

Time for a Reality Check

Jelena Petric

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*
T.S. Elliot (The Rock, 1934)

Prologue

In this current era it is the information technologies that has set the stage for the drama of human life to be acted out. The information revolution has created global links on a scale unparalleled in human history. With exciting explorations into virtuality (the current buzz word) our life experiences, dreams and ambitions will be mapped into cyber-space and our "real" reality will become indistinguishable from our virtual reality. We are on the verge of experiencing a complete sensory immersion in this man-made cyber-dream. We will be able to enter virtual space that has as much richness and tangible quality as the world from which it sprang.

In this space, and with every sense organ covered, the body can pretend to be anywhere, seeing and touching and feeling anything the programmers dream up.

Charles Jonsher, WiredLife, 1999

Welcome to the Matrix! But it is the stupidifying and not the thrilling or even threatening effect of the information age which should concern us. As

for the speculation on potentially liberating effects of information technologies with staggering proliferation of information (and make no mistake in equating the information with knowledge or wisdom), and the myth that this exchange of information is all democratic (i.e. no censorship control) - what can one say - but, how naive, how brainwashedly fake and how false. Democracy in the knowledge economy is the democracy which sets its own terms based on the laws of economy (i.e. how to make people buy more goods that they do not really need, so that the rich can get even richer-in the materialistic terms of course).

And the real issues are:

1. Destruction of the planet we live on. This is the destruction of the plant, animal and human life motivated by greed of humans who have (too much) and the alarming poverty of ones who have not. There is very little or no serious consideration in the ruling structures of our democratic societies for the well-being of the future generations.
2. Destruction of social values - On the micro scale the slow disintegration of the family unit and its values and therefore the support that each individual needs from a stable, healthy and encour-

aging family environment; On the macro level - the destruction of the entire societies which in their materially impoverished states present a threat to the stability of the “developed” and “civilised” world.

3. The alienation of human beings who, aided by current information technologies, are spending more and more time by themselves (in the state of intellectual masturbation) in front of the screens where no real human contact happens.

Now - here enters the virtual reality. There is nothing wrong ‘per se’ with VIRTUAL REALITY. It is just going to be an opiate substitute for what we have lost (see the three points listed above among other issues that you, the reader, might come up with). The Romans coined the saying ‘Panem et circenses’ (which can be translated as give the people bread and games - to keep them under control). Just in the same way the opium was once used in China to keep the working masses under control, virtual reality, with its pleasurable images, will keep our minds and senses well “protected” from all the grit, human destruction and anything negative that could unpleasantly disturb our “opium”-induced virtual dream which will be more beautiful than reality. This is a real enough proposition: how to make a technological fix and how to create something “better” than what we have in the real world which we are so insanely destroying. It is this collective dream (just like the one in Matrix) which will give us the pleasure of delusion. And, by the way, it is OK to destroy the real world because you can always substitute it with the virtual one.

What follows is an imaginary dialogue between Tantalus (T), who vainly wants something beyond his grasp, and Juno (J), patroness of the well-being of women; they debate the dilemma and paradox at the heart of IT in design.

Dialogue

J: I am becoming increasingly concerned by the unchallenged way in which the people of the western world are prepared to adapt their lives in response to the new technologies. My particular concern is the growing obsession amongst architects and architectural students – the current and future guardians of our precious physical heritage – with the ephemera of virtuality.

T: Maybe you are right to be concerned but I believe there is some evidence that the emerging information technologies provide the means for us to amplify our intellect.

J: The *logical* intellect of the brain maybe, but not the *emotional intellect* of our hearts and minds. It is our emotional intellect which is the mainspring of creative energy and innovative ideas – the very stuff of **design**.

T: But I can evidence how computers have already improved aspects of the design of our real world by hosting and manipulating virtual worlds.

J: Well of course increased rigour in the modelling of physical phenomena – whether environmental or structural – will yield more cost effective designs but where is the evidence that it will improve, rather than diminish, overall design **quality**, that is the visceral experience of great architecture and its power to uplift the human spirit above the merely functional?

T: That question seems to imply that, for want of better words, “form” and “function” are somehow in opposition and I simply don’t accept that; richness and diversity of vernacular architecture from around the world refutes such an idea.

J: Exactly! All designed and built before the onslaught of high technology!

T: But hold on! As I understand it the best examples of vernacular architecture came about

through gradual trial and error in a relatively slow changing, evolutionary development.

J: Exactly my point. Human kind itself evolves extremely slowly; our evolutionary pace, in terms of the development of our brains, our eyes, our hands is at odds with the monstrous rush of new technology and there is real danger, is there not, in our inability to foresee what might be dire consequences not just for the environment but for the population of the planet?

T: I feel more at home talking about the consequences at the scale of the built environment. Around the mid 70's when the first infantile computer-based models of buildings were making their appearance, the architectural profession was adamant in its opposition, believing the "meaningful" would be dominated by the "measurable" and that, in the doomsday scenario, every building would assume an identical box-like form. Today it is exactly the opposite; progressive practices are generating highly innovative and inspiring designs based on the confidence which rigorous computer-based design appraisal proves. This echoes the general fear in the late 60's in society at large that a few (estimated to be nine, world-wide) computers would hold all known information; contrast this with the PC/WWW environment we currently enjoy.

J: You are naive if you think that information about you, about all of us, is **not** held centrally and it is this naivety about the present and the future which is most disturbing. Howard Segal writing in Nature says:

"The transformations the technological elite deem almost inevitable are surely far from certain...the dreams of these engineers and inventors are more pathetically naive than enviably sophisticated"
Thankfully there is a residual scepticism in our generation but how vulnerable will be those students currently in our nurture and admonition as virtuality replaces reality?

T: I'm glad we have come to education: vir-

tual worlds are all very well in practice, but will they work in theory?

J: Very glib! But isn't that the paradox: in virtual worlds there is no distinction between theory and practice, between right and wrong between substance and appearance, between quality and quick-fix? Design education must be concerned with developing in the student the skill to create and discriminate in the **real** world, not some phantom world.

T: Look, J. The new technology has the potential to make us all aware, globally, of what is going on.

J: Make us aware!! Make us aware!! What awareness was there of the conditions in Iraq or the Balkans other than through the virtual "eyes-up" technology of superstate fighters and bombers? VR at its most powerful: thank you, science and engineering! For destruction!

When are you going to get it into your narrow academic head that the same elegant, explicit, enabling and engaging technology which amuses you and your privileged students is, in a fundamental way, a deep threat to diversity; political, cultural, national.

T: Like you, I was shocked by the media bias in recent European events and deplore the outcome. But, if I may, I have to give you my strongest argument, plain and simple (but, regrettably, not shared by established academics). The more information we have, the more we are knowledgeable; the more knowledge we have, the wiser we become; to turn T S Elliot on his head.

J: Clever, but not correct.

The world is facing unprecedented challenges; urban ghettos, fuel poverty, racial tension, superstate domination and yet you are dabbling in virtual worlds – what about the real world?

T: I really believe that we are on the verge of a new paradigm based on application of the intellect.

Advances in the understanding of how our brain

works have been stimulated by research in Artificial Intelligence. Our understanding of the complex human activity of design is being driven, I believe, by commitment to CAD. I expect our efforts to construct virtual worlds will significantly enhance our experience and understanding of what is real – if that's not too philosophical a statement.

J: OK. My last word is Wittgenstein's:
"You think philosophy is difficult enough but I tell you it is nothing to the difficulty of being a good architect."

Epilogue

The epilogue is going to be, as always, about the future of our lives as "digital" human beings and it will touch upon the issue of speed.

One of the major contributions of the current technological revolution should be to satisfy our pre-existing needs and desires, rather than to be a source of new consumer aspirations. Our society has evolved to recognise the existence of the realm of pure ideas (through virtual reality). With information superhighways replacing the need for physical travel a radical move towards de-urbanisation could in the long run improve our environment.

The mix of the limitless communication bandwidth and processing capability will make for a powerful shift in human ability to process information into knowledge and to make use of it. The Internet is the current embodiment of this trend.

As for the current era's obsessive delight in speed, which marks and bedevils our digital society, the authors of the paper would like to refer you to the equation from existential mathematics which states that the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.

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Jelena Petric
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK
abacus@strath.ac.uk
j.petric@strath.ac.uk