Simulation: The Cultural Anticipation of Our Own Demise

Banff New Media Institute
Living Architectures Conference Presentation
Sept 24, 2000

Greg Niemeyer with Julie Daley
Electronic Publication Version

Luther and the Emancipation of the Image

Between 700 CE and 1566 CE, a debate called the *Bilderstreit* (German for: image debate) polarized the European Catholic Church. At question was the veneration of images, such as paintings or sculptures, of Saints, the Madonna, Jesus and God. Such venerations were common practice, and were sharply criticized by the **Iconoclasts**, who believed that any veneration of images violated the second commandment:[1]

> (16) Beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, (17) the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, (18) the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

Images at the time were barely understood as artifacts, which are separate from what they represented. This notion was supported by the practice of including remains of the bodies of Saints in the artifacts. The image of a Saint was seen as an actual part of the Saint and was not understood as a simulation or a signifier. This image culture further intensified the debates regarding religious artifacts. The protests of the iconoclasts reached its peak in the *Bildersturm* (German for: image storm) between 1522 and 1566. In the Bildersturm, Iconoclasts raided churches and destroyed or burned religious artifacts, leaving the churches bare and whitewashed.

The actual resolution of the Bildersturm, however, did not lie in the destruction of images, but in advancing the cultural distinction between an image and what it represents. In the emerging Protestant church, it was Martin Luther who first articulated the abstract nature of the image in 1525:

> Whether I want it or not, when I hear Christ, an image emerges in my heart of a man hanging at the Cross, just as readily as my face projects itself onto water, when I look into it.

[1] The translations and numberings of the Decalogue vary, the quoted text is from the Revised Standard Translation of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, Chapter 4, Verse 16-18

Luther clearly distinguished between the image of Christ and the Christ himself. He identified the image as a product of an abstract notion, projected into the heart, comparable to a reflection. With this abstraction, the religious image was liberated from its conflicted role as a ritual artifact and was defined as a communicative representation of an idea or a form.

The dispute over the ritual usage of images in the Catholic Church was settled by a decree of the Nineteenth Council at Trent in 1564. The council's Decree on Sacred Images stated that it was not the artifact itself--the signifier--which was being revered. Instead, the Council decreed, it was the signified saint who was being revered[2]. Thereby the artifact was no longer ritualized, but was defined as a device to communicate an abstract idea.

The role of the image in Western Culture from this point onwards was to communicate ideas, and the role of the artist changed from artisan to author. This transformation constituted a fundamental evolution in Western image culture, and provided the basis for Western visual culture from Cranach and Durer onwards.

Nostalgia ex Machina

Today, we have reached a new problem in image culture. In a grotesque reversal of the Lutheran *Bilderstreit*, simulations give rise to new forms of image veneration. As concerns, for example, about the environmental health of our planet increase, fictions and simulations about unspoiled worlds we can migrate to increase in frequency as well. In an astounding leap of faith and denial, we tend to turn our back to the Earth world and immerse our bodies into alternative, simulated worlds, where we hope to maintain better ecological balances than we do here on Earth. Computer graphics help to establish such simulated worlds with compelling full motion graphics, immersive environments, and breathtaking interactivity.

The phenomenon of that simulated New World constitutes a cultural anticipation of our inability to establish ecological balance in our environment. Simulations may even accelerate the process of our ecological demise, because the force of its simulation can becloud our understanding of reality.

The success of a simulation depends, among other factors, on the suspension of the viewer's disbelief. This suspension process has a "client" side and a "server" side. On the server side is the persuasiveness of the simulation which electronic media are able to

---

[2] The Council of Trent: Canons and Decrees: 25th Session: "Moreover, that the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honor and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped; or that anything is to be asked of them; or, that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent; in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear: as, by the decrees of Councils, and especially of the second Synod of Nicaea, has been defined against the opponents of images."

generate. On the client side is the tendency of a viewer to turn away from reality and enter a simulated world. That tendency is a quality of image culture. Today, that tendency is strong, because the simulated, world is more "attractive" than the real world, and by real world I mean the world which allows us to breathe. As Jean Baudrillard[3] discusses, the simulation is not a representation of an idea, is not a signifier for a signified. Instead, the simulation is everything, there is no more signified the simulation could refer to. This is not because we ignore the difference between the signifier and the signified. In the absence of the signified, all our attention must shift to the signified, to the veneration of representations. The client-side tendency to enter into simulation, together with the increased power of server-side tools, creates a favorable condition for the complete substitution of reality with simulation. This substitution leads to the same conflict of representation, which Luther, the Council of Trent, and artists from the Renaissance to Modernism have so elegantly overcome with the notion of abstraction. The conflict then was: How can we distinguish a Saint from a representation of a Saint, and the conflict today is: How can we distinguish the world from a representation of the world.

Several recent electronic media projects, illustrate aspects of this conflict of representation. Addison's Val de Loire[4] for example, seeks to preserve the historical heritage of a French village, which is decaying under the pressures of pollution, age and globalization. The project may well contain historical data about what that village looked like at a given time. But the effect of its virtual reconstruction through data is not only informative. The effect is also that we can confidently turn away from the real village and its problems of depression, deficit and decay, and let the village fall apart, since we have stored a simulation of the historic, functional village for future reference. Our attention is distracted from reality because we are paying attention to the simulation. The simulation relieves us from our responsibility for reality.

The full-immersion project Ephemere[5] synthesizes that poetic afternoon we may have spent dreaming, by a creek, when we were young, just as our suburban homes cover up the last wild brook. Ephemere undermines the basis of addressing issues of ecological balance by providing escapist, false solutions. It engineers an illusory way out of the dilemma of ecological balance, a sense of control over a virtual solution before it even presents ecological problems. Instead of enhancing our awareness, the experience of Ephemere may well becloud our awareness of environmental challenges.

Eyematic, a web application, which allows clients to talk live, using the appearance of someone else's talking face, simulates manipulation of one's identity precisely when parts of our biological identities become the object of patents, speculation and trade.

There is something deeply tragic about all these projects. They illustrate a culture, which has forfeited the struggle to solve fundamental challenges to its own history, its own nature, and its own biological database, a culture, which would rather escape than face these challenges. But isn't the fact that we may be about to lose ownership of our

---

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, Paris: Editions Galilee, 1981
[4] Alonzo Addison et al., `www.cdv.berkeley.edu/research/Val_de_Loire`
[5] Char Davies, www.immersence.com

biological identities more significant than the possibility of faking identities in chat rooms, after dark? Isn't the fact that we cannot take time to engage with our natural environment more significant than the fact that we can simulate that experience in Ephemere in 15 minutes? Isn't the fact that historic communities collapse more significant in terms of our responsibility than the fact that we can preserve its fragments in simulation? I believe it is. There must be a way we can engage the power of the servers and the willingness of the clients into a dialogue, which can support our being in the real world.

Emancipating Virtual Reality

I propose an additional purpose for virtual reality. I think that virtual reality projects could serve as a potential tool for supporting insightful experiences, if only they were more directly connected to reality. SimCity, for example, might be a tool with great potential for real city governance, if it would allow all citizens to see some of the consequences of their actions in an accelerated timeframe. It could be connected to real money, real statistics, real cities and real people. A future version of Ephemere might promote ecological awareness, if its VR branches, blossoms, and seeds were affected by real-time air quality information, viewer health, climate and land use data.

To be more relevant to our survival, future VR projects could include ample, direct real-time relations with the real world. These relations could be technically established, but they could also be established by narrative structure. For example, VR worlds could be designed with urgent narratives about the real present instead of containing narratives in a fictional future. Jenny Holzer used such a strategy in the 1995 VR piece Lustmord[6], where several VR huts contained narratives about contemporary war crimes in the Balkan. By entering the VR huts, the audience was immediately implicated in the narrative, leaving innocence at the door.

In my personal research work, I have been exploring ways to connect virtuality and reality. In my project, Digital Daylight[7], I mount LCD panels in windows. I replace the backlight of the LCD panels with daylight, so that the LCD panels function like stained glass windows. These panels display electronic content blended with the daylight falling into the room. The electronic content consists of abstract, slow animations, most of which are based on microscopic views of cell movements in our bodies.

[6] Virtual Reality: An Emerging Medium, SoHo Guggenheim Museum, New York, with Sens8 and Intel

[7] Digital Daylight is funded by the Intel Art and Research Council

Above: Simulation of daylight LCD display with abstract animation (Chair model courtesy of Ben Dean).

The dark elements in the animations are opaque and block the view of the outside; the lighter elements are transparent and reveal the outside view. The complex structure of the animated motions and the covering and uncovering of the outside landscape addresses the opening[8] of the body and the world. The installation seeks to support the sense that our bodies and our minds are intricately connected to the world.

This sense of connectedness is complicated because it involves people, machines, natural resources, and the world. It is complicated but necessary, for without cultivating such complex connections, we separate ourselves from the very conditions which give rise to our lives. The culture of disregarding that cause and effect, the culture of simulation, is the cultural anticipation of our own demise.

[8] As defined in: Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Freiburg, 1950