Article

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The Whirlpool of Virtual Reality: Poly-Fragmented Transhumanism

Abstract:
This article will delve into the fascination with transhumanism and virtual reality, examining the works of filmmakers Michelangelo Antonioni, and David Cronenberg and experimental artist Stan Brakhage. It intends to explore how these creators envisioned the transcendence of the human body and consciousness through technology, prefiguring contemporary debates on mind-uploading and digital immortality. The analysis aims to highlight Cronenberg's *"Stereo"* (1969), Antonioni's *"Red Desert"* (1964), and Brakhage's "*Dog Star Man*" (1961-64), emphasising their prophetic insights into the disembodiment and reconfiguration of human experience within cybernetic and VR frameworks. The article will attempt to integrate theoretical perspectives from Roy Ascott, Jean Baudrillard, and Katherine Hayles, addressing the implications of a telematic embrace where human interaction with technology redefines reality and identity. Through a multidisciplinary lens, it will investigate the anxieties and aspirations associated with the digital age's push towards a posthuman future.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Virtual Reality, Cybernetics, Telematics, Simulation

"I don't know who I am most of the time. It's all on the other side of the mirror. I don't know what's on the other side of the mirror. But I think we're getting close."
– The Man Who Fell to Earth (David Bowie)[i]

Mind uploading or becoming the cloud, becoming 'post', or more accurately, trans-human, are some key issues plaguing Generation Alpha. But this idea of pushing the bounds of reality, of the tangible, of somehow acquiring the ability to circumvent death, of finding a way to achieve immortality has more or less been one of the chief concerns of most of our ancestors. From painting the caves of Altamira to constructing glorious architecture that has survived the tests of time, our species - the cerebral, cybernetic, aware-of-our-impending-deaths homo sapiens - have always thought of ingenious ways to keep history

alive, to immortalise men (albeit only the lucky few who got to get their names scribed into manuscripts). And when the artefacts began to show signs of repair, we even created sites like Lascaux II, which isn't the real thing, but it's basically what you'd get to see inside Lascaux-Parietal in southwestern France. It's a constructed reality that references the real thing. It's what Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality wishes to achieve in their hyperreal cyberspaces. Many would argue that mind-uploading or living in the cloud would, in a way, extend life, where you break free from the bounds of physicality by uploading your mind or consciousness into the cloud or computer network. However, the concept raises essential questions surrounding the idea of consciousness, identity, loss of embodied experience, and the consequences of transferring copied data v/s actual human consciousness. Often, such digital bodily transcendence evokes anxiety or fear within the layman, and the art or artists working through these questions are labelled idiosyncratic. The greatest example is the suave space-man/nightingale/rockstar David Bowie. He went from David Robert Jones to David Bowie to Ziggy Stardust to Aladdin Sane to The Thin White Duke to The Man Who Fell To Earth to married-to-Iman Abulmajid- new-wave-icon. He changed his identity the way you would change from Sareena to Scorpion to Raiden in *Mortal Kombat*. Bowie's transformations can be looked at as an analogue approach to digital V.R. The purpose of this paper is to locate this desire for bodily transcendence and our fascination with trans-humanism within the works of the prophetic Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, contemporary body-horror pioneer David Cronenberg, and the American experimental artist Stan Brakhage.

Cronenberg's first feature, *Stereo* (1969), follows the story of a group of individuals being subjected to an experiment in what he calls in the film "pattern brain surgery" at the Canadian Academy of Erotic Inquiry.[ii] A young man arrives by helicopter and participates in this experiment where their vocal capabilities are stripped off, and they are made to interact telepathically. It involves intermittent narration/commentary on the subjects being observed from the point of view of the scientists (whose constitutions are never revealed to us) who have kept them under observation at the facility. Cronenberg overwhelms his audience with the brutalist architecture of their space and silhouetted frames of his characters against windows and stairwells. Bodies move about the minimalist, clinical mise-en-scene. The interiors are white and squeaky clean, as you would imagine the inside of the cloud to look like. The film has no recorded sound or dialogue; he forces us to make sense of the images and the dry, clinical narration accompanying them. Several of the subjects' interactions occur telepathically – including sex, games, and conversations. Everything they do appears meaningless. Why are they sitting in cafeteria spaces and laughing at dusters and juice boxes? We don't know, and Cronenberg is not interested in telling us either. He does tell us about the telekinetic or false self when talking about his telepathic characters, that diverted them from their natural or true self, which manifested itself only in occasional, deliberately confused verbal utterances, or 'peaks of the present', as Deleuze would say. We could think of our own virtual, digital profiles on the internet in this context, or perhaps one can view it as manifesting itself in the V.R. systems that exist today, where the users' brains shoot out a signal that is relayed via technology to the cloud in which their chosen virtual reality exists.

Cybernetics is derived from a Greek word, ' to steer'. Cybernetic systems help steer us to our goals. The system or model follows a simple trial and error format where the machine or the human brain (since we're "brothers" under the skin) tries – acts – sees a difference – changes the approach – acts – sees the difference, and so on; through this mechanism, the machine creates a feedback loop – all intelligent

systems and machines have this property. The Macy Conferences held in New York between 1946 and 1953, as becomes clear from Katherine Hayles' account of the same, have paved the way for the discipline of cybernetics to achieve almost unbridled success. These conferences aimed to decipher how information is processed in our biological constitutions and within technological systems. In the early phases, information was reified and stripped of context so that it would be stable across mediums and situations. Donald MacKay, a British researcher, formulated a theory that brings meaning into focus. He brings structural information, which involves metacommunication about how the information will be read. This brings semantics and context into the picture, i.e., the same message may be received differently by different people in different contexts. The message contains information about the world but also points back to the observer/receiver since it is quantified by discerning changes via the measuring instrument, i.e., the mind itself. These changes are observed by someone else, and here we can see this process creating an infinite regress, which is characteristic of reflexivity – i.e., the feedback loop is created. Warren McCulloch helped give cybernetics a setting in human flesh by presenting us with the McCulloch-Pitts neuron. The neurons in the human brain fire signals based on the excitability of outside stimuli. These neurons are part of neural nets. These neural nets consist of output sets dealing with signals shooting out of the neurons within the net and internal states determined by signals and inputs from neurons within the net that aren't connected to the incoming or outgoing neurons. It was Walter Pitts, a 17-year-old who worked out the mathematics proving that a neural net could calculate any number/proposition that a Turing Machine could do. Therefore, we see that the brain doesn't secrete bile like the liver; it computes thoughts in the way that machines compute numbers. McCulloch further proved that the circuits designed for robot pattern recognition were the same as the visual parts of the human cortex, creating an equivalence between the two.

In the context of *Stereo*, Cronenberg tells us that treading the road of A.I. is a harrowing ordeal. He puts his characters inside this neat white box and lets them run around like rats in a labyrinth. He is the great scientist (whose face we do not see) carrying out this experiment. In one specific scene, mid-way into the film, two young boys are hanging out in a cafeteria-like space. The two toss a ball around, an object with nice round edges; they smile and giggle. The boy in white then passes the boy in black a crumpled sheet of paper, at which point the boy in black begins to convulse and contort. The frame changes, and we see the two boys running around the facility, chasing the other, almost as if hunting the other down. He jump-cuts sporadically between the scenes of the boy convulsing on the floor and those of the boys running across the halls. This space in which the boys chase each other appears to be some subliminal cybernetic space in which they telepathically communicate. But perhaps Cronenberg is talking about what Roy Ascott calls the telematic embrace. He's saying whether the implications of A.I. will be good or bad depends on what you put into the system; rounded objects with no jagged edges will create telematic love, but crumpled pieces of paper might be disastrous. He's also telling us that the real problem with the path to A.I. has to do with torture and pain. The system can be used for good or bad; it depends on who uses it. In the current age, several artists and filmmakers have produced works that deal with the questions surrounding consciousness, AI, and transcendence. Films like *Westworld* and its

corresponding series on H.B.O or Charlie Booker's *Black Mirror* have made it abundantly clear how A.I. can be toxic. At the same time, it also, in many ways, gives us its cure – V.R., which can only come to be in the context of A.I. V.R. is the extra potent A.I. to cure our psychosis, the rupture in perception caused via the advent of robotics.

One of the earliest V.R. visionaries in the cinematic universe has undoubtedly been Michelangelo Antonioni. His preoccupations with the ideas about constructed reality began to come to the fore with his 1964 film *Red Desert*. It is the story of a young mother dealing with the malaise of industrial society. It's a meditation on the rapid alienation produced due to mechanisation. Giuliana (Monica Vitti) reads like a fish out of water, like an alien on an unknown planet, as she traverses this industrial capitalist town in Italy. Long takes, electronic music, and a dishevelled Monica Vitti give the film a strange sci-fi feel. In one of the movie sequences, Vitti states that "there is something terrible about reality" and that "our bodies are separate".[iii] The dream-like shot breakdown and camera movements blur the viewer's conceptions of whether what we're viewing is reality, a memory, or a dream. In one of the scenes, Vitti discovers that her daughter, Valentina, has suddenly lost her ability to walk. She is taken to an infirmary, where she asks Vitti to tell her a story. Vitti then narrates a story of a young girl on an island who was bored of 'grown-ups' because they scared her and boys who pretended to be grown-ups. On this island, this brown-skinned girl flutters about. She spots a yacht in the sea and goes for a swim when suddenly she hears a voice singing. She swims about and reaches a formation of round rocks, rocks she hadn't seen before. There, she finds peace among the rocks that 'looked like flesh', where 'everything' was singing. What was this little story that she narrated? Was it a memory? Was it a dream? Or did she make it up, a product of what she truly desires? Like Cronenberg (in the case of his telepaths), Antonioni is not interested in answering these questions for the audience. This is precisely what Ascott demands from art being produced in the telematic embrace: viewers aren't simply passively receiving but actively participating in creating meaning. The fact that Vitti's character and the character she makes up (or the memory she recounts) feels disconnected from the real world, wishing to transcend or leave her physical space, possibly evocates our species' desire to transcend our physical realities. It is a voice without a body that calls to Vitti, to which Vitti is attracted. The physical reality of her world is too much for her.

This concept of memory also figures in Nick Kaye's work on site-specific art via the absences they represent. In his *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation*, he tells us that Sites are in a constant state of becoming. He exemplifies this through several examples of what the terms site and non-site mean via Fluxus presentations and happening performances. Through Smithson's 1968 art series, ' Non-Sites', he explains that the Non-Site represents the actual site inside a so-called gallery space. The Non-Site works as a map that points to the site's properties and limits. However, this stands in opposition to what Smithson says about the experience of the actual site, which is boundless. The on-site places a limit on the site. Lawrence Alloway makes it simpler by stating that the Non-Site relates to the Site in the same way the word refers to language. The Non-Site is the signifier, while the Site is the signified. The signified, however, is unstable. The slippage that occurs here creates the absence in the Non-Site, which is also a result of its mapping impulse. This absence can be seen as a "trace of a previous presence" and contains memory.[iv] This idea of the floating signifier can also be seen in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. For Baudrillard, the sign is detached from its original referent in contemporary consumer culture. It can acquire multiple meanings, floats around, and can be manipulated. Derrida's work on the ambiguity of language, the text, and its multiple meanings shows how text, as a representation, can acquire multiple meanings depending on its context and how it is used and manipulated. In two different scenes, Vitti tries to ask for help, owing to her post-natal depression and generally anxious disposition, and this anxiety manifests in her desire to get out. However, each time she does, she is unable to find the words and ends up mumbling fragments of sentences to herself. Here, we see a breakdown of language. Vitti is feeling claustrophobic in her physical space. The space is eating at her. Antonioni paints every surface of his mise-en-scene, creating a simulacrum of the industrial town, where the factories begin to look like toys. The architecture looks almost artificial, like a green screen effect, a pre-green screen. His factory surfaces start to look artificial because of his coat of

extra paint. He creates a dream world, one that haunts Vitti like a nightmare. The entire space of *Red Desert* is a simulacrum, where the signifier indefinitely floats, and for her, in her moments of anxious mumbling, language breaks down, finding no symbolic meaning. Vitti wants to escape the dreary industrial town, and her trials and quandaries figure themselves in a poetry of images, creating a dreamlike space.

This discussion of the real and the dream world leads us to the digital and Roy Ascott's article Is *There Love in the Telematic Embrace?* Here, Ascott focuses on electronic media – video, sound, and other cybernetic systems. Telematics, he tells us, refers to "computer-mediated communications networks", including cell phones, satellite links, data storage banks, etc.[v] Here, humans interact with systems of artificial intelligence and perception. In recent years, we have witnessed artists bringing together sound, image, text, and environment that use hyper-media to engage our complete sensorium. In telematic art, the observer is also a participant. Here, meaning is created via the interaction between the observer and the work of art/system. However, this system's contents are in a constant state of flux. The content is embodied in data that is itself immaterial, i.e., it is purely electronic. Nick Kaye also tells us about Kaprow, who suggests that the audience should be done away with his happenings. Instead of passive observers, they were supposed to participate in the meaning-making process. This participant feature can be seen everywhere today with all kinds of systems demanding audience/observer participation, including choosing your own adventure stories like Bandersnatch or those within virtual reality's gaming and filmic sphere. Again, here, we witness a drive towards transcending the human body to almost live in the cloud.

Stan Brakhage's series of experimental films filmed between 1961-64 provide us with as simple a plot as any – a woodworker climbs up a mountain with his trusty dog to axe some wood. He edits several layers of different shots together to create a schizophrenic journey for us. *Dog Star Man* is structured into five chapters: the Prelude and Parts 1-4. According to Fred Camper, "The parts can also be viewed individually," which is made clear by the opening and closing title cards on each part—the visual collages attempt to disorient us along with scratched and disintegrated film stock. Images in the film are cut so quickly that it's difficult to discern what's happening and what all these images might mean. Are we viewing decayed memories or flipping through a destroyed photo album? They're images of what once was, but what is now is unknown.

Brakhage plays with our senses and our brains. We do not know what's going on; this man is trying to climb a mountain, and we don't know why. He falls, stumbles, and hurts himself, but he doesn't quit his odyssey. Here, an absence, there is a presence. Images wash over the viewer, putting the onus of meaning-making on the viewer/participant. We see water, magnified images of the sun, the moon, flora, microscopic images of ice, organisms, intestines and other inner organs. Images of a newborn intercut with the man climbing - this is arbitrary stuff, rough shots creating grave depths of realism. The image of the baby, unaware of everything outside of the world of language. Here, we see Ascott's telematic embrace truly encompassing the viewer, forcing them to engage and make sense of this mad montage. Are these memories? A collection of images – humans, animals, internal organs, the environment, a Sisyphean struggle up the mountain. *Dog Star Man* very much explains the world we live in – a world with too many images all at once – all in the cloud, all in a chip somewhere, a record of our lives in images, stored up there as satellite data – in the internet – a collage of images – earth – finally almost transcending our bodies and becoming data,

becoming transhuman. This desire to transcend is located within the VR architecture created in the films discussed here. The dream is to get to a point where our brains are uploaded to the cloud, the brain kept alive via electricity, our minds existing in cybernetic space; clearly, we are sick of our bodies, and we want to transcend, to get as close to immortality as we can get. But like the images in Dog Star Man, the flesh-like rocks in Red Desert, or the telematic chase in Stereo, this dream could remain just a dream. For the time being, the Giulianas of the world might revel in this trans-human phase that we're currently inhabiting.

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