

Chapter 4: *Artifice in visual cyberculture*

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In the previous chapter it was demonstrated that utopian thinking has led to radically new developments in technology and that such developments have had a major impact on methodologies and technologies in art production. It was argued that at present new technologies dictate and dominate in many fields, and that one can go so far as to argue that they are shaping the future.

The previous three chapters entailed an investigation of the notions of utopia, dystopia and the impact of computer technology on artmaking, a kind of *mis-en-scène* for the argumentation to follow in this and the next chapter. The argument in this chapter relates to the convergence of the notions of technology, [real](#), and late twentieth-century dystopian *Weltbild*. It is centered on the dystopia inherent in the encounter with the convergence of different reals, mainly sensory reals and technological virtual reals or the artificial as 'other' of the real, and subsequent artifice. It will be demonstrated how the process of the exposure of the ugliness of the real is manifesting in ambiguous conjunction with the cultivation of the artificial, in turn bringing about a dystopian condition.

4.1 The artificial

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In contemporary terms, through the avenues created by computer technology, various alternatives to the notion of illusion in the context of visual representation have emerged. The concepts of 'cyberspace', 'virtual reality', 'simulation' and 'hyperreal' are in varying ways and degrees

related to the notion of illusion.

The topics of cyberspace and virtual reality have been well covered in academic literature of the last two decades, especially in the fields of sociology, philosophy, communication, cultural theory, visual arts and computer science. There are many different interpretations of these concepts. Most technothorists view cyberspace as the broadest domain of artificial reality and as encompassing all its mutations. I disagree, however, and prefer the term 'the artificial', as coined by Massimo [Negrotti](#), Director of the Lab for the Culture of the Artificial at the University of Urbino, as an umbrella concept for inclusion of all the afore-mentioned non-reals, including the traditional notion of illusion (cf. the distinction between 'the artificial' and artifice' in the [Introduction](#)).

At the root of the construction of the artificial lie the human needs to invent something new as well as to reproduce the real (the sensory real). David [Trend](#), arts theorist at the University of California, supports this view and interprets cyberspace (as part of the broad domain of the artificial) as a fiction, arguing that it " is not so much a 'new' idea as it is a repository for a variety of conventional ideologies disguised as novelty" ([Trend](#) 2001: 295). Negrotti views the thrust behind the construction of the artificial as grounded in the real. He argues that:

[the] world's events enter the mind through channels which are compatible with it, and, in the same way, the mind processes the events in the world in ways that derive from its nature and from its individual and species history, including the cultural (Negrotti 1999: 11).

He argues further that the concepts of observation, reproduction, invention and representation, as grounded in the real, underlie the drive to create the artificial ([Negrotti](#) 1999: 8). Negrotti (1999: 8) goes further, saying that this drive is grounded in the anthropological rule that human beings possess the aforementioned dispositions. The Cartesian duality of mind and world, which can be deconstructed as the dichotomy of the real and the artificial, springs to mind here.

In a utopian perspective, the notion of the artificial is ambiguous and ambivalent, since it is *simultaneously* utopian *and* dystopian. As *utopian* space, the artificial is host to the kind of ideologies pertaining to globalism, as articulated in [Chapter 3](#). During the late twentieth century, Western culture was mainly technologically conceived and produced, and the urban environment in its density and complexity became romanticised and mysterious. The migration from nature to the city as centre of contemplation and activity signalled the birth of the artificial and the virtual on a grand scale. A situation developed in which machine culture not only invaded the human space at every level, but became the predominant new utopian sublime, replacing nature as source of fascination and contemplation.

As *dystopian* space, the artificial is a dystopian mix of quotations of previous practices and principles, presented in an intermingled combination with new technology. In this process many artifices are appropriated and presented in new form. [Negrotti](#) (1999: 15) views representation similarly as an *interface* between the world and the individual, and the artificial as created through reproduction of either the

external or the internal world (or a mixture or both) by means of symbols or machines. Within the domain of the artificial there is interface as well as dissolution of the boundaries between various entities. In his article, 'History, Theory and Virtual Reality', Robert [Markley](#) (in [Trend 2001: 298](#)) distinguishes between virtual technologies and cyberspace and develops a theory on metaphysics of the artificial. With regard to the notion of the artificial he identifies dissolution of dichotomies such as "mind/body, spirit/matter, form/substance, and male/female that have structured metaphysics since Plato" (Markley 2001: 298).

To fully historicise and theorise the artificial is beyond the scope of this study, since it will imply a deep analysis of the metaphysics of technology, economics and psychology, to name but a few. However, this postulation can be extended into arguing that that, due to the infiltration of manufacture and technology in every sphere of the real, the real itself has become artificial. Consequently, images become dematerialised despite their naturalistic form and 'real' appearance.

In Figures 43 - 44, the artificiality of these contracted reals is articulated. In Figure 43, the artist depicts the urban *flaneur* being at 'home' in the city. The city as world has become transparent and blurred and the real exists in the experience of the human being's interaction with technology and manufacture. In Figure 44, nature is a far-away place, an exotic real. The city as the new home and natural habitat of human beings is confirmed. The city as artificial construct has replaced nature as human beings' 'original' habitat, as such distorting human identity's 'natural' distinctiveness.



[Figure 43](#)
Oladéle Ajiboyé Bamboyé,
Homeward Bound (1995)
([Enwezor 1997: 72](#))

Of interest to this study is the *conceptual content* and *form* of the representations of the artificial, and that, in terms of the subjectivity involved in such representation, it remains a *controlled interface*. This view is supported by Negrotti who argues that,



[Figure 44](#)
Stan Douglas, *Nutka* (1996)
([Enwezor 1997: 94](#))

...[It] does not matter what the world is in itself, since the only ways we have at our disposal to describe the world are our representations of it ([Negrotti 1999: 15](#)).

Since it is a controlled interface, humans feel at ease with the artificial. Kiku Adatto argues:

Today we pride ourselves on our knowledge that the camera can lie, that pictures can be fabricated, packed, and manipulated. We have even developed *an affection* for artifice, an appreciation of slick production values whether in political campaigns, beer commercials, or a favorite movie (my emphasis, [Adatto 1993: 2](#)).

The *acceptance* of the artificial and the pleasure it gives are major factors in the dissolution of the value dichotomies of the real and the virtual and subsequent dystopia. Before the concepts of cyberspace and virtual reality are investigated in more depth, the broader picture of the late twentieth century in terms of conceptual orientation and modes of representation is illuminated.

4.2 The return to realism and naturalism in the twentieth century

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Within the context of the twentieth century, there has been a return to [naturalism](#) in modes of representation, as well as in the reference to the real of manufacture and machine culture that has been absorbed by the domain of visual culture. At the same time a [new realism](#) is manifest in renderings of the human condition uncovering its dimensions to the fullest, from nauseating banality to terrifying mortality.

4.2.1 Representation and illusion

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Throughout the ages artists have aspired to reproduce the real world, that is, to create illusions of the real, through various technical and mechanical means. pre-twentieth-century Western art expression was *premised* in naturalism and illusion or the simulation of the real. Art production in the twentieth century is ambivalent in many senses, but especially so with regard to the issue of representation. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only marked a time of avant-garde vistas opened up by photography (discussed in more detail in the [next section](#)), but also a time when the drive to represent the observed world in a naturalistic mode *ceased* to a large extent and the inner world as well as self-based non-shared representations were generated. This was a time when art, in the wake of the invention of the camera, aspired to invent new forms of representation, mostly in *counter-direction* to naturalism (Figures [30](#) and [31](#)).

Any investigation of illusion implicitly contains a reference to the 'real', observed world. Prior to the twentieth century, nature, or the observed world as a whole, was the prime departure point and the source of meticulous copying or imitation, as well as the inspiration for romantic projections. Painstaking illusionistic painting, one-point perspective and the camera were some of the means employed to achieve such an [illusion](#) of the real. In essence illusion denotes delusion, fantasy, dematerialisation, disembodiment and transparency.

Illusion can take many guises:

In general, a pictorial representation is one in which there is a presentation of 'a' real, whether recognisable as measured against the experienced real or not. An illusionistic work is one in which there is imitation of the sensory real. Such imitation can be achieved using many diverse media, but traditionally this has been done through painting and sculptural media. The technical craftsmanship as well as the awareness of media contribute towards the experience of the work in its entirety, thus as an 'artwork'. Bruce Nauman's *Animal Pyramid* (Figure 45) represents this kind of illusionistic rendering.



In a *trompe l'oeuil* work, media and techniques are subjugated to the sole purpose of illusion of the real. In this case there will be subsequent "loss of medium awareness" (Allen 1995: 82); yet the representation is still experienced as an object, a representation. In the fields of visual arts not utilising traditional art media, the art forms that come closest to *trompe l'oeuil* are performance art, in which human beings become agents in representing and imitating the real, and land art. In Figure 46, such a *trompe l'oeuil* rendering in the form of a land artwork is illustrated.

A term coined by Richard Allen (1995: 82), "projective illusions", refers to a kind of illusion in which there is loss of the 'object-ness' of the representation since the reproduced illusion is so real that it becomes a "fully realized world" (Allen 1995: 82) and is not experienced as a representation. According to Allen, (1995: 82) projective illusions are not *trompe l'oeuil* but entail virtual reality experiences. The latter kinds of illusions are of special interest to the argumentation in this investigation -- the kinds that are technologically, mechanically and digitally produced and are facilitated especially in the genre of film, including video and computer animation. The creation of truthfully rendered, believable three-dimensional environments and objects has become almost effortless with the aid of computer technology, its objective still to simulate the real as truthfully as possible. However, since the notion of illusion is central to the history of visual representation and communication, the newness of this development in visual culture lies not so much in the aspect of the imitation of the real, as in the technological challenge.

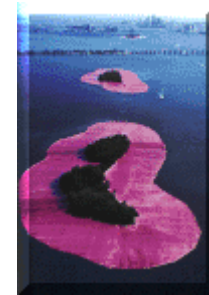
Also relevant to the notion of illusion is the concept of simulation as coined by the French theorist, Jean Baudrillard. His theories of representation problematise the notions of real and illusion. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1983), Baudrillard's first important step toward theorising the post-modern, he presents the concept of the 'simulacrum' -- the copy without an original -- and 'simulation' as an attempt to arrive at a closer understanding of the concepts of mass reproduction that characterise our electronic media culture.

In Baudrillard's view, Disneyland as a fiction is a simulation of a fantasy of America, thus a copy without origin. This view is debatable, since Disneyland as concept can easily be interpreted as a utopia, in which the main entrapment tools are entertainment and pleasure (cf. 'pleasure' in Chapter 5). There are many historical fictional examples of this kind of construction, such as the previously quoted More's *Utopia*, as well as real examples, emotional utopias or picturesque environments, such as beautiful beaches or mountain forests, even if these offer different kinds of utopia. The only difference lies in the ideology and

[Figure 45](#)

Bruce Nauman,

Animal Pyramid (1989)
(Ruhberg et al 2000: 551)



[Figure 46](#)

Christo and Jean-Claude,

Surrounded Islands (1980 - 1983)

(Ruhberg et al 2000: 549)

artificiality of the construct. Disneyland is a dystopian construct, since there is nothing but entertainment, a 'no space' in which the distinctions between the real and the non-real have collapsed and vanished.

For Baudrillard, Disneyland also illustrates the concept of nostalgia in the land of the hyperreal. In this sense he contradicts his own postulation that the simulation has no origin and he verifies the Negrotti view that the artificial is grounded in the real. Utopian construction, once again, is demonstrated to be a response to the sick real. Similarly the artificial can be interpreted as a response to the imperfection of the real of the human condition.

It is my viewpoint that all forms of non-real construction, including utopia as genre, obtain relevance and validity only in the *measurement against the real*. Fantasy can only attain such characterisation if there is evidence of an ordinary 'banal' real and dystopia can only be labelled as such if there is recognition of a real that show signs of utopia.

4.2.2 The absurd real

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In the visual culture of the twentieth century, and especially the late twentieth century, a brutal uncovering of those dimensions and aspects of the human real that in the past have mostly been kept hidden have been taking place. There has been a notable prevalence of naturalism as preferred mode of representation, especially in the rendering of the absurdities of the banal real. The naturalistic form is necessary to enforce, on one hand, a credible illusion, and on the other, the starkness and staleness of the narrated real.

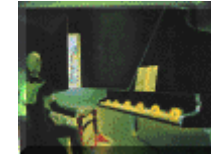
In this regard, an early twentieth-century stylistic movement that is of particular interest is Surrealism, since it came to be a movement revelling in the imagination, the fantastical and the "dissonant side of human existence" ([Ruhrberg](#) 2000: 137). As such it can be interpreted as a key force in shaping and preparing post-modern visual expressions of ambivalence and surreal or hyperreal states of being.

Surrealist artists employed the conventions of naturalism, but at the same time their art was "unclassical art par excellence, a protest against the norm" ([Ruhrberg](#) 2000: 153), as evident in the reference earlier to Man Ray and his avant-garde approach to photography (Figure [44](#)). The art of André Masson, Richard Oelze, Giorgio de Chirico, André Breton, Max Ernst, Rudolf Hausner, Salvador Dali and others was, for instance, just like many other early twentieth-century art movements such as Expressionism and Dada, deeply under influence of Symbolism at the turn of the century. It simultaneously shared a concern with these movements regarding the mythology of destruction and cruelty of the First World War. According to Ruhrberg, the Surrealists:

... marshalled many and diverse ancestors to legitimate their endeavors: Bosch, Brueghel, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the creator of labyrinthine dungeons; the Swiss painter of nightmares Johann Heinrich Füssli (who later, in England, became Henry Fuseli); another Englishman, William Blake; the Goya of the *Caprichos* and the *Horrors of War*; the French artists Redon, Henri Rousseau, and Moreau, mentor of the Fauves; and finally the early Chagall, Klee, a few works by Léger, the Romanian sculptor Brancusi, and more. The *poètes maudits*, or condemned poets, from Rimbaud and Baudelaire all the way back to Lautréamont and Marquis de Sade, were also invoked ([Ruhrberg 2000: 137](#)).

The Surrealists set themselves the task of unveiling social taboos, absurd contradictions and previously repressed emotions and images. In Salvador Dali's work, *Dream caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate, One Second Before Awakening* (1944), Figure 47, there is an intermingling of fantasy, real, dream and memory in the depiction of a man masturbating. The work deals with the visual depiction of a theme that would previously have been taboo in visual terms. Dali attempts to break through the barriers of convention and initiates an aesthetic that creates a sense of discomfort in the viewer. The naturalistic form of representation is necessary in order to invoke the narrative -- therefore the work is relevant in terms of a new variation in naturalism as mode of expression, but also in terms of a new emerging aesthetic in which the boundaries between the private and the public domains are blurred. The real of human existence, previously unspoken about in a direct and truthful manner, becomes almost surreal in all its horrific dimensions, as it is uncovered in Surrealism. The exhibitionist nature of the work is representative of Dali as persona, embodying the exhibitionist artist making public the private self. According to Dali, "blood, decay, rot, and excrement [are] the key components of a painting approach" ([Ruhrberg 2000: 143](#)). The utopian account evident in most pretwentieth-century art has become deconstructed into a dystopian real of gore, orgy and death. In Dali's work, as in many other artists' work of this genre, the human condition is presented in an exaggeratedly grotesque manner.

In Figure 48, *Time Transfixed* (1939), Surrealist Magritte builds "riddles out of components of reality, pointing up its absurdity in the process" ([Ruhrberg 2000: 146](#)). The artist transmutes the ordinary and the banal real into a poetic, magical real and fuses different narratives in the process. The credibility and logicity of the observed real is challenged and confronted through the insertion of an illogical and absurd image in the ordinary, everyday setting. Magritte intermingles sensory and tacit meanings, narratives and histories, and brings into play the fusion of the real and illusion.



[Figure 47](#)

Salvador Dali,

Dream caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate, One

Second Before Awakening (1944)

([Ruhrberg et al 2000: 145](#))



[Figure 48](#)

René Magritte,

Time Transfixed (1939)

([Ruhrberg et al 2000: 146](#))

Since the latter half of the century, artists have been exploring the notion of the anti-aesthetic to the point that it has become a trend to produce art that is as unashamed and blatant as possible. In his preface to the catalogue for *The New Neurotic Realism* (1998), an exhibition of British artists' work at the Saatchi Gallery in London, Dick [Price](#) argues that the new British painters of the late twentieth century evoke anxious worlds of cartoon-like madness and exposed sexuality; banal worlds claiming a peculiar heritage and becoming threatening and disturbing in their photographic clarity ([Price](#) 1998: s.p.).

In Figure 49, one of these artists, David Falconer, stacked dead mice in the shape of a cone, setting up a repulsive, foul-smelling environment. He deconstructs the exalted meanings traditionally constructed around the image of the tower, altar and monument, as well as around the surging vertical shape, into a pessimistic statement on organic death and life without vision. The heavier base of the cone shape emphasises the idea of human mortality.

In Figure 50 Hannah Starkey expresses similar sentiments in her depiction of a lonely elderly woman. Her meticulously tidy room, herself and her teddy bear form her universe. She is left with memories of her childhood and is 'faced' with thoughts about the time and place of her death. Looking at her own shrivelled face she realises her mortality, conjuring British artist Francis Bacon's famous statements that observing the movements of his face in the mirror is like looking at death folded in life. As in Bacon's rooms, her curtain is drawn and she sits visionless and oblivious, staring at herself.

In contrast to the dystopia of the emptiness in the ordered environments rendered by Starkey, Paul Smith depicts an absurd, Dionysian world of chaotic dystopia in which manic, orgiastic activities are used to fill the void left by the disillusionment with the real. In his series of photographs (Figure 50) based on his experiences in the army, he chooses naturalism as a form of representation in order to bring home shock and disgust ([Price](#) 1998: s.p.).

In all the afore-mentioned visual examples, the naturalism of the documenting mode is vital in bringing home perceptions of distress with the crudity and absurdity of the real. It is a fractured society that is depicted, premised in loss; a world in which individuals are alienated and lonely, even when they are together.



[Figure 49](#)

David Falconer,
Vermin Death Stack (1998)

([Price](#) 1998: s.p.)



[Detail of Figure 49](#)



[Figure 50](#)

Paul Smith,
Photograph from the series, *Make My Night* (1998)

(Price 1998: s.p.)



[Figure 51](#)

Hannah Starkey,

Untitled - March 1997 (Room) (1997)

(Price 1998: s.p.)

4.2.3 The manufactured real

The use of found, banal materials in twentieth-century art production embodies another form of reference to the real. The awareness of the infiltration of the artificial sphere of manufacture and production into human space manifested itself early on during the twentieth century, at the level of art production in particular. Besides the artists displaying a technological awareness as discussed in the previous chapter, Marcel Duchamp in particular expressed an awareness of the presence of the artificial infiltrating the human reality, in works such as *Bicycle Wheel* (1964), Figure 52. This insight of Duchamp was extrapolated four decades later in other artists' work which dealt expressly with found materials in an attempt to set up a more intimate interface between art and life (referring to a highly urbanised, technological life), in such a way expressing a post-industrial consciousness.

During the late Sixties the art-life relationship became fashionable as subject matter in art. The art-life movement may be interpreted as a response to the invasion of manufacture into every sphere of life and entailed the projection of conceptual meaning onto found materials. Artists such as Joseph Beuys (Figure 53) , for example, as well as artists of the *Arte Povera* movement, initiated the questioning of the boundaries between art and life through the aestheticisation of banal objects and materials (cf. Anselm Kiefer, Figures [11](#), [21](#), [42](#)).

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[Figure 52](#)

Marcel Duchamp,

Bicycle Wheel (1964)

(Ruhrberg et al 2000: 457)



[Figure 53](#)

Joseph Beuys,
Erdtelefon (1968)

(Stiftung Froehlich 1996: 60)

In this kind of aesthetic, the boundaries between the sensory real and illusion are broken down, essentially as a result of the use of found materials and naturalistic imagery. According to this thinking, a life lived is an artwork in itself and therefore ordinary, everyday activities are poetic in themselves. Ideologies of production, world and individual cross-reference, cross-pollinate and fuse to such an extent that the hybridised outcome can only be described as a 'poetic mix', and as dystopian.

4.3 Photography and [documentarism](#)

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Technology developments during nineteenth-century Industrialism impacted on artmaking media in the sense that they transformed or affected not only certain chemical, technical and technological processes, but also, fundamentally, the function of art. This is not new, since in the past, the development of particular visual technologies such as the [camera obscura](#) lead to the development of monocular perspective painting as a dominant representational mode in painting of the fifteenth century.

With regard to new developments in the field of technology impacting on visual culture, the invention of the camera during the middle of the nineteenth century was seminal. Since its initial invention for documentation purposes, the function of the camera has expanded into many domains. Just over a century ago, before the photographic camera was invented, one of art's prime functions was to communicate (visually) and document information such as on-court events, wars, historical and other events. The camera largely took over this function, and art had to find a new function for itself. Instead of documenting events, it acquired the highly individualised function of expressing human emotions and interpreting or internalising and externalising the world.

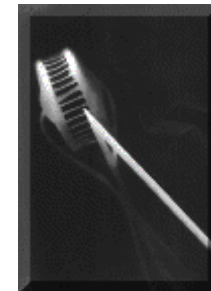
[Allen](#) (1995: 87) argues that "[the] minimal contribution of the photograph ... is to record an illusion, but it may also contribute to the production of an illusion by presenting the phenomenon in a way that disguises its fictive status". A core use of the photograph is to articulate artistically views on identity that are always tied to time and place. [Allen](#) (1995: 86) refers to Roland Barthes who, in *Image, Music, Text*, draws attention to the fact that the photograph necessarily documents a "particular moment in the past" ([Barthes](#) 1977: 44). According to [Adatto](#) (1993: 8), the magical aspect of the camera is that it promises a picture more perfect than the painter or the sculptor can manually produce. It is this aspect that has imbued the photograph, although being an 'objective' recording of a moment in time, with emotionalism: people are sentimental and want to remember and have a grip on the reality of time passing via the photograph. [Adatto](#) (1993: 8) refers to Edgar Allan Poe who was struck by the photograph's perfect correspondence to nature and said: "[The] closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented" ([Adatto](#) 1993: 8).

Within a historical context, the camera would have died a quiet death shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, if not for George Eastman who brought out the first box camera called 'Kodak No. 1' ([Honnef](#) 2000: 621). This camera contained a film-roll that had to be sent with the camera to the factory to be processed. (The firm of Eastman later became the Kodak empire.) As such, Eastman ushered in the age of

mass media. Photography simultaneously allowed people to see the world through the eyes of a mechanical device and also, through mechanical means, provided people with the opportunity to create their own images of the observed world. The industrialisation of photography thus also meant the democratisation of the visual arts ([Honnef 2000: 621](#)).

Photography since the late nineteenth century has brought home brute realities due to its documentary function. In Germany under the Weimar Republic, in particular, there was a blossoming of photojournalism ([Honnef 2000: 635](#)). Documented data acquired almost scientific status due to the factuality and verifiability of the photoreportage process. The New Realism in art and literature that emerged during the Thirties was in part induced by photomechanical technologies. Events such as the First World War and recent nineteenth-century civil wars could be documented and the bizarre, ludicrous and contradictory character of these events exposed. The documentary impulse of the early twentieth century was mostly concerned with public life, events and figures, an impulse that documented the particularities of time and place.

Very early on in the twentieth century, a marked distinction between the journalist-photographer and the artist-photographer developed. Revolutionaries in art circles, crying for new forms of art, stimulated avant-garde responses in many areas of art production and photography was no exception. The concept of 'art from a machine' emerged, pioneered especially by photographer Lázló Moholy-Nagy ([Honnef 2000: 629](#)) (Figure 54). Moholy-Nagy as avant-garde spirit stressed the autonomy of the medium and was interested in a "perception of reality unclouded by any kind of cultural convention", which he felt could only come from the camera ([Honnef 2000: 628](#)).



[Figure 54](#)

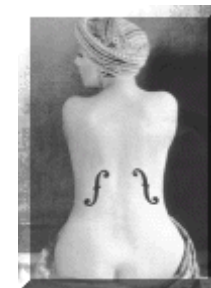
Lázló Moholy-Nagy,

Photogram (1924)

([Ruhrberg et al 2000: 629](#))

The Surrealist painter, Man Ray, epitomised a completely new type of artist-photographer (Figure 55). He constantly moved between painting, photography and film, in Honnef's words, as a "subversive magician with a tendency towards pragmatism" ([Honnef 2000: 645](#)). In the artist-photographer, the artistic and scientific imagination and processes converge. Walter [Benjamin](#), in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', illustrates this difference by way of comparing the relationship of magician and surgeon to painter and cameraman:

[the] painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. ... Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art (Benjamin 1973: 235).



It is clear that the mechanical developments in photography were seminal in pioneering not only mass media, but also in interfacing unrelated disciplines such as painting and photography. Photography maintained this avant-garde and key position right through the twentieth century, to the extent that, according to [Willis](#) (1990: 198), today “[the] naturalistic image, delivered by photographic/filmic means, mass produced and distributed to large audiences, is taken as a given” ([Willis](#) 1990: 197).

[Figure 55:](#)

Man Ray,

Kiki, Violon d'Ingres (1924)

([Ruhrberg et al](#) 2000: 647)

Since the Nineties, it is interesting to note the domination of photography and accompanying naturalism in visual communication and artmaking. It would seem that still photography has not faded as means of aesthetic expression, but has, in fact, come to the fore and has become a core medium in computer art, although it is still one of a larger scope of visual technologies available. The reason for this is that the photograph, whether analogue or digital, still or video, is often the foundation material for further digital reworking or transformation. Photography is now over a hundred years old and seems to be appropriate to the machine age, although it has adapted to the invention of new technologies. It has evolved from still black-and-white to colour; from silent movies to sound movies; from analogue to digital storage of information. One could argue that video is a different technology, since the way visual/audio information is stored is different, though the techniques of fading, superimposition of text and transitions of various kinds remain the same.

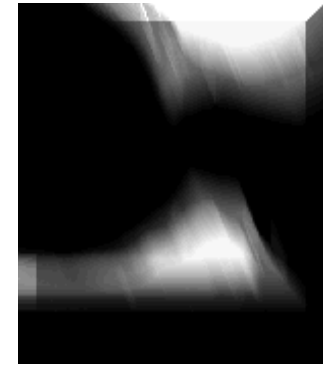
Messages regarding global and human concerns such as Aids can be most effectively communicated in a documenting mode, an orientation that has spilled over into the arts. Although the photograph provides a 'transparent' reference to the subject matter of the photograph, (as in [Figure 10](#), Jo Ratcliffe, *Detail of A Sunny Day IV* (1995)), there is still 'medium awareness' in the sense that the viewer is aware it is just that, a photograph. (The idea of the transparency of the body will be discussed in [Chapter 5](#)). This function of photography has been primary since its invention, but through digitalisation a new world has opened up that regards the virtualities made possible through mode and shape modification and adjustment processes.

It has become common practice in post-modern art to use photographs as foundation material or as base in multi-layered works. The overpainting of photographs, add-ons such as the attachment of found materials and digital touching-up have become some of the various methodologies used to express shifts and amendments to the world as we know and experience it, and the idea that the world is multi-faceted, multi-layered and complex. (In [Figures 25](#) and [34](#), such processes are illustrated.)

This process has also been extended into the realm of digital animation. In my own work *Under-Wear* (2000) (Video clip 11), the central position of photography in computer art is demonstrated. The steps in the digital artmaking process were as follows: (1) analogue photographic documentation of underwear; (2) digital scanning in of the images; and (3) animation of the images utilising the computer software, Power Point. The work comments on a condition of endless mutations of being in mutations of real, including the artificiality of the

media, and referring to stereotyped female sexuality; a sensory reality in terms of the identity of a real woman; and the metaphysical reality underlying appearances and the observed real.

For me, the use of the documenting modes of photography for poetic expression is a process that remains nothing more than an augmentation of the old desire for illusion through various imitative processes laced with subjectivity and imagination. Once again there is ambivalence in applying the concept of illusion to late twentieth-century art, since, although fundamentally there are marginal differences between illusion in a non-digital context and virtual reality in a digital environment, there are also definite differences, such as human interaction with the illusion/virtuality. Through the development of digital technology in Western visual culture in the latter half of the twentieth-century, the creation of believable artificial environments that are intensely 'real' has been facilitated and the possibilities for generating any kind of fantastical, virtual reality are limitless.



[Video clip 11](#)
Elfriede Dreyer,
Under-Wear (2000)
(Artist's Collection)

4.4 Cyberspace

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In Chapter 3, it was demonstrated that through the extended use of technology, technique has become a globalising entity. New technological environments and technologies, known as cybernetics, have been developed. Since the Sixties, a host of neologisms have sprung up, all related to cybernetics: 'cyberspace', 'virtual reality', 'interactivity', and 'digital', to name but a few.

4.4.1 Defining 'cyber'

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The journalist and science fiction writer, William [Gibson](#), coined the concept of 'cyberspace' in his novel, [Neuromancer](#) (1986). The word 'cyber', derived from the Greek *kybernan* which means 'steer' and freely translates as 'into the space of the future', has since developed into the signal word for anything online and digital.

Mutating in various directions and forms, the concept of cyberspace has come to mean a 'new world', a transmutation of the old world as we have known it thus far; not a totally new world but one that is folded in the old one. Philosopher Michael [Heim](#) (1990: 41) defines this new world as follows: "... each world is made from previous world's, and each process of worldmaking proceeds by composing or decomposing older materials, by identifying repetitions and evolving new patterns, by deleting and supplementing, by organizing and ordering aspects of the world(s) already there". To Heim (1990: 42) cyberspace is essentially a "broad electronic net" in which virtual realities are spun as products of the imagination.

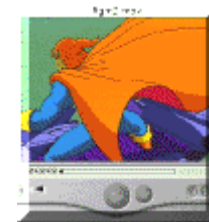
The variations or mutations of cyberculture include cyberspace, cyborg, cyberpunk and cybernetics. Many texts of the Eighties depicting dystopia, such as Ridley [Scott's](#) film, *Blade Runner* (1982) (referred to in [Chapter 2](#)), and Gibson's *Neuromancer*, one of the *CyberSpace* trilogy, launched a cultural genre that came to be called '[cyberpunk](#)'. Cyberpunk may be interpreted as an Eighties post-modern subculture that challenged morality, 'rules' and restrictions. Outside Science Fiction (SF) the term lives on as the name for a fictional evocation of the feeling or experience of technoculture in the late Eighties. While some in the SF community claimed that cyberpunk was the most important development since the New Wave of the Sixties, others scornfully dismissed it as a marketing device. Some critics went so far as to claim that cyberpunk should be seen as "the apotheosis of the post-modern" ([Fitting](#) 1991:295). According to Fitting, as an SF phenomenon, cyberpunk is passé (Fitting 1991:295-96). During the Nineties, cyberpunk became subsumed into a mainstream ethos of computer culture.

4.4.2 Cyberspace as ideology

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In cyberspace, the underlying ideology is the possibility of the international exchange of ideas, knowledge, advice and experiences in an attempt to improve the lives of people. [Fitting](#) (1991: 311) argues that cyberspace, a complex, artificial, technological matrix, the domain of the cyborg, is an attempt to "grasp the complexity of the whole world system through a concrete representation of its unseen networks and structure, of its invisible data transfers, and capital flows". He (Fitting 1991: 311) refers to Gibson's concept of cyberspace as the 'origin' of artificial space and views it as humankind's attempt to make the abstract and the unseen comprehensible, a kind of visualisation of the notion of cognitive mapping. According to Negroponte, the common bond in cyberspace is the belief that the computer would dramatically alter and affect the quality of life through its ubiquity, not just in science, but in every aspect in living ([Negroponte](#) 1995: 225).

In the Spider-Man depictions, Spider-Man radiates ideological thinking in his attempts to rescue the world from the threat of various kinds of evil, *both* human *and* technological. As a kind of superhuman God or Big Brother, he surveys the 'earthly' events taking place below him. As Spider-Man, he operates in the seamless, borderless space above the city (Video clip 12). As Peter Parker, he comes 'down to earth' and lives his life on the surface of the earth. The space of the city is the industrialised and human domain, closer to the earth. The space around and above the city can be interpreted as ideological space and the domain of fantasies, utopias, dreams and beliefs. This space can also be interpreted as seamless cyberspace, since it represents the virtual and the fictional domain of Spider-Man, the superhuman being.



[Video clip 12:](#)

fight2.mov

([Marvel Comics](#) 1995)

However, this so-called newness can be questioned in *both* ideological, philosophical terms *and* in terms of the so-called new reals that are created in new artmaking processes which utilise computers. Ziauddin [Sardar](#) of Middlesex University links cyberspace with the American Dream (Sardar 1996: 18) and maintains that:

[white] man's burden [has shifted] from its moral obligation to civilise, democratize, urbanise and colonise non-Western cultures, to the colonisation of cyberspace. Those engaged in constructing the new cybercivilization often see their heroic efforts in terms of 'a moral responsibility to fulfil an historic destiny, comparing themselves with historical precedents, like the original White colonizers of North America'.

When looking at non-Western countries such as South Africa, this picture becomes evident. Olu [Oguibe](#) (1997: 47) maintains: "What is of interest here is that in the presence of this great world of new consciousness, where the old reality becomes a Jurassic Park, our single, most needling problem as a species lingers on in the old reality, the reality of physical bodies with needs and desires, the reality of hunger and thirst and ignorance and vulnerability to disease". According to [Oguibe](#) (1997: 47), one may indulge in the fiction of new global identity, a fundamentally Modernist practice of masking in novelty, but it remains a practice that is as old as the human race. Within the matrix of the Third World reality, the assertion that the entire world is on the verge of a cybergasmic explosion is a fallacy. "In the end, cyberculture is a dependent phenomenon, reliant on the relative mitigation, if not absence, of deprivation" (Oguibe 1997: 49). The choice of 'deprivation' here indicates a Western ideological position of empowerment of the Third World through knowledge and education.

For [Baudrillard](#) (1996: 13) the 'original crime' of the real resides in the fact that, as in the ideologies of African cyberspace, certain truths have dominated thinking for centuries but its very foundations can be shown to be nothing more than illusion and imaginary certainty.

Existence is something we must not consent to. It has been given to us as a consolation prize, and we must not believe in it ([Baudrillard](#) 1996: 11).

Therefore the world, and cyberspace, strictly speaking, does not exist. Cyberspace in Africa, as well as in the West, then, may be interpreted as nothing more than a discourse on the real, constructed and articulated by Western ideologies of globalisation.

Michael [Heim](#) (2001: 70) makes another conceptual entry to the problem of the ideologies underpinning cyberspace by developing a metaphysics of cyberspace and by raising questions such as whether allegiance to one single reality should be pledged and who should be the decision makers in the democratic cyberworld. Underneath all such speculations, though, runs an ontological continuity that connects Platonic knowledge of ideal forms to the information systems of the matrix ([Heim](#) 2001: 73). More importantly, the ontological question needs to address the status of cyberspace as construct, the phenomenon itself, and the way

entities exist in cyberspace. This phenomenon he interprets as desire, not as ideology; that is, as a fascination with and a desire for the magic of technology - in short a love affair that goes deeper than a play of the senses ([Heim 2001: 71](#)) (cf. 'desire' in [Chapter 2](#)). Heim maintains further that:

[our] fascination with computers is more erotic than sensuous, more spiritual than utilitarian. Eros, as the ancient Greeks understood, springs from a feeling of insufficiency or inadequacy. Whereas the aesthete feels drawn to causal play and dalliance, the erotic lover reaches out to a fulfillment far beyond aesthetic detachment ([Heim 2001: 71](#)).

The Platonic view of Eros can be traced in *Symposium*, from Plato's mature period of 385 - 379 ([Trend 2001](#), [Taylor 1960](#), [Plato 1961](#)). In the speech of Eryximachus, the cosmic significance of Eros is insisted upon and the body is presented as a composite of opposites that demonstrate a need or desire to be combined or supplemented by 'the other' (Taylor 1960: 218). Heim (2001: 73) refers to the explanation by Diotima, the priestess of love, to Socrates that Eros is essentially a drive to extend the finite, mortal being. In this sense Eros is nothing more than a reflection of the "psyche [that] longs to perpetuate itself and to conceive offspring, and this it can do, in a transposed sense, by conceiving ideas and nurturing awareness in the minds of others as well as our own" ([Heim 2001: 73](#)).

It would seem that although cyberspace was initially ideologically conceived as the offspring of technology as advancement, it has become far more in the sense that it has developed into a Romantic kind of cosmology in which the desire for the exotic or the unknown other is continually enabled.

4.4.3 Cybertime

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Cyberspace concerns not only a constructed real, but also constructed time. Technoculture and the computer industry have changed our sense of time into a distortion in which there is fragmentation. In his article 'The Internet and Its Social Landscape', Steven [Jones](#) (1997: 14), Professor in the Faculty of Communication at the University of Tulsa, refers to the consciousness raised by Lewis Mumford for the new emerging awareness of the notion of time in the late twentieth century. The Internet has a sense of time in which time is not only marked, but also filled imaginatively ([Jones 1997: 15](#)).

Jones refers further to the Internet as more of a "discontinuous narrative" than some kind of futuristic cyberspace. In order to enter this very particular space, body and place must be forsaken. In this sense it is "an imagined and imaginary space and thus is a narrative both because it is an area of discursive interaction and because it contends very successfully, for our imagination." ([Jones 1997: 15](#)). Jones maintains that narratives determine the passage of time:

Narratives are not, of course, communities, though they may be artifacts of community and may represent a good portion of what communities do to maintain and reproduce themselves over time. Narrative may imagine communities, and we may imagine ourselves to be a part of a community based on our reading of a narrative (Jones 1997: 14).

The fact that the Internet is all about connectivity further distorts time and has created a revolutionary evolution called simultaneity. Time is empty but it is "a series of fragments that pass by, one to the other, in a serial lock-step" (Jones 1997: 13).

4.4.4 Cyberart

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Art's function has changed radically in the context of the Internet as cyberspace. Art is produced for marketing, auctioning and selling purposes on the Internet. This has resulted in the production of more commercial art and art that is more accessible to the public. The concept of the art gallery that has dominated Western art exhibition for almost two centuries, is still alive and well, but is being challenged by the Internet, a world-wide computer network aimed at users. The Internet is an exciting new communication space with a global rather than a local orientation.

Together with the cyber exhibition space, methodologies, processes and materials have undergone major changes. Yet, as argued earlier, the so-called newness of these facets of art production is debatable. In his article, 'The Aesthetics of the Internet - Context as Medium', Ito [Joichi](#) (1997: 21) concludes that almost complete chaos can be found on the Internet in terms of the sheer amount of information, knowledge and "disorganized pieces of content and people". But, he maintains

... both complete order and complete chaos offer very little information, value or energy. Systems that help order chaos or disorder order are useful. ... This requires a group of rules or memes that attracts energy in the form of people, content, traffic, money, etc. and organizes this content in a way that grows and adds value. It is almost a kind of mimetic engineering.

[Joichi](#) (1997: 20) describes the Internet artist as a 'memetic' (not 'mimetic') engineer who creates an idea software protocol or image that grows and evolves on the Net, a process that to him is more "about creating life than about creating a non-living piece of art" (Joichi 1997: 21). A significant difference between the traditional artist and the memetic artist, is that the latter seeks to have the particular meme (rule) copied and replicated, whereas the former, who in the capacity of a genius (or a serious aspiration to geniality), is 'protective' of his/her work, and attempts to protect the integrity and authenticity of the work. In this sense the Internet artist is more of a scientist, a scientist who discovers/invents rules within the real, lays down these as universals and expects others to follow, copy or imitate.

Machiko [Kusahara](#) (1997: 22) extends this discourse by arguing that cyberartists are challenging the traditional idea that an artwork (or 'piece', as he calls it) should be the result of the artist's original creativity. He observes that whereas in the West authenticity is

valued and protected and indeed the original author or origins are and have been treated with esteem, in the East and specifically Japanese culture, citing or borrowing is not considered theft but a virtue ([Kusahara 1997: 23](#)). This is remarkably easy in the case of the copying of music. The use of digital technology in art seems to have enforced this idea and rules (or myths) of originality are constantly broken. According to [Kusahara \(1997: 23\)](#) the Net is seen rather as a tool or a space for "integrating different imaginations, or even different egos".

In Walter van der Crujisen's web page production, *Amsterdam Digital City* (1994), Figure 56, intended for the Internet, the new role of the artist is demonstrated. The artist interprets the Internet as a "new public environment, which is a global layer upon the existing environment" ([Pijnappel 1994: 21](#)). *Amsterdam Digital City* is a constellation of metaphors depicting a symbolic mapping of the decisions people make. Information can be retrieved through navigation from hotspot to hotspot and the exercising of certain choices. The main idea of the work is that the wired-together global community is an intimate environment where information, skills and even trivialities can be shared. The Internet artist thus becomes a public facilitator and the concept of the genius individual is subverted. In this sense, the Internet as cyberart space is ideologically and conceptually concerned with the deconstruction of the notions of authenticity, authorship and collectivity, none of which are foreign to either Western or non-Western art. In Norman Catherine's work, *Ju-ju bazaar* (1996), Figure 57, the figures contain references to various myths, rituals and practices, but in essence depict dividedness and collectivity. The idea is expressed that the individual does not exist in a vacuum or as a single consolidated whole, but that it is part of a greater collective firmly premised in belief and history.

What is central to this work, and other visual works that deal with the topic of collectivity, is that space and context are significant, even in a globalised, decentralised and artificial environment. Selection and exclusion still direct choices, whether physical space or cyberspace is concerned. The concept of nation-state (as articulated in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 3](#)) expressed as a specific cultural grouping often still forecloses or predetermines such space or context, as evident in [Figure 57](#). Even 'transnational nomads' need such determined boundaries in order to derive meaning from artworks. The notion that the predetermined, inherent meaning paradigm founded on the concept of nation-state can be ignored since there are global forces at work, is to be regarded with suspicion. Art, after all, is not separate from politics.



[Figure 56](#)

Walter van der Crujisen,

Screen shots of *Amsterdam Digital City* (1994)

([Pijnappel 1994: 20](#))



[Figure 57](#)

Norman Catherine,
Ju-ju bazaar (1996)

([Williamson & Jamal 1996: 27](#))

4.5 Virtual reality

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Within the context of virtuality, the notion of imitation, illusion and the experiences and responses of the spectator are core components.

The term 'virtual space' indicates a mutation of and the current availability of cyberspace. Initially, in Gibsonian context, the word 'cyberspace' indicated "the virtual space within the matrix - the globalNet - reached by jacking in via a socket or a 'trode net'" ([Brown](#) 1990: 238). The term 'virtual' goes back to a linguistic distinction formulated in Medieval Europe ([Heim](#) 1990: 41).

The creation of virtual reals through naturalistic means has been induced and facilitated by the development of still [photography](#) as well as through the medium of film and computer animation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the medium of film initiated experiences of virtuality and displacement. The computer technology that has been used in films since the Eighties has now reached the stage where literally anything is possible in creating illusion or virtual reality. Technicians pioneered a series of innovative cutting-edge processes in the film *Pleasantville* (1998) that seamlessly integrated colour characters and objects into a grey-scale world (discussed in more detail [later on](#) in this chapter). The film has been entirely digitally colour timed on a computer. Traditionally, colour timing (the process of balancing and adjusting the colour and density of images to each other) was done photochemically in a film lab (as in the last scene in *Schindler's List* with the little girl in a red dress against a grey background). The extraordinary new technology used in colour manipulation involved a kind of reverse colourisation where the original coloured background was taken out and just the original flesh tones were kept. This further implied that lighting had to be set up for both colour and black-and-white filming. Each still frame was electronically 'painted' to add colour in varying degrees of softness, saturation and luminance. (URL: www.movieweb.com/movie/pleasantville/pleasant.htm.)

Since the 1960s, through computer technology in particular, three-dimensional visual representations of the sensory real have been simulated to the extent that they are believable or 'virtual' -- a development in the history of technological development that has elicited discourses on the nature and validity of appearances and their value dichotomies. According to [Hollander](#) (1986: 3), the "power of moving pictures has been undeniable since the beginning of the cinema". In the history of art production, painters in particular, created proto-cinematic art, as is evidenced in the work of Botticelli, Goya and Degas. Such artists prefigured and attempted what cinema achieved later, especially in artworks that suggest a narrative in the sense of the 'single' image being presented as one fragment from a whole event.

The flight simulator developed by computer-imaging pioneer Ivan Sutherland has been instrumental in developing so-called 'artificial realities' as found in computer games and TV adverts (Darley 1990: 53) (Video clip 13). According to Darley (1990: 53), "Artificial realities', 'virtual realities', and 'responsive environments' - though not exactly referring to the same thing - stand for an area of research into computer simulation which involves computer imaging and some of its central components". In Video clip 14, with the aid of the software 3D Studio

MAX, a four-legged fantastical creature has been created. It is half-human and is presented in full three-dimensional form. The recognisable, naturalistic form presentation makes it appear believably 'real'.

In [The Perfect Crime](#) (1996), Baudrillard (1996: 11) argues that "virtual reality is the product ... of a surgical operation on the real world". This view echoes Marcuse's postulation that fantasy (as virtual reality) is a rebellion against the real (Marcuse 1968: 98). For Baudrillard, the most dreaded scenario would be to start believing in the real for want of anything else, since the real is merely the natural child of disillusionment and has been given to us as simulacrum. Therefore everything is illusion and neither the sensory real nor the non-real can be believed. "Faith in reality is", he proceeds, "of all the imaginary forms, the basest and most trivial" ([Baudrillard](#) 1996: 11). According to Baudrillard, the world is only appearance and will always remain the ultimate mystery, the enigma. In fact, the world has disappeared and is radical illusion (Baudrillard 1996: 16): the real actually consists in the discourse on the real (1996: 13).

In the virtual reality in Video Clip 14, Baudrillard's postulation that the sensory real assumes its full meaning when it is no longer what it used to be, that is, as we have known it, is applicable. This does not mean that before virtual reality the real has been understood and experienced in monolithic ways, but that there is a common human understanding and experience that human beings share, and that a creature such as the one depicted in Video Clip 14 is simply not part of that world nor has it ever been.

The fact that the *visual real* has become amended by virtual creatures such as the one in Video clip 14, means in the Baudrillardian sense that, although world and 'the real' is a construct already, the human imagination has been active in altering and adding to the real, and therefore it becomes a fully human world assuming its full meaning in being fully imaginative and fictive. The credibility of the simulation of the sensory real in the animated object masks the real and makes it disappear through its 'realness'. The boundaries between the sensory real and the imagined real become blurred and the real, in whatever form or dimension or articulation, attains its full meaning in the sense of its being nothing but illusion.



[Video clip 13](#)

Antartica-Hires.avi

([Kinetix](#) 1999)



[Video clip 14](#)

legWalk.avi

([Kinetix](#) 1999)

In most virtual fantasies, reference to the real is articulated through the imaginative reworking of known concepts and objects. As Heim (1990: 42) maintains, a "virtual world needs to be not-quite-real or it will lessen the pull on the imagination". Something less-than or more-than real will stimulate visual and imaginative response. Video clip 15 from the film, *The Fifth Element* (1997), demonstrates that the utopian fantasy created in the film, premised in scientific fictions and inventions, has been derived from examples in the real. The old-fashioned taxi has been transformed by still newer and more sophisticated technology and is now a fantastical, computerised, talking taxi cum aeroplane.



[Video clip 15](#)

Video clip 2 from the film *The Fifth Element* (1997)
([Besson 1997](#))

The computer simulation in Video clip 16 from the film, *The Matrix* (2000), represents illusions of real in such convincing manner that the real indeed disappears and the boundary between the projective illusion of the represented real, achieved through filmic means, and the digital, virtual real, achieved through digital manipulation means, collapses. The computer manipulation presents the main character of *The Matrix* in Spider-Man fashion as a superhuman being endowed with special powers to dodge bullets and, as such, infallible. The virtual real of the video clip is made more entertaining and enjoyable because the non-real is merged with the real but without any 'real' threat or violence. The entertainment aspect is to be found in the intelligent spectator's immediate distinction between the real and the virtual; that is, that based on experiences of the real, spectators realise what the limitations of the real are and enjoy the virtuality due to admiration for the powerful tools of digital technology.



[Video clip 16](#)

Video clip 1 from the film *The Matrix* (2000)
([Silver 2000](#))

The abovementioned interpretation of illusion and representation in Video Clip 16 supports Baudrillard's anthropological orientation with regard to the notion of the real, namely that the real is subjectively constructed and experienced by human beings. In support of this view he argues that when the real is no longer what it used to be and it becomes nostalgia or memory, for instance, it assumes its full meaning (Baudrillard 1996: 130). The notion of difference is relevant here; that is, that the real is experienced in multifarious ways by human beings and that the artificial therefore stays a relative construction and, through its character of fragmentation, remains dystopian.

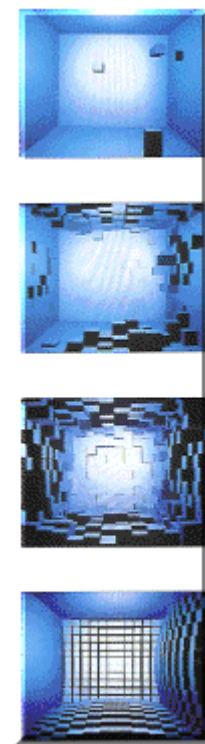
In many virtual reality renderings, alternative value systems are posited that become as acceptable as those of the real (for instance in films such as *The Matrix*, *American Beauty* and *Pleasantville*). This position is articulated in the post-structuralist theories of Derrida who views *both* presence *and* self as illusion. Subject and object or self and world, rephrased as spectator and representational illusion (as object), are alienated since language intervenes in and distorts this relationship ([Derrida 1973: 93](#)). As a result of such intervention there can never be a 'truthful' transferral of signs from world to self. For Derrida the subject can only exist through discourse, but in a sense divided from

itself. Following Derrida's line of argument, it can be postulated that in the same way that language mediates between self and world, representation acts as visual mediator between viewer and world. World can only exist through presentation and representation, and solipsistically, self can only be articulated in relation to world. Due to the fragile nature of representation and illusion, the dismantling of the truth character of the real in interface with the non-real comes about without difficulty and ambivalences are set up between the value dichotomies of the real versus those of the non-real. As Willis maintains, in dystopia "just as traditional categories of understanding are breaking down, so too are the once neat division between the reproductive technologies". The possibility of virtuality challenges *both* knowledge *and* belief about the real or the observed world as we know it.

In the German artist Peter Weibel's electronic interactive artworks, three facets of his subjectively constructed virtual world are depicted: the world of space and architecture (Figure 58), the world of objects (Figure 59) and the world of text (Figure 60). These artificial worlds are created by human beings, but attain a life of their own and start mediating between self and world. They are subjectively constructed artifices, subject to deconstruction and rearrangement at any time. As such, the electronic picture becomes a dynamic system of variables. The Weibel series can be interpreted as an attempt to construct "context controlled event worlds, built on the virtuality of the storing process, where information is not locked, but free-floating and therefore immediately changeable" (Pijnappel 1994: 29).

These works further demonstrate the idea of virtuality as processes of *both* 'looking-in' *and* 'looking-out'. The images are a response to a scientific analysis of the manufactured world and the physics of objects, as well as a reworking of these responses into imaginative, abstract statements. Figure 60 is an interpretation of the symbolism of language and text as visual manifestation of language. Since the letters move and change in the interactive impulse of the viewer, it demonstrates Derrida's postulation that there can never be a 'truthful' transferral of signs from world to self, and that the self as subject exists through discourse which is impossible to predetermine or fix.

The works become solipsistic comments on human beings' imaginative construction of artifices in the form of objects and structures (a process of exteriorisation) and the symbolic and abstract reinterpretation of these objects and structures (a process of interiorisation). At the same time, in the completion of the full circle of consciousness, they can be interpreted as a demonstration of Baudrillard's idea that the world is only appearance or artifice, that it exists in the discourse (as visual text) on the real, and that the sensory real assumes its full meaning when it is no longer what it used to be, in other words, when it has been given



[Figure 58](#)

Peter Weibel,

Virtual World 1: Space and Architecture (s.a.)

meaning. At the same time, my argument that artifice only attains meaning in its reference to the real, although the real is subjective artifice, is applicable.

It appears to me that it is the aspect of the ever-present possibility of change, variability and subjectivity of the artificial and virtual reality in these works that evokes dystopia. Weibel views the electronic picture no longer as simply a picture but as "a dynamic system of variables controlled by the observer or the context" (Pijnappel 1994: 29). He argues further that:

What we are doing is constructing context controlled event worlds, built on the virtuality process, where information is not locked, but free-floating and therefore immediately changeable. The instant variability of the information stored creates a dynamic system with lifelike behaviour that I call viability. Virtuality, variability and viability are the main characteristics of interactive electronic media.

The American artist Jenny Holzer, one of the best known artists working in virtual reality, aims to fill the gap between life and art with her work, in continuation of the Art-Life movement initiated by Marcel Duchamp in the second decade and given momentum by Joseph Beuys in the sixth decade of the twentieth century, as mentioned earlier. Holzer's virtual realms or "completely fake worlds" as she calls them (Pijnappel 1994: 19), are viewed as opportunities to make visible or resonant the "truly terrifying ... to make it as bad as what is happening ... after all, it's people who are making these machines, and people are the truly dreadful and frightening things as far as I'm concerned" (Pijnappel 1994: 19). In her virtual installation at the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo, New York (Figure 61) Holzer presents virtual reality as a kind of illusion, entailing cyberspace *both* as public space *and* as private space. This ambivalence, especially with regard to time and space, can be interpreted as "the place of the individual within the collective and the power struggle that unfolds as boundaries are renegotiated, broken, and formed anew." (Jones 1997: 53).

The archaic yet futuristic character of Holzer's virtual world affirms Fernback's view that virtual space is socially constructed and reconstructed space, and is:

... a repository for collective culture memory - it is popular culture, it is narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts. It is sacred and profane, it is workspace and leisure space, it is a battleground and a nirvana, it is real and it is virtual, it is ontological and phenomenological (Fernback 1997: 37).

(Pijnappel 1994: 29)

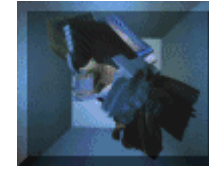


Figure 59

Peter Weibel,

Virtual World 2: The Object World
(s.a.)

(Pijnappel 1994: 28)

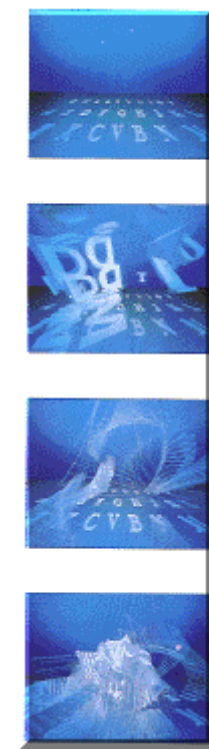


Figure 60

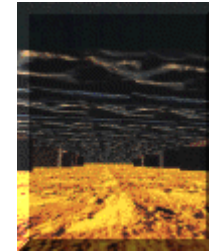
With reference to the above visual examples in this section, it can be argued that it is more than ideology that is articulated; it is utopian thinking in the form of a new emerging global matrix for social organisation, more fittingly described as a dystopian matrix. In the dystopian matrix, anything is possible and anything can be deconstructed and rearticulated at any moment. This matrix is a technological, utopianistic, seamless, borderless environment in which anything is possible, but which exists without moral justification.

This is possibly one reason for the existence of so many expressions of nostalgia in late twentieth-century visual texts.

Peter Weibel,

Virtual World 3: The Text World
(s.a.)

([Pijnappel](#) 1994: 28)



[Figure 61](#)

Jenny Holzer,

World II (1993)

([Pijnappel](#) 1994: 18)

4.6 Unpleasantness, pleasantness and dissolution

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As described in Chapters 1 and 2, the old hierarchies, master-narratives and ways of thinking have collapsed and a new order has emerged. In the late twentieth century the real has become distorted by the influences of computer technology, consumerism and the modernist obsession with novelty, and, as posited by Baudrillard, the real has 'vanished' and the boundaries between the real and the imagined are unclear. The virtual real is an artificial real, but it can be assumed with relative certainty that most people would want, or at least feel more at home with, an artificial construction that mimics the real sensory world and that is pleasant in many or most respects. A world with free, non-moral shooting sprees will be welcomed only if the sky remains blue and gravity remains as in the real world, and people speak in a language the user understands, even though the computer programmer and the computer's video board are easily capable of much more exotic and unexpected things.

It is not only in literature and electronic visual culture that the collapse of the boundaries between the sensory real and the non-real is evident. It is especially in video and performance as art forms that such disintegration is manifest. A musical artist such as Laurie Anderson, for instance, completely embraces technology although it interferes with real time, space and bodies. Although to her the world of technology

and machines is alienating, it still is the world; there is no distinction (Murphie 1990: 210). To her and other artists such as Stelarc, technology is a messianic force that will supplement humankind's ailing evolution (Murphie 1990: 210).

Places of entertainment and shopping malls in the city have become the pleasant dream where the unpleasant, sick or ugly real can be forgotten. The new artificial environment, a real, has become utopia, a comfortable place. Escapism from the real is manifest in high levels of technologisation and virtual avenues of, in particular, entertainment made possible through technology.

It would seem as if the unpleasantness/pleasantness of the real and the pleasantness/unpleasantness of the artificial have become interchangeable. The artificial has status only in the face of the real and the real is a subjective construct anyway. Within the context of the real there is a yearning for utopia, an artificial alternative reality; within the domain of the artificial there is only comfort and security in reference to the real. There seems to be a radical dissolution of the dichotomist boundaries between the utopia of the real and the artificial and the dystopia of the real and the artificial.

In addition, Huyssen argues that "the old [dichotomy](#) between history and fiction no longer holds ... in the sense that historical fiction can give us a hold on the world, the real", as well as that "the old opposition reality/utopia has lost its simple binary structure" (Huyssen 1995: 101). Huyssen postulates that the search for the real itself has become utopian (Huyssen 1995: 101). He refers to "Baudrillard's astrophysical imagery [that] betrays his hidden desire: it expresses nothing so much as the desire for the real after the end of television" (Huyssen 1995: 90). This idea is clearly articulated in the film, *Pleasantville* (1998) (Ross 1998). The real of present-day (1998) America is depicted in colour and *Pleasantville*, a fictional Fifties construct of the American Dream in black-and-white. *Pleasantville* reflects utopia in the following words:

In Pleasantville, USA, there has never been any rain.
There has never been hatred, aggression or tears.
In Pleasantville, USA, there has never been a passionate kiss.
There has never been a flat tyre, a red rose or a work of art.
Until now.

(URL: www.movieweb.com/movie/pleasantville/pleasant.htm.)

In the film the two teenagers (brother and sister) are like Alice through the looking glass, displaced through the TV screen from their present (unpleasant) nineties world characterised by loneliness, divorce, and a mother with severe personal problems, to the ultimate American Dream world of the Fifties (Video clip 17). This America is portrayed as a kind of New Paradise, a utopia destined for greatness and happiness. The idea of America as a future utopia is underpinned by the notion of a scientifically grounded as well as advantageous order of life. Yet everything is so ordered, 'thought-out' or predesigned and predetermined,



that the two teenagers become inordinately frustrated and irritated with the 'unnaturalness' and pretentiousness of the perfection and develop an urgent desire to return to their 'real', 'imperfect' world.

[Video clip 17](#)

Video clip 1 from the film *Pleasantville* (1998) (Ross 1998)

Both reals in *Pleasantville* -- the real of the Nineties and the exaggerated artificial real of the American Fifties -- are unpleasant constructions. Both become mutations of the real, rendered in this film as divided and dualistic. The historical real of the Fifties becomes a simulacrum, that is, an ideological, utopian real constructed according to the Baudrillardian model of a real without author or origin. Baudrillard's theory of simulation flattens the difference between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in the sense that it purports two realities, the actual and the virtual, that are not very different in the end. Thus there is substitution and mutation rather than simulation.

In both reals the experienced real becomes untenable and unpleasant and in both there is a desire for the other. In many utopian constructs there is the nagging realisation that the imagined construct is only a pipedream, or, as depicted in *Pleasantville*, so perfect that it becomes unreal and is therefore often treated with distrust. Although the two realities are clearly divided, a constant flux of moving in and out of realities is suggested, thus making an existential postulation about the persistence of the paradise myth: that people constantly desire alternatives, reals or novelties.

Exactly this sentiment is expressed in my own work, *I remember green* (2001), Video clip 18. I layered different timelines, which I combined with the sound of wind in order to express the rapid passing of time, but also distorted time. Throughout the work, fleeting landscape images are interspersed with still images of a magical green patch. Towards the end of the work the magical place is reached and an attempt is made to make time stand still in order to embed mythological meaning in the idea of a green patch. Although this thesis focuses on the idea of utopia and not of paradise, this work does express an urgent desire for escape and mediates the idea that in current dystopia, individuals in solipsistic fashion seek flight, not only from the world but also possibly from self.



[Video clip 18](#)

Elfriede Dreyer,

I remember green (2001)

(Artist's Collection)

These movements in and out of the real and the virtual are at the core of the dystopian condition: when the real disappoints, there is the desire for the utopian/imagined/virtual, and inversely, when the latter has become overwhelming, the desire for the real emerges. The escape from the virtual and dystopian world into a more 'human' real can be understood as a nostalgic real, manifesting in, amongst others, a revisitation of history, renderings of memory and environmental concerns.

4.7 Conclusion

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It would seem that within the context of the virtual or the artificial, a return to naturalism as preferred mode of representation is distinguishable. The artificial as a concept in the late twentieth century is about setting up new believable realities through means that will facilitate such virtuality. Combined with the new potential of video to create believable three-dimensional virtual space and animated form, basic questions regarding the real and the belief in appearances, illusion or the virtual have become vital.

In the late twentieth century, a radically virtual world has come into existence, a world premised in technology and novelty and assembled of many reals. Such technoreals seem to satisfy the desire for escape, but also for paradisiacal 'instant plenty'. In the dystopian matrix, new content, new methodologies, new models and a whole new society have been born. The dystopian matrix simply is and fills the abyss of nothingness, perhaps with motivations of pleasure, mainly in the form of entertainment and the satisfaction of hidden curiosities and desires.

In the new language of digital communication, illusions are created by means of the computer and various software programmes. However, as argued previously, fiction and fantasy have always been part of art and the notion of an alternative reality is not a new idea. When the life-like artificial environments that are being created by computers are considered, such new reals can easily be misunderstood as mere replications of nature or as pure instrumentality ([Negrotti 1999: 102](#)). However, any visual rendering refers more to the mental representation of the real, than to the real itself. It remains a subjective interpretation of the real.

The visual format of twentieth-century alternative reality constructs (without ignoring the role of technology in this) 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, in turn resulting in a disintegration of logocentrism and master narratives that were previously derived from the real of human experience. A naturalistic mode of representation enforces the oscillation between the real and the virtual, and creates dystopia.

Although the sophistication in technology available to artists and creative directors has manifested in **blurred boundaries** between the real and the non-real, the awareness of the real and the virtual persists. Many positions are found in the grey area between the real and the virtual. The use of technology such as video, photography and the computer becomes a triple play of irony. If the real has disappeared, the documentation of the real cannot be sustained; it becomes a copy of an untenable entity, further rearranged and reconstructed into an artwork that volunteers an illusion of that real. The intense, repetitive interaction with the real is nothing more than a vicarious sublime of hyperreality and the artwork in this technocontext becomes devalued and disappears into virtual nothingness.

One may argue that it is still possible to articulate utopian thinking in cyberspace, although there is actually **no real horizon** against which the utopian construct can be measured and from which utopia can emerge. The latter situation of nothingness renders the utopia dystopian, but at the same time the artificial reality is still grounded in, and measured and validated against, the experiences of the real.

In the [next chapter](#), portrayals of the late twentieth-century human being reflecting a dystopian condition will be investigated.