, as Brian McHale points out, the dating is of an intuitive nature. Higgins avoids dates which have historically significant symbolic meanings (like 1945 or 1960), therefore letting us know that his formulation is ‘a story – not a map whose boundaries need policing’ (McHale 1992: 146). In his analysis of these groups of questions, Brian McHale (who deserves an extensive reference here) has adapted a terminology of a more familiar nature – identifying the cognitive approach generally with modernism and the postcognitive approach with postmodernism (McHale 1987: xii; 1992: 146). Higgins himself seems to avoid these terms and I will follow his example in order to avoid the ambiguity, random use and excessive dead weight which the term *postmodernism* seems to entail all too often. McHale puts these aforementioned questions into meaningful perspective, describing the cognitive questions as dominantly epistemological and the postcognitive questions as dominantly ontological (McHale 1987: 9–10). Epistemological questions are the ones which refer to knowledge about the world and about one’s character. To the basic ones stated by Higgins, McHale adds some more: ‘What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? What are the limits of the knowable?’ (McHale 1987: 9.) Ontological questions are those about being and modes of existence, McHale’s additions here go as follows: ‘What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different

kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of a world (or worlds) it projects?' (McHale 1987: 10.) The cognitive and the postcognitive should not be considered successive but parallel discourses. This way, intractable epistemological uncertainty 'becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough, and they 'tip over' into ontological questions' (McHale 1987: 11). The same applies to ontological questions; the relation between ontological and epistemological is not linear and unidirectional but bidirectional and reversible – 'if the ontological questions are pushed far enough, they become epistemological questions' (McHale 1987: 11).

In this fashion, in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), protagonist Oedipa Maas is confronted with the borders of the ontological by having reached the absolute limits of her knowledge and writing 'Shall I project a world?' under an unknown symbol in her notebook (Pynchon 1999: 64). At that moment, Oedipa has reached a point when she has to decide whether she has or hasn't discovered Tristero, a worldwide conspiracy of postal workers – all evidence seems to point that way but there is no real proof. Oedipa is faced with an inability to decide whether to go along with the existence of the conspiracy and see a world of a totally different nature, or avert all the symptoms of the possible conspiracy. Such epistemological uncertainty paves the way to the ontological – Oedipa abandons the level of inner knowledge (because, in this situation, it's impossible for her to know more) and considers projecting a new world and believing in an alternate reality in which Tristero exists. At the end of the novel, Oedipa remains in an auction-room to wait for the arrival of Tristero's representative, but the story ends before she can warrant or confute her doubts. Tristero remains only a possibility. Oedipa does not break through the closed circle of her solipsism (McHale 1987: 24) and accordingly, the whole novel remains in the field of the epistemological. McHale explains that this epistemological solipsism 'can be transcended, but only by shifting from a modernist poetics of epistemology to a postmodern poetics of ontology, from Oedipa's cry *Shall I project a world?* to the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural' (McHale 1987: 25). The epistemological crisis that follows the admittance of equally believable versions of truth can be overcome only by admitting the parallel existence of multiple worlds and their mutual comparison – a phenomenon McHale playfully calls 'the kiss of

cosmic pool balls' (McHale 1987: 25). Pynchon explores the literary possibilities of this 'tilting into the ontological' in his next novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

As can be concluded, the meanings of the terms 'self' and 'world' differ radically in the cognitive and postcognitive. Higgins' cognitive questions indicate the inner integrity of 'self' and 'world': in the cognitive condition, one has a certain and indivisible self which operates in one existent world. Such singularity is generally not challenged (the case of Oedipa Maas can be considered a border-case); literature of the cognitive field emerges from the contradictions between 'self' and 'world' and the lack of knowledge concerning both. On the other hand, the postcognitive questions denote the inability to orientate in the maze of innumerable selves and worlds – this signifies both the resigned withdrawal from the traumatic nucleus of the cognitive integrated self as well as the subjection of epistemological problems to the ontological category of 'worldliness'. The strong presence of virtuality can thus be considered a source of the present cityscape's epistemological crisis. The virtual (being such in power, force or effect, although not actually or expressly such) paves the way for the rise of ontological issues – issues concerning multiple selves and worlds which have the same 'strength of reality'. The presence of the virtual radically affects the cognition of psychological space-time. Hereafter, I'll make an effort to bring out the characteristic features of the postcognitive continuum.

The postcognitive space

According to Fredric Jameson, today's late-capitalist cityscape can be best described as a continuum where the 'modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'.' (Jameson 1991: ix.) Such a condition is the product of a human being constantly aspiring towards rationality, arising from a desire to control the ever-growing entropy of our space-time. Culture can be regarded as the manifestation of rationality's incursion, as humanity's consistent effort to preclude everything that cannot be rationally concluded. Such, for example, are the ways of the sciences – the main markers of cultural progress in western or westernised societies. All too often, the envisioning of some given process is accompanied by a supposed, anticipated outcome. Reality's growing fulfillment with objects can be regarded as a result of the aforementioned urge to rationalise – by calling forth produce which subjects itself to

logical control, western or westernised culture tends to cover up chaotic impulses sprawling in the cultural space. As a result of such a process, the status (but not the essence) of the object has gradually changed and this change in the late-capitalist cityscape has brought about the transformation of the cognition of space.

In his essay, 'The ecstasy of communication', Jean Baudrillard mentions that in the western society, the object no longer functions solely as an attribute or supplement of one's nature or character. In the producer society (the characterising questions of which are Higgins' cognitive ones), the object could be considered a reflection of the subject (Baudrillard 1983: 126) – as an external extension of some internal physical or mental function. The object was then approached according to the logic of possession and projection (Baudrillard 1983: 127); one's social character was determined by the amount he owned, and this, correspondingly, determined the configuration of the network of social relations that surrounded him. Slavoj Žižek, in his survey *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, looks at the way Marx described the transition from feudalism to capitalism, seems to support this train of thought. According to Žižek, 'the crucial social relations, those of production, are no longer immediately transparent in the form of the interpersonal relations of domination and servitude; they disguise themselves ... under the shape of social relations between things, between the products of labour' (Žižek 2002: 26). In other words, the relations between humans were hidden behind or 'covered up' by the relations between objects; even one's character was ever more revealed through the interaction of objects. Baudrillard adds that 'The description of this whole intimate universe – projective, imaginary and symbolic – still corresponded to the object's status as mirror of the subject, and that in turn to the imaginary depths of the mirror and 'scene': there is a domestic scene, a scene of interiority, a private space-time (correlative, moreover, to a public space). The oppositions subject/object and public/private were still meaningful.' (Baudrillard 1983: 126.)

During the transition from producer society to consumer society (which can be characterised by Higgins' postcognitive questions), people no longer project themselves into their objects. In the consumer society, according to Baudrillard, 'mirror' and 'scene' (as keywords describing a human belonging in the producer society) have been replaced with 'a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold – the smooth operational surface of

communication.’ (Baudrillard 1983: 126–127.) This rather figurative explanation is successful in bringing out the change that occurred in cognition during the transition from producer society to consumer society: one’s inner psychological self (epistemological character) has now been projected onto the surface of the surrounding world, one’s ‘self’ and ‘character’ now appear in the countless objects on the level of ‘reality’. A human’s ‘self’ can thus be regarded as a symptom of the surrounding network of social relations – not as its primary cause but its final result. She is forced to search for her externally projected ‘self’ in the surrounding (object-level) world and this compulsion leads to an imprisonment that is guarded by Higgins’ postcognitive questions. No longer is she able to ask for her internal ‘self’; instead, she must grasp the maze of countless worlds (filled with countless entangled motifs of various ‘selves’) and modify her ‘self’ (‘selves’) according to these worlds.

Baudrillard characterises this transformation – the transition from object/subject relation to the network of relations – through Barthes’ myth about Citroën (Barthes 1972: 88–90). Barthes, using the then released newest model of Citroën as an example, observes the changes in ‘mythology’ surrounding the car. Baudrillard, summarising Barthes’ essay, explains that the logic of possession and projection has, little by little, been replaced by a logic of ‘driving’:

No more fantasies of power, speed and appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tactic of potentialities linked to usage: mastery, control and command, an optimization of the play of possibilities offered by the car as vector and vehicle, and no longer as object of psychological sanctuary. The subject himself, suddenly transformed, becomes a computer at the wheel, not a drunken demiurge of power. (Baudrillard 1983: 127.)

The generalisation arising from Baudrillard’s message turns out to be decisive – in a society whose members’ primary problematic questions are those Higgins calls postcognitive, the main factor in defining one’s ‘self’ or ‘character’ is no longer through quantity or character of owned objects, but rather by staying in the network of social relations through the use of these objects. Only in this way can one be open to the possibility of achieving contact with the motifs of (epistemological) ‘self’ that have been irreversibly projected outwards. As Baudrillard summarises, ‘what was projected psychologically and mentally, what used to be lived out on earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical scene, is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all, into an absolute space which

is also that of simulation' (Baudrillard 1983: 128). Higgins' cognitive questions – questions about knowledge of the world and one's self – are inevitably hidden beneath the postcognitive questions (about multiple existent worlds, selves and modes of existence); the former cannot be answered until the latter have been solved.

This last observation by Baudrillard is by no means rare in contemporary thought. The postcognitive can be easily related to Deleuze's and Guattari's idea about rhizome and the schizophrenic subject (Deleuze, Guattari 1983), Barthes' ideas about the death of the author (Barthes 1977), Eco's descriptions about the hyper-real (Eco 1986) and the poststructuralist discourse in general, where, in Žižek's words, 'to dissolve the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential relations' (Žižek 2002: 72). As a result of this dissipation, the object has lost the meaning it had so far. It is no longer regarded so much as a part of the subject/object binarity, and because of this the strong borders which earlier separated the object from the subject have started to disperse. As a result, the object is increasingly more integrated into the subject – its firm separation from the subject is not only no longer necessary but (according to the logic of 'driving') even disadvantageous. Due to the necessity to 'stay in traffic', many objects¹ (mobile phones, computers, physiotherapy units) surrounding contemporary western or westernised people (and explicating their identities, lifestyles and values) are comparable to prosthesis – 'the artificial supports used by medical technology to complete otherwise lacking physical organisms' (Cavallaro 2000: x). Artificial products have increasingly started to amplify one's natural abilities or to compensate for their natural defects and a (western or westernised) human no longer defines herself through the natural, but predominantly through the artificial (the technological is no longer perceived as alien). This is close to the postcognitive condition where, as Jameson mentioned, 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'.

The prosthetic status of many objects is exploited by advertising, the media and the information industry. In the survey *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, Dani Cavallaro (who also deserves a lengthier reference here) states that

...technologically mass-produced objects are incessantly caught in cultural operations [---] that are not so much concerned with tangible products as with images, fashions

¹ Object now taken on a simple everyday, materialistic level.

and styles. The material CD player or laptop PC one happens to own, for example, is far less significant than the immaterial images or ideas of such objects promoted designers or advertisers. Moreover, those images and ideas keep shifting, being constantly modified by the introduction of minimal differences that rapidly consign even the most attractive products to obsolescence. (Cavallaro 2000: x.)

Cavallaro (considering Gibson's definition of cyberspace) concludes that the solidity of a wide range of commodities we use is therefore a hallucination – something delusory, illusory, mirage-like:

Yet Gibson's definition also suggests that our illusions and mirages form the basis of a kind of consensus by being continuously shared by large groups of people. This sharing is achieved by transforming individual experiences into collective representations. Advertising, the media and the information industry capitalize on the translation of people's subjective desires, emotions and fantasies into images of ideal and desirable products. Such images bypass individual tastes and preferences by being presented as universally appealing. They thus create a curious notion of commonality, based on the assumption that belonging to a culture amounts to desiring the same commodities desired by virtually any other individual inhabiting that culture. In this illusory community, people are little more than anonymous strangers to each other: all that connects them is an abstract network of representations. They are characters in a narrative, or actors in a play, who roughly know the plot without being familiar with the rest of the cast. (Cavallaro 2000: x.)

Hence, the object has a prosthetic status, it is integrated into the human being and surrounded by the universal amplification of subjective desires – a network, where the preference of certain configurations shapes one's identity. A subject (now – as he is facing Higgins' postcognitive questions – no longer a subject proper) can achieve contact with other subjects (who are trying to modify their selves to their respective 'worlds') only through the virtual. She can understand them only through the choice of the surrounding universal representations and not through some easily perceivable inner (epistemological) 'self' or 'character'. Such is the impact of the virtual – the material is strongly penetrated by the ideological, the real strongly by the fictitious. As Baudrillard concludes:

Here we are far from the living-room and close to science fiction. But once more it must be seen that all these changes – the decisive mutations of objects and of the environment in the modern era – have come from an irreversible tendency towards three things: an ever greater formal and operational abstraction of elements and functions and their homogenization in a single virtual process of functionalization; the displacement of bodily movements and efforts into electric or electronic commands,

and the miniaturization, in time and space, of processes whose real scene (though it is no longer a scene) is that of infinitesimal memory and the screen with which they are equipped. (Baudrillard 1983: 128–129.)

The postcognitive time

We can begin the description of the postcognitive sense of time with another one of Jameson's generalisations: the postcognitive could be best grasped 'as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place' (Jameson 1991: ix).

The virtuality dominating the postcognitive sense of space also dominates the postcognitive sense of time. In the same way as the postcognitive poses difficulties in differentiating the virtual from the real in the cognition of space, so do the future and the past fail to break through the veil of present in the cognition of time. Such an assertion only deepens Augustine's vision of time, where past is seen as the present time of past things and the future is seen as present time of future things (Augustine, *Confessiones*, 10.14.17). But in an era for which the definitive questions are Higgins' postcognitive, this kind of perception of time may not only function as the declaration of an individual subjective cognition but also as a general tendency describing culture as a whole. Jameson expands and illustrates this view by observing how the news media exhausts news: how Nixon and Kennedy now seem to be figures from a relatively distant past (Jameson 1983: 125). He concludes that the real function of news exchange is to banish the recent historical experiences into the past as quickly as possible and help us forget; the news media is thus seen as the agent and mechanism of historical amnesia. According to Jameson, our contemporary social system has lost its ability to maintain its own past and started to live in a perpetual present (Jameson 1983: 125).

We may or may not agree with Jameson – Mark Currie, for example, is of the opinion that the reason for the mentioned rapid banishment is not our wish to forget but to add narrative quality to things as fast as possible (Currie 1998: 97). But whether these are the real reasons or functions for the rapid historicisation of events or not, the nature of the outcome is nevertheless the same: every perceivable time-segment is so heavily encumbered with analytical attention that we receive the impression of even the smallest event having a decisive historical importance. As a result, the ability to maintain our past has been replaced with

a perpetual need to analyse every present moment; the linear flow of subjective time has replaced itself with a single infinitely condensed present moment. It is virtually impossible to breach this continual present moment and reach the past or the future, because all our energy is spent on grasping this intensified plurality. The strong presence of the virtual may be considered the symptom of a temporally centripetal late-capitalist cityscape, in the centre of which lies the immense black hole of the present. J. G. Ballard explains the transformation of the temporal dimension in simpler words:

Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. Just as the past, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age, so in its turn the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present. We have annexed the future into the present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. Options multiply around us, and we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly. (Ballard 1995: 4.)

For closer mapping of this temporal condensation, it would be only logical to once again turn to the recent change in the object's status. Namely, in the same way the object is no longer in a defining relationship with the subject, it is also no longer in a defining relationship with its own historical origin. Here, the notable improvement and exceptional quality of reproductive techniques play a significant part in imprisoning the object to the present and freeing it from its temporal background.

In William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003), protagonist Cayce Pollard wears a very rare and expensive Buzz Rickson's Black MA-1 pilot jacket. At one point, her business rival happens to burn a hole in its shoulder with a cigarette. During the course of the novel, she develops a habit of touching the damaged place with her fingers. Later, when Cayce, concerning and odd-job, is given virtually unlimited credit for spending on anything she may need for completing her assignment, she orders a new Buzz Rickson's and it is brought to her hotel room quite soon. Later, having pulled on the new jacket, she habitually feels for the place where the cigarette stub had burnt a hole but discovers that the damaged place is no longer there. She thinks about the experience and calls it 'history erased via the substitution of an identical object' (Gibson 2003: 194).

This literary example may be the basis for a conclusion of a more general nature: if the object – together with the quality of its historical background – may

be reproduced with sufficient accuracy, its nature is no longer determined by its historical origin – the original can't be distinguished from a copy, the past from the present, the real from the fictitious. The issue of the current condition of the past, present and the future occurs frequently elsewhere in the novel. Another character, Hubertus Bigend states on a more generalised level:

Of course, we have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile. (Gibson 2003: 57.)

The protagonist Cayce Pollard utters a similar train of thought concerning the past:

The future is there, looking back at us. Trying to make sense of the fiction we will have become. And from where they are, the past behind us will look nothing at all like the past we imagine behind us now. [---] I only know that the one constant in history is change: the past changes. Our version of the past will interest the future to about the extent we're interested in whatever past the Victorians believed in. It simply won't seem very relevant. (Gibson 2003: 57.)

These literary but forthright literary examples prove that Higgins' postcognitive questions should be interpreted not only from a spatial but also a temporal perspective. In the same way that virtuality is present in the absolute space of our everyday lives, it is also the characterising component of the past and the future – the latter (as spatial markers) have also receded to superficial representations in what Ballard calls 'the all-voracious present'. The result is an absolute space (or time) in which the virtual and the real exist side-by-side, infinitely entangled with each other – an estranged and confusing continuum (if it can still be called a continuum), a reversed product of the urge towards rationality. And, again, Baudrillard concludes:

This is the time of miniaturization, telecommand and the microprocession of time, bodies, pleasures. There is no longer any ideal principle for these things at a higher level, on a human scale. What remains are only concentrated effects, miniaturized and immediately available. [---] The countryside, the immense geographic countryside, seems to be a deserted body whose expanse and dimensions appear arbitrary ... as soon as all events are epitomized in the towns, themselves undergoing reduction to

a few miniaturized highlights. And time: what can be said about this immense free time we are left with, a dimension henceforth useless in its unfolding, as soon as the instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of instants? (Baudrillard 1983: 129.)

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Virtuality is a feature inherent to the late capitalist cityscape. The presence of the virtual turns the real into an absolute space where the psychological and the mental is (without any metaphor) projected as real and the real is indistinguishable from the fictitious, the natural from the artificial, a copy from the original. The balance between fiction and reality has changed, and this – no doubt at once the reason and the symptom of the virtual – inspired Ballard to write the following:

We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – massmerchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality. (Ballard 1995: 4.)

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