Digital Bungling: Realism in an Unreal World

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The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age
Damien Sutton, Susan Brind and Ray McKenzie (eds)
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'Reality' has been called into question so frequently of late that one is tempted to insist on it all the more dogmatically. But of course it is not reality (without quotation marks) that is being discussed. It is 'Realism' or 'the Real' that is repeatedly the subject of dispute. In such quarrels 'reality' is variously understood as the foundational concept, the fictive assemblage, the representational system, the philosophical agonising, the social construction, the rhetorical device, the repressed trauma. The incredibly banal conclusion is reached with tedious repetition that there is no longer, if there ever once was, any unmediated access to what is really real.

Such repetition has the effect of presenting an actual ideological consensus as a matter of ritualised contention. Again and again, the idea that we can have direct access to reality must be heroically unmasked with all the force that anti-Realists can muster. This recurring anti-Realist exposé stands somewhere between theological revelation and scientific discovery. Somewhere, simple-minded Realists or Modernists or Marxists are supposedly holding out against the finality of this insight. Anti-Realists wrestle with the reflection of reality among the shadows cast in a hall of mirrors. For this bloodless struggle to be reproduced, and with it the social conditions of reproduction that it presupposes, the 'anti-Realist' story has to be continually retold and affirmed as new-fangled. In the 1920s the struggle against Positivism united thinkers otherwise diametrically opposed. In the 2000s the struggle against Realism unites 'postmodern' merchants of culture.

Alien Central

There is a history to all this that often goes unremarked. It is one where the everyday, and more specifically the mass of people who populate it, are disdained as caught up in an unreflexive second nature, so completely immersed in banal technological artefacts that they are unable to penetrate to the deeper, more authentic reality expressed in art, science and philosophy. An ideology of transcendence, of genius, of authenticity, has often acted as a mask for ignoble motives, including the abolition of criteria for judging the truth content of ideological claims.

When an ideology of transcendence is joined by the latest technologies and techniques, alienation is deepened on a vast scale. For instance, production technologies are introduced into workplaces on the basis of the rationality and efficiency claims advanced by innovative managers and technicians, often with the conscious intention of degrading, deskilling and routinising the embodied capacities of workers. This despoilation of human labour is not, as some think, an old outdated story, romantically hankering after the ideal of skilled manual labour, a world that has largely disappeared, replaced by a post-industrial world of immaterial labour creatively fashioning objects of technological wonderment.

Alienation is not some accidental oversight. It is designed into the rationalised socio-technical environments we inhabit as workers and consumers. Call centres, for instance, have become the very acme of control over the service function once carried out on a face-to-face basis. In the *State of the Real*, Andrew Lee's photo essay 'Centres' features a series of photographs of

bare call centre spaces in Scotland.[1] Here the contrived monotony of work spaces is pared down to soulless functionality. Even emptied of people/operators these spaces appear as claustrophobic environments of control. Although they serve a range of interchangeable sales functions – holidays, insurance, double-glazing – the same windowless, open architecture recurs of clustered ranks of desks, chairs, equipment, artificial lighting. Lee shows working spaces compressed under false or bare ceilings. This tedium is only relieved on occasion by potted plants or company brochures or 'motivational' signage hung from the ceiling that mixes the names of high performance car manufacturers with animals such as wildcats and pumas. Even if the function is to protect the natural environment, presumably seen as a 'first nature', as in Lee's photograph of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency office, it is performed, ironically, under the sparse, artificial glare in the 'second nature' of the call centre environment. If there is no return here to a bare naked 'authentic' nature from an alienated existence, Lee's photographs invite us to critique that condition and perhaps reflect on the possibilities of escape.

Can alienation be reversed with a turn back to some more 'authentic' relationship to technology? In making a stand for the sheer empirical facticity of socio-technical systems based on digital technologies, a blow may be struck against the mystificatory and redundant abstractions of philosophies of transcendence and essences. Something of an authentic relationship to technology might be preserved, a relationship without illusions that its own socio-economic preconditions might be altered. In contrast to this, Realism does not simply reflect this condition by lapsing into existential simplicity and forgetting all about technical mediation, as is often claimed. It need not even dispute the veracity of claims made by empirically-minded anti-Realists about the 'mutually constitutive' relationship of society to technology. Instead, Realism seeks to return us to the more fundamental question of whether this reality is one that we ought to live within any longer.

Too often social relations ensure that the quest for an 'authentic' relationship to cultural technology becomes a self-defeating chimera. Too often also, the social and cultural reception of technology is 'bungled', distorted by the concentrated possession of material and intellectual resources in private hands. Industrialised technologies that once promised liberation from unnecessary toil and suffering were diverted into Taylorism and imperialist warfare by economic and political imperatives.[2] So also were the possibilities for early photography deformed by artistic pretensions and private studio practices of large and small photographer-entrepreneurs.[3]

The pressing question confronting the cultural reception of digital technology refers then not to some existential essence of a localised 'authentic' relationship harking back to the ideal of a pre-modern face-to-face community. Nor does it come down to the celebration of the empirical immediacy of the human-technical 'interface', a deeply entangled relationship where it is impossible to know where 'the human' ends and technology begins. Neither is technology to be reified as an autonomous actor in its own right, unfolding according to its own logic and even revealing its own 'nature'. Instead, we are forced to interrogate the reception of digital technology
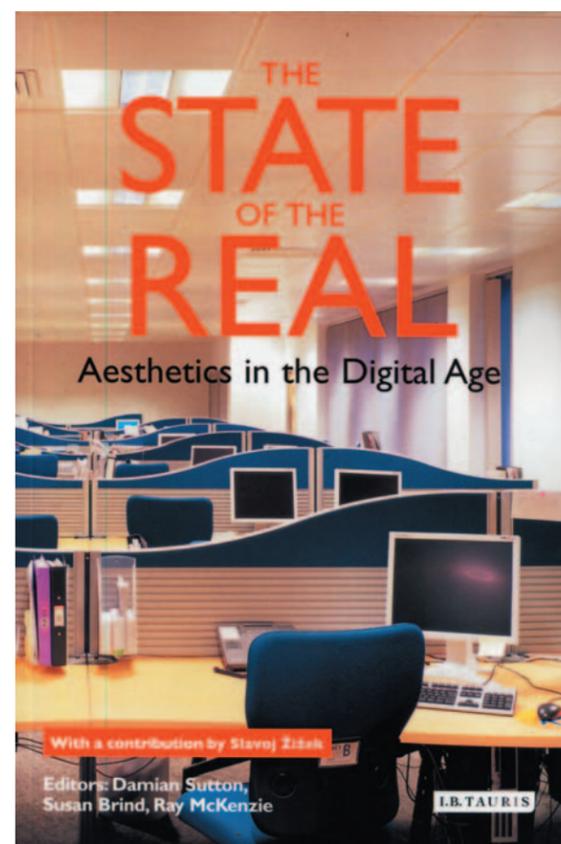
within the bad reality of social decomposition and polarisation.

If we can speak about a 'digital age' at all it cannot be that of a universal signifier. That role has already been commandeered by global capitalism. Society in the age of digital technology remains one constructed by the antagonistic relations of specific classes of people to other classes of people, their unequal relationship to resources, financial, technical and natural, at specific times and places. Consciousness lags behind these processes. Only in retrospect is the latest configuration of nature, class and technology given a catch-all name, 'the digital age', 'the knowledge economy', 'the network society', or whatever.

Does this mean that technology is forever a direct expression of the will to accumulate, as some wiseacres are wont to misrepresent historical materialism? Absolutely not. Any distortion of technology derives not from some pure essence inscribed in the objectification of its material existence. Rather, technology is 'bungled' from the point of view of its *virtual* history, not simply its empirical trajectory or 'path dependency' understood as the expression of some intrinsic technical logic. Bungled technology reflects the destruction of emancipatory possibilities by alienated social relations. A piling-up of the technological wreckage lies squarely at the door of social relations that express an overriding priority other than those of freedom and democracy: namely, the accumulation of capital.

All change

As the case of call centre design shows, digital technologies are being pressed narrowly into the service of accumulation, and with it the furtherance of alienated lifestyles. Might there be other possibilities that lie unexpressed or are rendered marginal by the euphoric reception of digitisation? *The State of the Real* addresses itself precisely to the critical relationship between digital technology, the real and visual culture. It assembles contributions from international scholars and practitioners to explore the altered practices and perception of reality in 'the digital

age'. It explores the core assumption that with the emergence of digital technology an irrevocable shift has occurred with profound implications for visual culture. Traditional fine art practices have to contend with this culture-wide shift. It is exacerbating feelings of a loss of authenticity, originality and genius at exactly the moment when 'authenticity' is being organised as an urgent matter of public policy objectives.

New practices intent on developing digital culture can abruptly find themselves moving from the margins to the centre of our concerns. Digital creators are credited as standing among the radical innovators currently re-constituting reality and our perception of it. One example of this is the Lazarus-like powers of the 'creative class'. Cast by Richard Florida as digital-savvy entrepreneurs with tasteful lifestyles, this class fraction has been deemed capable of reviving the urban decay of depressed industrial towns into vibrant 'cultural quarters' of consumption and innovation. Nothing needs to be done about the decay of social relations, no progressive redistribution of society's resources is called for. Art and creativity will find a way to spontaneously release the potential of 'human capital' without affecting the wealth or self-image of the affluent. Indeed, it flatters them further, that by following a culturally tasteful lifestyle and by living and networking in the inner city they are already making a selfless contribution to social justice. Throw in the most up to date clean digital technology into the mix and human spoliation is seen as a grim and unnecessary hangover from the more downbeat, pessimistic days of dirty technology.

Hyper-market

In the face of such claims a nagging doubt surfaces that, like the dot.com bubble some years ago, it is becoming difficult to separate reality from hyperbole. Worryingly, the current reception of digital technology places yet another layer of lost opportunities over previous rounds of technical innovation. The book's introduction shares these misgivings. It proceeds to talk about the radically new digital age as a 'working hypothesis' only, rather than an empirically established fact. What this means for Realism as a set of cultural conventions and a certain kind of representation runs through most, though not all chapters of the book.

This is raised with particular acuteness in the chapters concerning photographic practices by Jane Tormey, Neil Mathieson and Damian Sutton. Photography's power of re-presentation relied on a chemical process to index the traces of an independently existing reality. Once images are captured by means of digital coding they become manipulable in ways that no longer command confidence that the photograph, if it can still be called that, remains an accurate re-presentation of some original, objectively-given reality.

Ready to hand here is the late Jean Baudrillard's notion of 'hyper-reality'. For Baudrillard it is already impossible to separate reality from the image. All that is left is the simulation of reality in the images circulating around us. Walter Benjamin's famous thesis that artworks lost their charm or 'aura' when they could be reproduced in identical multiple copies by mechanical technology is driven much further by Baudrillard. Now the copy has effectively done away with reality, has become reality itself.

Baudrillard divides opinion sharply. With his penchant for exaggeration and the provocative gesture, critics find notions of simulacrum and hyper-reality banal, trivial and derivative. Others accuse Baudrillard of falsely or prematurely erasing reality behind symbolic hype. However, many cultural theorists see in Baudrillard both an unmasking of symbolic domination and a resigned acceptance that things today could not be otherwise. As some chapters in the *State of the Real* argue, in this Baudillardian sense, visual culture works 'on the edge', in-between reality and the image. 'Postmodern' photographic practices share in an 'irreal' search for non-meaning. Authorial intention to represent reality is surrendered to a naïve aesthetic that contrives to relinquish any claims to affirmative documentary value

and hence the idea of an objective reality to be recorded.

But as Jane Tormey concludes in her chapter, photography's appeal to the 'irreal' merely displaces, rather than disproves, the objective real world. Such practices echo an older Modernist story of contriving to unlearn the dominant aesthetic in order to return to a more primal aesthetic beyond positivist truth claims. However, it is one thing to consciously reassemble authorship, replacing the documentary function with an allegorical one as Neil Matheson suggests to valuable effect in his discussion of the work of German photographer Thomas Demand. It is far less easy to escape the embodied habitus that reproduces a certain kind of conceptualist aesthetic among specific social groups. The detached critique of Realism cannot be divorced from institutional training.

Bodily functions

Concern about the presence or absence of bodies in visual culture offers a clue about the digitised mediation of the real. In Lee's call centre photographs and Demand's reconstructions bodies are deleted. Such bodily erasure decentres the human figure as an independent agent or object of contemplation. In such work, any appeal to some basic level of identification of a shared corporeal existence is resisted. In the middle section of the book, 'Realism in Practice', practitioners reflect on the body, mind and artistic detachment. James Coupe's work *Digital Network Warfare* uses mobile phone text messaging to construct a non-representational artwork from which the artist can disengage and allow the technology to 'develop autonomously' as a developing system. Bodily intervention is displaced by a concealed technical infrastructure. Coupe develops a 'systems analysis' that concedes agency to technological processes governed by the 'corporate body'.

Mediated by technology, heightened impersonality in the digital age raises issues of political and economic power and the evisceration of the mythical public sphere. Jennifer Willet and Shawn Bailey's BIOTEKNICA turns on ethical dilemmas of biotechnological science and the power it represents. Potentially liberating, biotechnology is in serious danger of being bungled by capitalism, with horrific consequences. BIOTEKNICA's installations and virtual environments pose weighty questions about the alluring and repulsive contradictions and exploitative potential of corporate biotechnology. As Willet and Bailley put it:

"BIOTEKNICA is intentionally both aesthetic and horrific in its manifestation. It is a beautiful immersive environment rooted in scientific optimism, clean design and technological wizardry. It is also a freak show – a site where disease is allowed to grow and proliferate – all within the capitalist model of exploitation at any cost in exchange for financial gains (p. 133)."

Bodily manipulation is also at the heart, so to speak, of Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow's *Einstein's Brain Project*. They take the decentred self on a journey through the psycho-geography of the interior. Any assumption of a literal reality is disturbed by narrative disruptions so that reality and art cannot be told or torn apart. As metaphorical effect the constant struggle to centre the self in a dynamic world of objects can assume a destablised reality, a world where everything is in flux, play, questioned, and negotiable. But the historical context, the reality of neoliberal capitalism, is missing. An older existential model of authenticity resurfaces, only this time affirming the flexible subjecthood of hyper-capitalism where the earlier authenticity of the Situationists (Debord is quoted favourably) sought to challenge the conformist subjecthood of the previous bureaucratic stage of capitalism.

Contrary to those who think that, just as we can't live in unmediated authenticity, that this is also news, the self-contained human subject was long ago dethroned as a sovereign overlord. Slavoj Žižek in his chapter in the book recalls the part played by Copernicus, Darwin and Freud 'and many others' he adds, including Marx and Nietzsche. This has not been an unmitigated

triumph, combined as it has been with the technological arrogance and ideological illusions of class society. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in their ways aimed to 'demystify' the reality of surface appearances. Even way back then reality was understood through technical devices. Marx compared the alienated reality of capitalism to the *camera obscura*.

Žižek notes that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud shared what he calls a 'desublimating' hermeneutics of suspicion. By this he means that some high-minded function like art or ideology depends on but conceals conflicts taking place in some lower region. Today, Žižek argues, the real action is found in the immediacy of the 'thing-like' appearance of bodies and objects. In philosophical vitalism, existentialism, and phenomenology there is no longer any need to look behind or beneath to explain the motions of observable phenomena. But the point is that the constitution of alienated reality was never for historical materialism that of a false cover for some underlying authentic existence. Ideology may be duplicitous but it is always *necessarily* so given the prevailing conditions. Objective falsehoods are truthful social facts.

Failure to understand this plays into the hands of the bungler of technology. The bungler's shadow looms over BIOTEKNICA's exposure of the contradictions of biogenetics. What Žižek calls 'a state philosopher' is called upon to keep intact an outdated liberal model of 'the human', the representative example of which is Jurgen Habermas. On the one hand, further scientific research is permitted and even condoned by the 'state philosophy' but, on the other hand, everything is done to contain and compromise its social and ideological impact. Better a moral consensus than a leap in scientific knowledge. Meanwhile capitalism sweeps the globe as a universal system without meaning. Capitalism has a worldwide, and hence a 'worldless', capacity to live with all manner of belief systems, regimes and cultures. It also exposes and overturns once cherished illusions, say about democracy or freedom, which the liberal democratic state once depended on.

Neoliberal triumphalism cannot be contested on the field of meaning and morality. Instead it is to be taken to task on the field of the Truth in 'the real of capitalism'. Here Žižek draws on and critiques the remarkable revival of historical materialism in Alain Badiou's notion of the event. But Badiou's 'event' seems too narrowly conceived and weakly political to rupture neoliberal capitalism, hence his hostility to the global 'anti-capitalism' movement. Contrary to received wisdom about the separate logics of state and economy, capitalism does not tolerate any split into distinct zones in reality because the economy is already political. And so any challenge must for Žižek become a 'pure politics' of the 'economic' domain. There he speculates the Truth of the Real might be exposed.

This is an eclectic, fascinating, and sometimes infuriating book. The theme of visual culture is not always tagged to questions of Realism, 'digital aesthetics' or the 'digital age'. However, the aim of the book is not to be comprehensive in the manner of an 'A to Z', though it does manage the 'B to Z' from Baudrillard to Žižek. It managed to avoid any mention of Marshall McLuhan, who seems to turn up in all discussion of digital culture these days, and from whom Baudrillard is charged with daylight robbery. That the book ends in typically explosive stuff from Žižek is a credit to its ambitions to leave the dilemmas of Realism, digitisation and visual culture as a matter for praxis than one prepared by premature analytical foreclosure.

Notes

1. Damien Sutton, Susan Brind and Ray McKenzie (eds) *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (IB Tauris, 2007).

2. Esther Leslie forcefully makes this point in her *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Pluto Press, 2000).

3. For a historical materialist approach to class society and early English photography see the excellent study by Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).