

Metaphysics and Multimedia

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Abstract

The effects of multimedia on users are profound, affecting their relation to physical reality and metaphysical perspective. The multimedia user experiences within the electronic environment a spatio-temporal freedom from certain important physical constraints of the real world. Electronic configurations are free from constructional, material, structural or gravitational constraints operating in the physical world. This freedom is liberating: the imagination is given a powerful tool with which to explore externalized representations of ideal environments. But a potentially destructive potential arises. External tools of the imagination become increasingly sophisticated at the expense of the ability to master the internal imagination. We externalize at the price of inner vision. There is a possibility of greater alienation from the physical world and from the spatial and structural intuition with which we inhabit reality. A loss of these critical relationships to physical reality may mean we encounter a loss of metaphysical lucidity to the world.

1. Introduction

The interrelations of the multimedia electronic environment and the workings of consciousness have implications for the design and habitation of the physical environment. Particular structures of consciousness characterize the inhabitants of specific cultures at particular times and places. These forms of consciousness arise, are sustained, and are transformed in dialectic with the characteristic spatial form of the physical environment with which they are associated. Significant modifications of the workings of consciousness will be reflected in their effect on the physical environment and on associated habitation patterns. Conversely, significant alterations of the physical environment will likely engender

modifications of consciousness. Consciousness interacts with the physical environment, both in making it more habitable, and in inhabiting it. However, the tools with which this interaction takes place are not neutral, but influence both physical environment and consciousness, to reveal the nature of the consciousness that produces them. The multimedia environment comprises such a tool. Multimedia is not neutral, but affects the nature of the physical environment from which it emerges; it modifies our consciousness, and informs us of ourselves.

2. A critique of the modern age

2.1. Cultural shifts in modern consciousness

The internal and external modes of consciousness we employ profoundly affect the built environment we engender and inhabit. Three primary strands characterize a cultural shift in modern consciousness from the Renaissance. The processes of consciousness have increasingly become externalized; the Industrial Revolution has emphasized technology; and living phenomena have tended to be modeled as mechanistic processes. Koyré [1] characterizes the fundamental changes in world-views that have taken place as the destruction of the Cosmos (the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole) and the geometricization (decentralization) of space. But the momentum of externalizing has become excessive. A complementary wave of internalizing is needed in response, and may perhaps be underway.

2.2. Multimedia as product of externalization

The multimedia environment is significant as product and evidence of the externalizing principle. The workings of the mind are made tangible, and thus more accessible. Associated with this externalization is the danger of trivialism. Powerful tools are developed that are capable of the production of great

quantity and variety, but at the expense of a concomitant inability to produce or appreciate quality and profundity. A paradox arises: the externalizing of the virtual workings of the mind threatens the modern Western taboo against introspection. The more sophisticated our command of what is controlled externally, the more the inner self is exposed to the relentless challenge of self-understanding. In so doing we become more painfully aware of the superficiality of this modern age, compared with the sophistication and wisdom of the past. This is an opinion shared by a number of traditional scholars, and presented in the profound writings of René Guénon, Frithof Schuon, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, among others.

The electronic environment has evolved as a substitute for the psychic environment (the mental and emotional world of the imagination, or environment of the psyche). Certain mental operations are replicated in the multimedia electronic environment, and so a degree of detachment from them is obtained. This allows their rationalization and automation. As operations become reified their efficiency improves. But the detachment this affords enables the recognition of similar processes to reified electronic operations taking place within the mental world. This allows the intentional modification of patterns of thinking and workings of consciousness. An irony of the development from psychic to multimedia electronic environment is that it may provide a key to rediscovery of the worth of the psychic environment.

2.3. Modern externalization of consciousness

The contemporary age has felt the full force of a wave of externalization. Appearances matter, and social credence is given to wealth, status, and power. Materialism places a high value on physical and social reality. Importance is given to technology and politics. Meanwhile a low value is placed on psychic, internal, or metaphysical values. Postmodernism relativises aesthetic response. This age faces the loss of the Ideal, with an insidious discrediting of value, significance and meaning. Together with this is a desperate need for social conformity, and the ruthless production, manipulation and consumption of social meaning.

Modern man is outwardly directed, concerned with the play of appearances, beyond which he asserts nothing lies. Intimations of depth are actively suppressed, for they threaten a tenuous hold on reality, on what he sees as his power over the external world. His instinctive response to perceived need, a mismatch between inner and outer realities, is to seek to rearrange his outer world to suit himself. The

evolution of the multimedia environment can be understood in this light, as furnishing more powerful tools for change. The rearrangement of the outer world is achieved by accumulating more wealth, material possessions, power, or social status. This process of external rearrangement and accumulation requires the expenditure of physical energy and sociopolitical power to achieve its goal. An economy of scarcity restricts the deployment of resources, and preserves structures of privilege. Modern man terms politics "*the art of the possible*", as if mere possibility was legitimation in itself; he maintains, "*Power is All*".

3. Contrast with traditional societies

3.1. A traditional ecology of consciousness

These patterns stand in contrast to those typical of traditional societies, which are characterized by stable (but by no means inert) institutions. These stable patterns arise like standing waves, which maintain their structure in the midst of constant flux; states exist, while people merely pass through them. Such patterns satisfy in an integral manner both temporal and spiritual needs. Snodgrass [2] provides a clear analysis of the role of traditional Hindu and Buddhist architecture in this light. Steil [3] maintains that tradition has a dimension of timelessness and universality, being the selected wisdom of people throughout the ages, and a character of local and geographical specificity. In a traditional society therefore, man tends to respond to perceived need, not by seeking to change the outer world, but by rearranging his inner world. This is achieved by redefining the relation between inward and outward realities. It is done in ways that respect and make good use of external constraints, whilst satisfying deep inner needs, such as the need for significance and meaning. This inner transformation requires, in contrast to the modern situation, *psychic* energy, and a measure of wisdom in order to be accomplished.

3.2. An essential problem of the modern age

In comparing traditional Tibetan *thangka* painting with the multimedia environment of CAD [4], I have elsewhere identified an essential problem the modern age must face. It has become too easy to *do* - to travel, act, write, play, work, produce. But the *quality* of what is done, of what is produced, becomes of less relevance. And the *intent* with which it is done has become of even less consequence. This is tragic. Ultimately what we are producing, when we work, is

ourselves: we refine our consciousness. Traditional wisdom teaches that the intent with which we approach this work is critical to its effectiveness. This purification of consciousness becomes an intentional process for the dedicated traditional craftsman, an integral part of a traditional aesthetic and philosophy of art, as detailed by Coomaraswamy [5]. But have we ever been less self-aware? We earnestly seek to change the world in the name of progress; the last place we look to achieve that is within. The potential distractions have become so great; postmodernism now maintains that there are only distractions, only appearances. But what this really means is that we are merely losing sight of our profound nature, seduced by the infinite play of formal possibility. We become more desperately ensnared in the web of *Maya*.

So we face dangers in the explosion of the multimedia environment. CAD evolved as a powerful tool for designing physical and virtual environments. But we are seduced by the means of production, which become ends in themselves. This is evident in computer-generated multimedia compositions, where designers clearly revel in the novelty and rich potential the various media offer. We are learning to inhabit that electronic environment as the primary external reality. The virtual world of multimedia is much more exciting than the dreary physical environment of suburbia, streets, cars, buildings and objects. The multimedia environment changes much more rapidly, with more choice; it's more colorful, responsive and accessible. But does it satisfy our deepest needs?

4. Multimedia and meditation

4.1. Multimedia and psychic environment

A problem with the multimedia environment is its lack of subtlety in comparison with the psychic environment. The psyche constitutes an incredibly rich environment that may be readily accessed through meditative visualization and traditional symbolism. It is inexhaustible. But the excesses of the great wave of externalization have meant that we have become alienated from our psychic world, and thus we have great difficulty in knowing ourselves. Our culture is losing the traditional techniques of inner vision.

Further, compare the comparative degree of integration to the physical environment that sustains these multimedia creations. Considerable resources are consumed to produce virtual environments, which substitute for or supplement the physical environment. But some familiarity with traditional Hindu and Buddhist culture suggests that there exist in these

traditions highly sophisticated techniques of the progressive visualization and manipulation of images within the contemplative act. Christian and Islamic traditions also have much to offer in this regard.

These abilities of the psyche of traditional religious cultures compare favorably with our multimedia efforts. Further, both the hardware necessary to perform them (a clear and unsullied consciousness) and the software (the traditional wisdom and practices) are readily accessible, provided only that we are disciplined and well intentioned. And both are highly resource efficient! The meditation technology of these cultures is so sophisticated that individuals elect to live in retreat from the social world, not communicating with another living soul, for periods of years, and even until death. Having met individuals who have undertaken long retreats, I can attest to their qualities as vital, enlightening beings.

4.2. Sacred architecture and *tantra* of CAD

Kramrisch [6] draws attention to the remarkable integration of the physical and the metaphysical in Hindu and Buddhist sacred architecture. In both traditions, the temple is not merely the physical fabric of the building, but more importantly the psychic and spiritual environment it engenders and sustains. Zimmer clarifies this in a seminal work [7]. He shows that, in the Traditional understanding, the physical artifact exists primarily as a *support for contemplation*. The contemplative act generates and sustains a psychic environment that is in many ways comparable with the multimedia environment, but one that is closer to our center of being. It is a psychic environment that we are entitled to call architecture, or an architectural environment; and it is one that mediates our deeper self. By contrast, the multimedia environment all too often perpetuates the alienation of the viewer intrinsic in the subject/object dichotomy inherent in the modern Western *Weltanschauung*. Multimedia has a fascination and self-rationalization that tends to isolate us from both inner and outer realities. But the atomistic, detached world-view characteristic of our age is becoming increasingly suspect as we find we can no longer separate the perceived from the act of perception, nor the conceived from the act of conception, as Wilber, Bohm, and others have drawn to our attention.

Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions of art have much to offer modern architectural theory and practice, and are particularly relevant to the use of the multimedia environment in design. The externalizing act of making the art-object (artifact, building), of

producing, is seen to be one part of an integral cycle of devotional activity. Khanna [8] discusses how the art-object serves as a support for contemplation of supra-empirical principles, through the techniques of inward contemplation and the internal development of images in the mind's eye. The work of sacred architecture is intended to be experienced as a tool for internalizing activity. Its purpose is as a means of unmaking (or unmasking) the viewer, to where a more complete realization of his deeper nature is attained. Shankaranarayanan observes that, "...the Mandala is a pictorial representation of the process of descent or devolution of the One Supreme Consciousness, step by step, layer by layer, into the creation of multitudinous forms. Equally it provides the scheme for the evolutionary return of the individual unit so formed into the plenitude of the Fundamental Consciousness at the head of all Manifestation." [9]

Potential vices of the electronic environment may thus be turned into virtues. By producing outwardly, we are given a means of looking within. We learn to see ourselves. Multimedia environments become ways of accessing our psychic environment. We then have the potential to realize more clearly our true nature, to know ourselves. This is of value in an age that is losing sight of itself; preoccupied with the externalities of the moment we suppress, forget, and wantonly destroy traditional means of self-awareness that have evolved over many thousands of years.

Multimedia techniques of image creation and manipulation provide in turn tools for the imagination. Our mind's eye provides a disciplined means of visualization, as we learn more control over the workings of our consciousness. Controlling the quality of consciousness influences the quality of physical and electronic productions of that consciousness. Improving the quality of the physical and electronic environment clarifies consciousness. This technique of internalization allows for self-cultivation, providing an ecological balance of externalizing and internalizing that serves the needs of the soul as of the body.

5. Metaphysics and Multimedia

5.1. Metaphysical aspects of multimedia

A Metaphysic of Multimedia can thus usefully be addressed. In looking outwards, at the outermost limit, we see matter. The physical world we experience has definite constraints, which favor an atomistic singular world-view. Physical objects occupy space; in general they cannot pass through one another; they compete for spatial location and extension. The danger is that

we then unthinkingly project that exclusive building block world-order into the social milieu and inward space of consciousness. The territorial instinct provides evidence of such an attitude, as does the excessive compartmentalization that Alexander [10] maintains characterizes our world-view. But human society is not restricted to its physical manifestation; and the individual inner consciousness is not constrained by the laws of physical existence. Ideas and images are not material objects. The multimedia environment provides an alternative mode of reality that in part simulates the world of consciousness.

Multimedia may even prove useful as a model for more appropriate world-views that accommodate the non-physical nature of consciousness. In the electronic environment, three-dimensional forms can be rapidly generated, scaled, skewed, rotated, reflected, translated and located. Unlike solid material objects, these forms can interpenetrate, readily pass through one another, and occupy the same space. They need not conform to requirements for structural integrity, either as individual elements or as complex assemblages. They are arbitrarily located in virtual space without needing to resist the forces of gravity, akin to operating in the micro-gravitational environment of outer space. Their configurations need not reflect constructional requirements, nor properties of materials from which they may be realized.

Although one generally works with component elements in the electronic environment, properties of this kind favor field perception over discrete object perception. In such field or flow perception, component forms, although distinguishable, are seen as essentially non-distinct aspects of the same field. The interest shown in recent years in fractal geometry is indicative of this approach; for example Fuller [11] draws attention to the relation of fractal geometry to Postmodernism. Vibration theory also offers a relevant model, where component vibrations of a medium pass through one another without affecting each other, and are locally summed to provide an overall mode of excitation. Vibration theory and harmony have long been significant facets of the discipline of sacred architecture. This is reflected in Keith Critchlow's attention to the Mediaeval Scholastic Quadrivium, of Number, Eurhythmy, Geometry, and Cosmology [12]. Sacred architecture, by incorporating all four, may lead toward Goodness, Beauty and Truth, represented by the higher Trivium of Grammar, Rhetoric, and Dialectic. Fellow Kairos scholar Robert Lawlor also relates Sacred Geometry, Proportion and Architecture.

In CAD programs, spatial elements need not satisfy structural requirements characteristic of the

physical realm. Elements are arbitrarily positioned in three-dimensional virtual space, and arbitrarily scored in time without regard to natural rhythm. No support is needed to hold them in place. Complex virtual spatial assemblages are created without regard being paid to their inherent structural integrity or to their capacity to resist gravity. This is similar to Space, where objects float freely and very large-scale structures are feasible. Elsewhere [13], I develop this intuition to propose an appropriate architecture for micro-gravity, based on a traditional integration of structure, form and meaning.

A danger of the multimedia environment is therefore a lack of feedback from the physical and natural world. Ideal solutions to real problems may then not work in practice, and experience is needed to exercise discernment. But alternatively, freedom from the immediate pressures of the everyday world may stimulate more creative, elegant solutions than a pragmatic approach may allow. The challenge is in obtaining a healthy balance of ideal and worldly.

The electronic environment offers an enhanced facility for spatial manipulation and composition. It encourages compositional techniques using virtual geometries that can be unrelated to structural and constructional methods of realization. The aesthetic sense responds to the underlying geometry, and transcends the physical manifestation. Hersey [14] discusses this process in the use of *linee occulte* in Renaissance architecture, and I elsewhere [15] develop the design use of *linee occulte* for sacred architecture.

The approach to design that multimedia suggests does thus have its drawbacks, in potentially giving rise to an insensitive approach to structural, constructional and material considerations. But it need not. The master architect seeks to integrate all of the different facets of the architectural process. Elsewhere [16], I suggest the work of architecture is not the physical artifact, but rather the architectural idea, which is expressed in the physical world via the physical object and in turn impressed in the mental world via its contemplation. As such, architecture is profoundly metaphysical. Multimedia, used wisely, offers a means of enhancing that metaphysical understanding.

5.2. Multimedia mediates ideas and realities

The multimedia environment offers a convenient mediation between a private world of metaphysical ideation, and a public world of physical realization. It simulates the physical environment, in recreating empirical space, while it simulates the psychic environment, in recreating imaginative space. In its mediating role, the multimedia environment not only

aids physical realization of the metaphysical idea, as when a CAD package is used to develop a design that is then built; it also aids the internalizing moment, in reminding us the inner space of imagination need not be limited by natural constraints of the physical world.

While Lilly has suggested that our minds operate as human biocomputers, our psyche is not simply a multimedia electronic environment, and should not be treated as such. Both the electronic and the psychic environment can be thought of as a medium within a vessel, within which virtual objects float for a time. We can presume in the case of the electronic environment that the particular nature of those objects does not influence the medium of the carrier environment. The same cannot be said for the psychic environment. Traditional psychology holds that the ideas and images one entertains, whether voluntarily or not, affect the nature of the mind-stream. Buddhist and Hindu Yogic psychology [17] teaches that *citta vrttis* or fluctuations of the mind arise. Wrongful identification with these fluctuations results in the creation of *samskaric* impressions in the mental substance. These latent impressions mature over time, until karma is eventually exhausted. As they mature, they create further fluctuations and disturb the mind of the meditator. A mind that indulges in viewing pornographic images thus becomes tainted by the attachment it forms to those images. Conversely a mind that concentrates on more lofty images will with time become clear and unsullied. We become what we behold. Elsewhere [18], I discuss this process in regard to design, architectural imagination, and Tibetan sacred architecture. Thubten Legshay Gyatsho describes how the *Gompa* or temple functions as a support for enlightened mind in Tibetan Buddhism. Entering the Door of Religion (the monastic order), erecting temples, and performing the cycle of religious duties, endows the mental stream with merit [19]. This generates higher cognition, clarifies the mind-stream, and facilitates the path to liberation. The process is well known, having been taught and practiced for many centuries by highly intelligent individuals, and is of relevance to modern architectural design.

But traditional psychology holds, in an alternative profound metaphysical sense, that the contents of consciousness cannot affect its essential nature, which is like the *materia prima*, a universal substance that gives rise to all forms, but is constrained by none. It is therefore the task of architecture, whilst satisfying more earthly requirements, to reunite our limited mundane consciousness with essential reality. Multimedia offers an exciting potential to assist that process, in enhancing our self-understanding.

6. Conclusion

The multimedia environment raises intriguing metaphysical considerations, and offers potential drawbacks and benefits. Its use may be at the expense of the internal imagination, as we become more reliant on external tools of the mind. Further, we readily effect operations in the electronic environment that are impractical in the real world. This may give rise to alienation from the physical realm, and a loss of metaphysical lucidity. But this alienation may be no bad thing if it correlates with an increasing contemplative orientation. The obsession of recent times with the phenomenal realm may be giving way to an increasing metaphysical delight in the ideal, as the *vita activa* yields to the *vita contemplativa*. So the inertia of physical reality is not merely a nuisance to be overcome; it can also be rewarding, as the work involved becomes an essential part of the joy of being.

The potential of the multimedia environment may prove to lie in its timely reminder of the sophistication of our psychic environment. I envisage an educational system which integrates in a studio context both multimedia and meditation, working with traditional techniques of mental concentration, meditative visualization, and the development of the creative imagination. And I look forward to a wave of internalization that renews respect for our inner world, and empowers through wisdom the profound capabilities of our innate biocomputers to explore and more fully inhabit that rich environment of the psyche.

Multimedia offers a rapid variety of exciting images, but presents a keen dilemma. We appear to be entering an era when the reality we inhabit becomes electronic, as physical reality recedes in importance, to even become redundant. But will a post-computer age emerge, when we come to realize the potential profundity of our innate human biocomputers, and renounce a hard technology of the material world for a soft technology of consciousness?

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