

# Closure

A post-structuralist strategy of 'both/and' was applied in this study in order to effectively uncover the essentially erotic process of the interface of closed and open systems of thinking, the real and the artificial, machine and being, and utopia and dystopia. As a result, it is virtually impossible to come to a conclusive point of resolution in this investigation. Since the impact of technology on late twentieth-century visual culture has been a core facet of the research, such resolution is even more difficult due to the rapidly changing scenarios and debates inherent in the developments in computer technology.

Whilst final resolution might not be possible, this study was an attempt to make a contribution to scholarship in the field of the visual arts within the context of Western art production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In Chapter 1, it became apparent that within utopian constructs there exists an intimate relationship between individual and world. The pursuit of happiness and the improvement of quality of life seem to be further essential ingredients of utopian thinking. However, although the latter are meritorious ideals, utopian construction remains impotent due to various ambivalences such as the unresolved dichotomy between the real and the imagined ideal.

In Chapter 2, utopia in late twentieth-century visual culture was investigated from the vantage point of the *flâneur* and dystopia was found. In particular, a specific interpretation of the ontology of dystopia was attempted. The dystopian condition seems to entail an uncomfortable, undesirable and unpleasant present, as well as an unpleasant and threatening but conceivable future state of society. Dystopia further seems to entail states of fragmentation, relativism and questions regarding the truth value of appearances.

In Chapter 3, it was argued that in the West of the late twentieth-century, technology has developed at a dazzling speed and that the use of new technologies in visual culture can be interpreted as the new avant-garde. It was demonstrated that computer technology impacted on the function and production of art. It was argued furthermore that there is an essential awareness of the dominance of technology and so-called 'new technologies', as well as of the threat of technology-out-of-control. In Chapter 3, it was concluded that technology determines culture, creates conditions, guides thought and deconstructs ideologies.

In Chapter 4, the argument was that technology has facilitated journeys to artificial isles of pleasure and plenty, and has unleashed a dystopian orgy of world-bubbles popping in the sky. It was argued that, within the context of the virtual or the artificial, there is a return to naturalism as preferred mode of representation is distinguishable. Facilitated through this mode of representation, the visual media have become obscene and pornographic in the desire to take artifice to its most banal extreme and to expose the most appalling zones of the sensory real. The visual format of twentieth-century alternative reality constructs has minimised the distance between the visual text and the

recipient, and the impact and influence of fictional constructs is therefore much more significant. Cyberspace remains an endless intertextualising of the real and the non-real, as well as of the past, the present and the future. Therefore the boundaries between the truth claims of the sensory real and the non-real made possible through technology have collapsed.

Throughout the thesis, the investigation of contemporary artworks showed that, in the urbanised, post-industrial setting of the late twentieth-century, human beings are both fascinated and alienated by their environments of radical artifice. It is very strange and serendipitous that on 11 September 2001, at the time of the closure of this study, there were terrorist acts of planes crashing into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington (Figures 91 and 92), ([Tuesday's chronology of terror: September 12, 2001](https://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html) and <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html>).



[Figure 91](#)

First plane crash into one tower of the World Trade Centre in New York  
(URL: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html>)



[Figure 92](#)

Second plane crash into the second tower of the World Trade Centre in New York  
(URL: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html>)



[Video clip 26](#)

First plane crash  
(URL: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html>)



[Video clip 27](#)

Second plane crash  
(URL: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/trade.center/multimedia.day.html>)

At the level of visual consumption, the 'real' scenes in Figures 91 and 92, in which a plane crashes into the World Trade Center in New York, do not differ from the virtual scenes in Figure 93 and Video clip 6 generated through computer technology, in which a meteor strikes the Empire State Building in New York. The real, as Baudrillard argues, has vanished (cf. [Chapter 2](#), [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 5](#)): in a visual sense, the real cannot be clearly distinguished from the virtual and pluralist, ambiguous positions regarding the real are evident.



[Video clip 6](#)  
Video clip 1 from the film,  
*Armageddon* (1999)  
([Bay](#), 1999)



[Figure 93](#)  
Scene from the film,  
*Armageddon* (1999)  
([Bay](#), 1999)

To me such ambiguity signals the following:

Technology is still a tool used for achieving ideological (and political) objectives. Although in the incidents of 11 September 2001 the planes were flown by human beings, demonstrating that technology is a human invention and controlled by human beings, it was *both* the ideology *and* the technology of the technological invention, the plane, that caused death, disaster and tragedy.

Technology is indeed very powerful and the threat of technology-out-of-control *is* real in the sense that it can be misused for destructive purposes. Technology does pose dangers to society, although human beings have always battled to survive and are faced with dangers of all kinds. Of a different magnitude, however, is the terror and horror of a technological catastrophe, such as the atom bomb on Hiroshima, the Holocaust or the plane crashes of 11 September 2001. The twentieth century has had more than its share of these.

Technofantasies, virtual reality and fears of cataclysm and Armageddon are not as far-fetched as these are often made out to be, especially in virtual reality fictions. It *is* possible that the artifice of human invention can indeed turn into a Frankensteinian monster.

The irony is that most utopian constructs, such as the current ones regarding globalism and technological utopia, are still not pleasant places although they intend and purport to be exactly that.

From a materialistic viewpoint consisting of both organic and artificial components, the human sensory real has always been and still is intertwined with the artifice of dream worlds, once imagined and envisioned in both nightmarish and pleasant appearances. People's reactions in South Africa (and probably in other parts in the world) to the recent incidents of 11 September 2001 included the following:

Many people expressed a kind of apathy and a sensation of virtual experience, since they "have seen it happen in movies so often before";

Some commented on the trailers of forthcoming movies on TV that made them "sick to the stomach" because they were suddenly re-sensitised to the violence in these movies;

Some experienced an initial sense of shock, and immediately shelved the incident as another shocking news event presented by the media;

Some joined in the jokes generated on the topic, such as "American Airlines - we deliver you directly to your office" immediately trivialising the incident, probably due to its being received in dematerialised virtual form by non-Americans.

The 'real' people's responses prove that on the level of visual consumption, the disaster of the real cannot be completely separated and distinguished from fictional disaster and that the real and the virtual have become coexistent realities. My interpretation of the late twentieth century is that there are many coexisting worlds, different concomitant spaces and layered spaces of both real and virtual kinds. It seems to have become impossible to fully verify the 'real' observed experiences and observations, and cyberspace can become as real as the 'real'.

Baudrillard is both correct and incorrect in arguing that the real has vanished: on one hand he is correct in the sense that the presence of the real as a monolithic single paragon for empirical evidencing has disappeared and that there are many other artificial reals that have become as powerful in presence and influence. On the other hand, Baudrillard is incorrect, since the real is still the model for the measurement and verification of virtual realities and artifice.

**The incidents of 11 September 2001 prove that in the late twentieth-century, it is especially technoreals as 'Other' that have come to coexist with the sensory real.**

The incidents of 11 September 2001 furthermore confirm my view that there is an existing perception that disaster is not so bad, since the real is not so good either. This condition reflects a kind of apathy and lack of participation in utopian schemes. It points to ruling dystopia in the perception that, in revisionist perspective of the history of the world, none of the previous utopian schemes have actually contributed to the improvement of the world. The post-industrial world is still relentlessly caught up in utopian dreams of scientific progress and the narrow-

minded pursuit of the improvement of the quality of human life through technology. Yet, ambiguously, it would seem as if the current rigorous interaction with technology has led to the development of the distortion of common human codes.

In Chapter 3, I concluded that technology has changed the function of art in the sense that through the emergence of computer technology it has acquired a new function of providing entertainment for the masses primarily grounded in the principle of pleasure. Considering the visual pleasure people have taken in obsessively watching replays of the plane crashings of 11 September 2001, it would seem that virtual violence and disaster have become common enjoyable experiences to the general public. Such forms of pleasurable visual consumption can only be described as pornographic and obscene.

Furthermore, the process of the exposure of real collapse, disintegration and loss in the media, as well as fictionally in films, has made people *immune* to the concepts of trauma and disaster. Empathy with and sensitivity to the human dilemmas inherent to life-on-earth that were once firmly entrenched in the interface of human beings and their worlds have vanished into dystopian oblivion in the global nation-state.

**This proves that the visual arts and media are the prime intermediaries in perpetuating such ambiguity and confusion, as well as in desensitising human beings, to the extent that dystopia rules.**

Although the aim of this study was neither to provide an interpretation of the ethical consequences of the impact of computer technology on visual technology, nor to provide a prophecy with regard to future scenarios, I did set out in the beginning to answer Andreas Huyssen's question: "When reality can no longer be presented, understood, or conceptualized in terms of a stable episteme, when the modernist problematic of language and representation is no longer limited to the aesthetic real, but because of the spread of the media, has become all-pervasive, what are the consequences for utopian thought?" (cf. [Introduction](#)). I attempted to answer this question during the course of this study, but the events of 11 September 200 demonstrate Huyssen's argument that the twentieth-century obsession with novelty (specifically technology as novelty) has brought on a crisis (cf. [Chapter 2](#)) for humanity. Inhabitants of the world of the third millennium will have to seriously consider the pros and cons of computer technology, since it remains a matter of participation and choice. The image of Spider-Man heroing it up in the sky between the buildings of New York has become vital in the sense that human heroism will probably be necessary for the sake of survival in the wake of the threats of technology.

The aim of this study was to demonstrate that computer technology has played a major part in bringing on dystopia as manifested in visual-cultural texts. Yet, whilst this seems indeed to be the case, at the same time the events of 11 September 2001, as well as Huyssen's argument that technological novelty, is inducing nostalgia for the real seem to prove that the search for the real (cf. [Chapter 4](#)) itself has become

utopian. The abovementioned events brought on a reevaluation of 'the real' of the sensory human real on many levels, including a reconsideration of human values, a renewal of patriotic sentiments and a revisitation of emotions such as empathy and compassion.

The argument in Chapter 5 was that the only common characteristic that human beings share is their humanity and this seems to have been demonstrated by the events of 11 September 2001: while fundamental aspects of the 'human real' have become idealised again in the wake of technological disaster, it would seem as if there is a 'new' emerging utopia of an entirely human kind in the face of tragedy due to the traps of artifice and technology.