

Contemporary Art Society Annual Conference: The Virtual in Museums: Hot Medium?

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Lecture: What Is The Current Fascination With VR On The Part Of Museums And Art Galleries? Andrew Dewdney

Over the past two years more and more national and international museums and galleries have teamed up with technology companies to demonstrate how VR applications can be used in the cultural heritage sector. Modigliani's studio in VR at Tate Britain, The Royal Academy in partnership with HTC Vive demonstrating VR in the 'From Life' exhibition, Zaha Hadid's Architecture in VR at the Serpentine. Matt Collishaw's reconstruction of the first photographic exhibition studio in VR at Somerset House. I could go on, The National Gallery and The British Museum teaming up with Oculus to provide virtual 3D headset tours, not to forget Google Arts and Culture's now established Google Art Project partnerships using Google software tools. How are we to assess this growing trend? Is it a potential moment of radical change in the museum, or is it another fleeting fascination? One way of thinking about this is to ask how the current interest in VR applications relates to the wider technological environment of networked culture?

I will discuss VR in terms of its claim to be a medium. It is undoubtedly the case that 21st century developments in virtual, augmented and networked computational technologies have profoundly affected social and economic realities. In what appears to be the hyper acceleration of continued technological development it is crucial that we critically question the meaning of such developments for culture and creativity.

The presentation aims to briefly do three things. Firstly to revisit some of the ideas and difficulties of the work of Marshall McLuhan in thinking about what kind of medium VR is. It situates VR technologies in a longer history of optical technologies of vision in the context of the convergence of and boundaries between art, media and technology. Secondly, to define some of the current ways in which the terms digital, media, virtual and reality are used in the museum and art context. Finally to briefly discuss how museums have engaged with and understand the value of digital technology in terms of their future strategy and development.

I take the view that whilst VR devices and software are now more widely available and applicable, the current interest in their use may well be a distraction from a much greater virtual reality that has already taken place in everyday life. The network of networked computers, the World Wide Web, and global positioned connected mobile devices, have and continue to profoundly change what it is to be human. Whilst current interest from corporate content providers is in testing market

appetite for immersive 3D interfaces, VR may very well turn out to be a nostalgic longing for a past imagined future world, rather than portal into a new one.

Preface

I would like to thank Ilaria Puri Purini and the conference organisers for inviting me to speak here today and to thank you in advance for your time and attention. My credentials for being here are I think twofold. Firstly, I am a 1990s digital migrant who got an early and real sense of the excitement and possibilities opened up by digitization and computing as well as a strong sense of the enormous scale of cultural change it would usher in and that has certainly proved to be true. Secondly and more specifically I'm here because between 2007 and 2012, I undertook research at Tate Britain and Tate Modern into both how Tate understood its audiences and how it understood and used digital media. Both of these topics are covered in, *Post Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum* (2012) and *Modeling Cultural Value and the Digital* (2014) and have a bearing on today's proceedings.

One: the medium is the message

The conference has declared itself in terms of the work of Marshall McLuhan, identifying his notion of 'Hot' and 'Cool' Media as an historical reference point. This is not the place for a critical review, but McLuhan's account still proves both significant and problematic in thinking about the situation today. In *Understanding Media* (1964) McLuhan set out to demark a radical change in culture with the ending of the era of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy', dominated by print and the birth of a new Global Village set in motion by electronic technology. He wrote;

*Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a **global** embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.*

(McLuhan 1964)

Marshall McLuhan was born in 1911 in Edmonton Alberta, at a time when the mechanical, rather than electronic world dominated. It took two World Wars, the

detonation of the Atom Bomb and the ending of the Cold War to bring the digital and computational world into existence. Like Walter Benjamin's earlier discussion of the revolutionary impact of mechanical reproduction upon art and culture and in parallel with Raymond Williams's work in the UK, McLuhan strove to understand the impact of mass media, particularly television.

For McLuhan the terms 'hot' and 'cool' define the mode of social and cultural adaptation and response to new mediums. A hot medium, in McLuhan's terms is one which extends a singular sense in high definition, demanding full attention to one particular mode to the exclusion of all others, with the consequence that it lowers the participation or input of the user. In contrast a cool medium has a lower and diffused definition and therefore demands a higher level of participation and involvement. For McLuhan, somewhat counter intuitively, Print is hot and TV is cool.

Why this matters is because hot and cool are not simply labels, but denote how a medium operates and with what social as well as individual consequences. McLuhan understood new mediums as dramatic events, creating ecologies which humans adapted to. This is why his famous maxim, 'the medium is the message' remains important. It was not the content of TV that mattered, but its general affect. For McLuhan electronic media and what in the 1960s came to be called mass media, created a global electronic village and with it a new tribalism. Over half a decade on from *Understanding Media* and nearly 40 years since his death McLuhan is recognised to have prefigured the global moment of the Internet.

So how would McLuhan have seen the current VR moment? He would undoubtedly have seen VR as an extension of the senses, by which we mean an extension of the body and an extension of the mind. His example was simply that just as a stick extends the reach of the arm, so a VR headset and computer programme extends consciousness and the body's position in space and time. Although here we might want to think about Baudrillard and others argument that simulacra involve a redundancy of the body. In a contemporary context is interesting that Antony Gormley in a Royal Academic video clip says of VR that it contains a paradox, "*in*

many senses its' a trick on consciousness", in that it takes people out of their preoccupations and frees the mind to go somewhere else". In this statement Gormley strikes a note of caution, i.e. VR is an illusion rather than a reality, whilst continuing in the tradition of early writers in VR on the belief that machines promise to free or expand consciousness.

McLuhan's insights and understandings of media remain important and relevant, but he bequeathed the new media community two unhelpful shibboleths, or naturalized 'truths', which continue to obscure rather than enlighten the discussion of new media and digital culture.

The first problem is his idea of cultural lag, which was his riposte to his cultural critics. He pointed out that technological innovation moves faster than humans can grasp, technology is always in advance of society and therefore it is a given that it always takes time before everyone catches up. Of course there are many situations in everyday life where consciousness lags behind events and conditions, but this is not an inevitable consequence of technology. McLuhan's jibe of cultural lag contributes to the idea that it is always simply a matter of time before any perceived limits or deficiencies of current technology are overcome. The danger in this way of thinking is the suggestion that the future is already decided and all we can do is race to keep pace with it. Mark Zuckerberg recently said;

"We believe that the future can be a lot better. Optimism is good. It's true that nothing is ever going to replace being with someone in person or doing something physical but when we can't experience those things, when we run up against the limits of reality, VR is going to make our reality that much better."

Mark Zuckerberg

Zuckerberg's view is a good example of McLuhan's cultural lag riposte in operation, but it also expresses the second of our McLuhan problems, which is the belief in the inevitability of technological progress, and its essentially inherent goodness. (The recent Cambridge Analytics scandal revealed the naivety of this view). The idea being

expressed is that continuous technological innovation drives progress and with it the liberation and expansion of human subjectivity and consciousness. At its crudest McLuhan bequeathed us technological determinism, an irreversible process of technological progress from which all we can do is understand the logic of our past as well as predicting the path of predetermined future.

‘Anything you can imagine you can bring to life in the real world’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SwZUNdsWaM>

Cultural lag and irreversible tendencies combined present us with a big set of problems. It encourages cultural passivity in the face of an overwhelming force beyond our control. It encourages an uncritical embrace of all things technological in which human agency and making choices of how we wish to live are not part of the technological agenda. It reinforces the view that technology promises us a kind of omnipotence.

Two: when old media was new

Virtual (Latin, virtus, for strength or power) of, relating to, or possessing a power of acting without the agency of matter; being functionally or effectively but not formally of its kind.

So if technology alone is not responsible for the development and interest in VR who or what is? Against the techno-determinist view we might briefly consider ‘When Old Media Was New’

In her book ‘The Virtual Window’ (2009) Anne Friedberg is at pains to decouple the term virtual from its association with digital technology and takes the reader through a history in which the virtual defines optically mediated representations as well as philosophic reflection. For Friedberg the camera obscura, photography and cinema produce the virtual, as both, directly mimetic or simulated and that’s important to

remember here. Crucially the virtual is not necessarily a simulation, but tied to a much longer history of representations and technical mediations of the world. This distinction helps us understand that the combination of 3D optical headsets, connected to a graphical software interface which can also stream data contains the paradox Gormley recognized. As Bolter and Guisin put it in their book Remediation (2000).

Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.

So on the one hand we seek the pleasure and fascination of immersion – the conjuring trick, the convincing illusion in which the goal is immediacy to ‘be there’, as if we were in an unmediated reality, and on the other hand, we want the control of the presence of media in a hypermediated environment. Of course we always want our cake and eat it, and this is where the competition between augmented and mixed reality media and the goal of 100% immersion in VR stand.

For Lev Manovich writing in 2001 he put the choice as between telepresence, which allows the user to operate remotely in real time and the promise of 360 degree movement. As he put it:

VR provides the subject with the illusion of being present in a simulated world. VR adds a new capability: It allows the subject to actively change this world. In other words the subject is given control over a fake reality. What is modified in each case is nothing but data sorted in a computers memory. The user has power over a virtual world which only exists inside a computer.

There are a number of artists engaged with networked computers and using new media animations and graphics who have grasped the transmedial nature of this moment amongst them Jon Rafman

The technology is evolving very rapidly. I think very soon we will start to see the introduction of Mixed and Augmented Reality technology within both commercial

and artistic application. Also, the ability for multiple users to inhabit and influence a shared virtual environment is something that may open up interesting possibilities for making and presenting artworks

The commercial driver for simulated worlds, which puts the user in ‘the view from nowhere’, or the omnipotent view, an essentially patriarchal perspective as a Donna Harraway and others have analysed, has been the Games Industry, which combines gaming algorithms, photo-realistic animation and cinematic narrative. In contrast recent developments in augmented reality is primarily driven by the automation of informational labour processes. Here the main use of 3D VR headsets is industrial.

In contrast to the technophile and techno –utopian thinking spawned by thinking of VR as an always just about to happen realization, media scholarship shows how technological development is more arbitrary and selective, in which at times there are technologies looking for uses and at others uses which stimulate technologies. Not all technologies succeed or are adopted and equally technologies invented for one purpose can be used for another or even abandoned as the prehistory of VR demonstrates clearly. What has to be put into the account are economic, military and social contexts which drive and shape the uses of technology. For any technological development there is always an alternative.

Three: Technology in the museum

Firstly it is relatively straightforward to see that technology companies are looking to test public appetite and response to a 3D interactive interface. This is evident in Facebook acquiring Oculus VR in 2014. Museums provide a very good high profile public space for this to happen and in a cultural space of legitimation. In this sense it is a testing ground for tools, platforms and algorithms. For Museums VR are clearly a novelty and attraction. All the evidence points to the fact that the inclusion of VR alongside and in relation to the display and exhibition of objects of collection is welcomed. Museums see how VR can augment the visitor experience adding to its

stock of interpretative and education strategies. It is no accident that many of the partnerships are taken up by learning rather than curatorial departments.

Of course museum visitors and more so museum professionals will point out the continual teething problems with technology which doesn't work on the day, or the long queues for limited headsets, or indeed the underwhelming nature of the experience when you finally get to put the headset on. Which leads us to ask what the larger significance of VR projects in the museum currently are.

Against the enthusiasm to try out VR, museums have generally been slow and in many cases resistant to the larger impact of the Internet and its networked cultures. Museums have largely responded to the Internet and networked culture in terms of an analogue culture. Social media platforms are an opportunity for marketing, whilst embedded media has been taken up as a channel of broadcasting. As I have argued elsewhere, the reasons for this 'fear' of the Internet, as Claire Bishop termed it in *Artforum* (2012) are twofold. Firstly, the networked character of distributed information is perceived as a threat to the traditional cultural authority of the museum, whereas the analogue broadcast model maintains and centres cultural authority based upon collection. Secondly, networked culture is an unruly and chaotic information environment, which paradoxically narrows the field of control in monetised knowledge in data acquisition and exchange, whilst multiplying and amplifying an uncontrolled number of voices. You could say the Internet stands for a contemporary popular culture, from which the museum has always wished to distinguish itself.

So to finally conclude, the current engagement, fascination and pleasures afforded by the current moment of 3D VR headsets and their connected software programmes represent a safe response of the museum community against the unsafe and much more risky engagement with network culture. This is something to do with the fact that the museum is resolutely analogue, that it sees technology as a means of bringing people into the controlled space of the museum, rather than taking the museum out into the uncontrolled but far more public spaces of networks.

However novel and interesting sponsored VR projects maybe in themselves, they represent a diversion, a sort of whistling in the wind, whilst the much bigger and more serious augmented reality, which happens all around us everyday is ignored. It is certainly not an either VR or the Network situation and other commentators on this moment in museums have recognized. Museums would need a very different organization than the current corporate hierarchies if they were to engage with digital media in McLuhan's terms as a new environment. And again in McLuhan's terms the network can be likened to 'the global village' where the terms of cultural engagement with its public can be found. Embracing networked culture would require a very different outlook and skill set for museum professionals, where the current organization still defines the break between curatorial knowledge holders and technical media skills, the future museum needs to be of the network itself.

Jean Baudrillard acknowledged the influence of McLuhan and in his own work outline a grand order of the era of simulation. In what is probably a serious joke, but an illuminating and fitting one to end with he pointed out that

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

from *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.166-184.

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