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# ESSAY

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### Cyberspace as the darker side of the West

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**Cyberspace is being described as the 'new frontier'. But the notion of the new frontier is a mythic formulation, constructed to bring the past into an organized and reinterpreted unity with the present and emphasize how the new 'territory' is to be dominated and controlled in the future. The occupation of cyberspace has direct parallels with the colonisation of non-Western cultures. Cyberspace is turning out to be the new Other of Western civilization which is projecting all its colonial prejudices, and the images of sex and violence in which it framed non-Western cultures, on to cyberspace. But this time the darker side of the West is bouncing back on itself.**

Richard Pepin's *Hologram Man* is a third-grade film with a first-class insight into Western psychosis. It exhibits and plays with all that Western man desires, all that lies buried deep in his consciousness, and all that is steaming his restless soul. The story is quite one-dimensional. A rookie cop, Decoda, arrests a psychotic terrorist, Slash Gallagher, after a bloody encounter. In his own evil way, Slash just wants the world be a better place and free of the Corporation that rules it; and in his own legal way, Decoda too just wants the world to be a better place and doesn't really care for the Corporation that sustains him! Slash is sentenced to the worst form of imprisonment that the future can offer: holographic

stasis. His body is turned into a hologram, while his brain and soul are stored in a computer to be reprogrammed. Slash's multicultural gang (this is a pc film!) manage to free their leader, hacking his mind and soul out of the computer, but his body is destroyed in the attempt. Slash pours an artificial skin on himself and walks the earth as an electromagnetic hologram: walking through walls, changing his physical identity at will, a mind, a soul, free from the limitations of physical existence he is invincible, a man turned into god by virtual reality. As is usual with such narratives, Decoda too turns into a hologram to defeat and capture his foe. Even though he is not as strong as Slash, Decoda is smarter. In the final encounter, Decoda not only kills Slash but also takes care of the equally evil chairman of the Corporation.

The tone of *Hologram Man* is set within the first ten minutes of the film: grand spectacle wrapped in grotesque violence and graphic sex. Its origins in

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computer games like *Doom 2* and *Mortal Kombat* are quite evident; as is its love affair with digital technology, which played no small part in its production, and virtual reality. Such combinations of violence, advance technology and sex are not only used to sell films and video games (they are the *raison d'être* of *Hologram Man* and numerous other similar films like *Digital Man*, *Brain Scan*, *Videodrome* and *Lawnmower Man*), they also come in rather useful in shaping civilizations. Violence, advance technology and sex have been the containers—vats—within which the West has existed for much of the second half of the millennium. In the normal course of events, the West has used these barrels to capture non-Western civilizations and cultures and then projected its own darker side on to them, portraying and describing—and therefore containing—them in terms of violence, sex and primitive technology.

At the end of the second millennium, however, the standard grand narrative appears to be going through a new, and interesting twist: the darker side of the West is bouncing back on itself! The very materials with which the West painted all Other civilizations is now acquiring a life of its own and is threatening to recast the projected image as well as the self-perception of the West. As the body of Western civilization gradually dissolves into digital technology, it is slowly being replaced, just like those of *Slash* and *Decoda* in *Hologram Man*, with a transparent virtual skin that reveals the true darkness that lies underneath—in the mind and soul of the West. *Decoda* and *Slash* are the two Janus-like faces of Western civilization: one, the projected innocence standard-bearer of civilization, the enforcer of universal law and morals; the other, pathologically untamed, the psychotic inner reality. To look at the inner reality of the West, the darker side it projects on to Other cultural and mental landscapes, we must look at the West's latest conquest, the new domain that it has colonized: cyberspace.

### **The allure of the colon**

Western civilization has always been obsessed with new territories to conquer. The narratives of these conquests, on the whole, have followed a basic, linear

pattern. The hunger for new conquests stems from the insatiable desire to acquire new wealth and riches which in turn provides impetus for the development of new technologies of subjugation which are then employed to bring new territories under the servitude of the West. Once a new territory has been colonized, it is handed over to business interests to loot; and the worst elements of the West are posted there to administer and civilize the natives. The natives themselves are rendered non-people by framing them with the images of all that the West fears about itself. Cristobal Colon's (aka Columbus) voyage to the 'new world', for example, was a product of the quest for wealth and riches, what in contemporary parlance we would call 'new markets'. Colon and those who followed him, adventurers and perverts, rampaged what they discovered and butchered the natives they encountered. The West's conquest and colonisation of the Muslim world was motivated by its image of the Orient where unfathomable riches existed and cruel and barbaric scenes were staged. Once colonized, Islam was projected as evil and depraved, licentious and barbaric, ignorant and stupid, monstrous and ugly, fanatic and violent—the very traits of those who went to the Muslim world to rule it, civilize it, and strip it of its wealth and power. The English and Dutch East India Companies went to India and Indonesia looking for new markets and, with the aid of advanced military technology, enslaved their cultures and turned these countries into gold mines for the homeland. The conquest of the American West was spurred by the gold rush, the desire of the settlers for absolute freedom, and ended with the almost total annihilation of the native Indians. When the West ran out of physical landscapes to conquer it moved into mental territories. Colonization paved the way for modernity. During the second half of this century, modernity relentlessly conquered almost every culture and every mind. Under colonization, the basic weapon was the brute force of military technology; modernity combines military technology with communication technology, Western cultural products and instrumental rationality. The 'civilizing mission' gives way to 'progress' and 'modernization' and produces the same effect: cultures are decimated, bulldozed, 'globalized' with

barbaric abandon. When mental and cultural territories are exhausted, the West moves on to conquer the reality of Other people. The end of modernity, ushers in the all-embracing totality of postmodernism. In Other peoples' reality, Other ways of knowing and being, Other identities, postmodernism has discovered new spaces to conquer and subdue. Here 'progress', 'modernization' and instrumental rationality are replaced with relativism, real human beings are filtered through electronic screens to render them into virtual images—all the better to exploit them and butcher them without feeling real emotions.<sup>1</sup> Virtual persons bleed virtual blood—just like so many computer games, including that simulation of the real things, *War in the Gulf*.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond postmodernism's subjugation of the realities, modes of knowing and actual being of Other cultures, the West urgently needs new spaces to conquer. The moon and the inner planets are ruled out for the time being given the cost of colonizing them. The outer space is a domain best left, for the time being, to *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, and *Space Precinct*. For the conquest to be continued unabated, new terrestrial territories have to be found; and where they don't actually exist, they must be created. Enter, cyberspace.

Like most new technologies, cyberspace did not appear, to use the words of Chris Chesher, 'from nowhere as a mystical spark of inspiration from the mind of one individual'.<sup>3</sup> It is a conscious reflection of the deepest desires, aspirations, experiential yearning and spiritual angst of Western man, it is resolutely being designed as a new market, and it is an emphatic product of the culture, worldview and technology of Western civilization. That it is a 'new frontier', a 'new continent', being reclaimed from some unknown wilderness by heroic figures not unlike Cristobal Colon, is quite evident from how the conquest of cyberspace is described by many of its champions. Analogies to colonization abound. The September 1990 edition of the cyberpunk magazine, *Mondo 2000*, carries the cover line: 'The Rush Is On! Colonizing Cyberspace'.<sup>4</sup> Ivan Pope, editor of the British cyberspace magazine *3W*, describes it as 'one of those mythical places, like the American West or the

African Interior, that excites the passions of explorers and carpetbaggers in equal measures'.<sup>5</sup> Howard Rheingold, a guru of the movement, describes his own flirtations with cyberspace as 'my own odyssey to the outposts of a new scientific frontier . . . and an advanced glimpse of a possible new world in which reality itself might become a manufactured and metered commodity'.<sup>6</sup> Many computer games, like *Super Mario Brothers*, *Civilization*, *Death Gate*, *Merchant Colony* and *Big Red Adventure* are little more than updated versions of the great European voyages of discovery. These are not just games but worlds, constructed Western utopias, where all history can be revised and rewritten, all non-Western people forgotten, in the whirl of the spectacle. It is hardly surprising that Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins have found direct parallels between many Nintendo games and New World documents like Columbus's *Diario* (1492–93), Walter Raleigh's *Discoveries of the large, rich and beautiful empire of Guiana* (1596) and John Smith's *True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia* (1608). The theme is reflected in more serious documents. 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: a Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', a document that 'represents the cumulative wisdom and innovation of many dozens of people' including Alvin Toffler, prepared for the right-wing The Progress and Freedom Foundation, states that 'the bioelectronic frontier is an appropriate metaphor for what is happening in cyberspace, calling in mind as it does the spirit of invention and discovery that led the ancient mariners to explore the world, generations of pioneers to tame the American continent and, more recently, to man's first exploration of outer space'.<sup>7</sup> We are not told what the voyages of discovery did to the indigenous populations; or that they were motivated as much by greed as the so-called 'spirit of adventure'.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the original Magna Carta, which concerned itself with mundane political and civil liberties, 'A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', places cyberspace at the zenith of civilization: it represents 'civilization's truest, highest calling' and would lead to unparalleled 'demassification, customization, individuality, freedom' and will be the main form of 'glue holding together an increasingly free and diverse society'.

Cyberspace, then, is the 'American dream' writ large; it marks the dawn of a new 'American civilization'. White man's burden, then, shifts from its moral obligation to civilize, democratize, urbanize and colonize non-Western cultures, to the colonization of cyberspace. Those engaged in constructing the new cybercivilization often see their heroic efforts in terms of 'a moral responsibility to fulfill an historic destiny, comparing themselves with historical precedents, like the original White colonizers of North America'.<sup>9</sup>

The 'frontier' was, of course, an invented concept which recapitulated an experience that had already passed. The frontier exists in the mind, it operates as a myth only after the process of control has been established. The fate of the American West was already determined before the idea of the frontier could be effective as the means for its dominated integration within the praxis of American citizenry.<sup>10</sup> As in idea, the frontier is a tool of domination that arises from the certainty that one already has total control. As an instrument, the function of the frontier is to pass the routine practice of domination into the hands of the populace, to give them the illusion of freedom while they merely act out the actual effective control that is already predetermined, scrutinized, and seen to be good by those with power. The frontier is the agency through which power elites get everyone to do their work while thinking they are acting on their own volition. The cyberspace frontier is no different. It has already been controlled; the populace, in a whip of frenzy, are now being motivated to explore and settle in the new frontier. The ideologically constructed anarchy of cyberspace reflects the drive of the early settlers who colonized the territory like free agents, but only as the free agents of the evolving concept of a particular civilization. What the frontier gives is the liberty to indulge licence within the brief of the civilizational stage directions, 'to do', as John Wayne apocryphally termed it, 'what a man's got to do'. What such men did turned out to be only what was in the self interest of the civilization they represented and what characterized the doing was brutality to Others.

What cyberspace 'frontier' is doing as a first step in rewriting history: an exercise in

catharsis to release the guilt of wiping out numerous indigenous cultures from the face of the earth, the colonization of two-thirds of the world and the continuous degradation of life in the Third World that the West has engendered. Why else have these colonial metaphors of discovery been adopted by champions of cyberspace—particularly, as Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins note, when these

metaphors are undergoing sustained critique in other areas of the culture, a critique that hardly anyone can be unaware of in the year after the quincentenary of Columbus's first American landfall. When John Barlow (1990) writes that 'Columbus was probably the last person to behold so much usable and unclaimed real estate (or unreal estate) as these cybnauts have discovered' (page 37), the comparison to cyberspace drains out the materiality of the place Columbus discovered, and the nonvirtual bodies of the pre-Columbian inhabitants who did, in fact, claim it, however unsuccessfully. I would speculate that part of the drive behind the rhetoric of virtual reality as a New World or new frontier is the desire to recreate the Renaissance encounter with America without guilt: This time, if there are others present, they really won't be human (in the case of Nintendo characters), or if they are, they will be other players like ourselves, whose bodies are not jeopardized by the virtual weapons we wield. The prospect of seeing VR (virtual reality) as a revisionary reenactment of earlier history raises issues that we address only in passing: One would be the ethics and consequences of such a historical revision; another would be to ask whether it is accurate to say that VR is unlike Renaissance discovery in having no victims, that at no point does it register harmfully on real bodies that are not the bodies of its users.<sup>11</sup>

But, of course, cyberspace does have victims. The rewriting of colonial history has direct impact on the lives of those whose history is being denied and whose historic identity is distorted. It leads to blaming the victims for the misery of their current reality. If Colon, Drake and other swashbuckling heroes of Western civilization were no worse than pioneers of cyberspace, then they must have been a good thing; and colonized people should be thankful for the civilization and new technology they brought and the new markets they opened up! Western revisionist writers and thinkers never tire of making such claims as William A Henry III's re-interpretation of American history in his *In Defense of Elitism* illustrates so well.<sup>12</sup>

Cyberspace is particularly geared up towards the erasure of all non-Western histories. Once a culture has been 'stored' and 'preserved' in digital forms, opened up to anybody who wants to explore it from the comfort of his armchair, then it becomes more real than the real thing! Who needs the arcane and esoteric real thing anyway? In the postmodern world where things have systematically become monuments, nature has been transformed into 'reserve', knowledge is giving way to information and data, it is only a matter of time before Other people and their cultures become 'models', so many zeros and ones in cyberspace, exotic examples for scholars, voyeurs and other interested parties to load on their machine and look at! Cyberspace is a giant step forward towards museumization of the world: where anything remotely different from Western culture will exist only in digital form. And in digital form, not only their past but also their present and potential futures can be manipulated: 'we can run a simulation and show you what are your best options for survival!'

But non-Western history is being sanitized not just by the metaphors of cyberspace, numerous computer and video games, advertisements for software, but by a host of new CD-ROM encyclopaedias like *Microsoft Encarta*, the *Compton Interactive Encyclopedia* where *Star Trek's* Captain Peccard is your tour guide, and *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant. The great explosion of information on CD-ROMS is in old West-is-Great paradigm repackaged for a new generation and extending the dominance of the old academy. The hard won new spaces and discourses of Third World perspectives created in conventional fields now disappear into the oblivion of cyberspace; we thus return to square one, the beginning. The Other is once again the virgin land waiting passively to be dominated by the latest territory controlled by the West. Even the documentary evidences of history are oxidized in the way they are 'preserved' in cyberspace:

With the mushroom development of the electronic memory, the scope of storage is expanding indefinitely. Data banks are being created for every imaginable aspect of life, and age-old, dusty archives are being transferred to the most modern information systems. The Archivo General de Indias in Seville harbours hundreds of thousands of historical sources, in the form of

decrees, instructions, letters, regulations, case records, maps petitions from Indian chiefs, etc., which refers to the historical ties between Spain and its former colonies in Latin America. The whole archive is now being digitalised. The manuscripts are being recorded on interactive, optical video disc, not only to protect the original collection (*to preserve the past for prosperity—the present is once again discarded*), but also to increase their accessibility for the researcher: the documents, discoloured by time, can be 'cleaned' on the screen via the computer (stains can be removed, creases smoothed out, colours changed, letters enlarged or reduced, etc. . . .) In a way, a 'contaminated' and guilt-laden episode of history is being relieved of its blood, sweat and tears, and being given a false air of innocence. In the unbearable lightness of the realm of data, things are being relieved of their stoutness and weightiness: as 'bits' and 'bytes' they all look the same. It is not about whether the originals speak the truth, but about their disappearance into a retouchable 'image': the act of copying makes the originals artificial too. At the same time, the 'real thing', having become inaccessible, is entrenched in secrecy for fear that it will be touched by life, so that its existence becomes insignificant.<sup>13</sup>

But cyberspace not only kills history, it actually kills people too! The dress rehearsal for the smart bombs that so consistently missed their targets in the Gulf War was carried out in cyberspace. Cyberspace, like Teflon and mini hi-fi and so much of modern advanced technology, has its origins in the military. The Internet was developed as a fool-proof mode of communication in case of nuclear war and expanded as a computer network that linked university research centres with the defence departments. Virtual reality first emerged as a safe and inexpensive way of training pilots to fly advanced military planes. Indeed, the US military has been testing equipment and operators using VR technology for some time. The origins of the term 'information superhighway' can be traced back to that other highway, also a product of military concerns, which emerged at the end of World War II—the grand US interstate highway system (the 'Al Gores' have been involved in both: Al Gore Sr played an instrumental part in the development of the federal highway system; Al Gore Jr has been instrumental in placing the information superhighway on the American political agenda!) The software games market is saturated with 'shoot'em-up' games and flight simulators,

involving flying jet fighters, shooting and bombing targets, not simply because people like playing such games, but because weapons guidance and tracking research for military use has filtered down into video games. Virtual reality has now moved on to the 'entertainment' arena largely because the US defence industry wants a return on its investment by finding other uses for the technology it originally developed.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the first major commercial application of VR betrays its military origins. Battle Tech, one of the earliest commercial uses of VR, is a game based on networked military tank simulators. At Chicago's North Pier, where a Battle Tech Center opened in 1990,

Players pay and sign in at the front desk and are matched up with others to make teams. The teams play in a room decorated as the war room of a starship, with TV monitors filling up a wall. Each player gets a Battle Tech console, which is steered like a battle tank, with floor pedals and throttle. Speakers around the players supply the sounds of machinery and battle. The joystick has triggers and buttons for controlling weapons systems. The idea is not to beat the machine but to beat the enemy either individually or in teams. As one report states, 'what gives realism and challenge to the Battletech experience is the fact that you play against living opponents rather than the algorithms of a computer's program'.<sup>15</sup>

Once the military has opened up the new-frontier, the settlers can move in to play their games, to explore, colonize and exploit the new territory taking us back to mythic times when there were other worlds (Islam, China, India, Africa, America) with resources beyond imagination and riches without limits.

Since its genesis as a military research project, the Internet has been managed by the US-government funded National Science Foundation (NSF). The NSF has now handed over the managerial reins to three commercial carriers, Sprint, Ameritech and Pacific Bell. These multinational, modern equivalents of the East India Company, will become the principal providers of access to the Internet. The many networks that make the Internet, the network of all computer networks, are inter-linked in a rough hierarchy: the bigger the network the higher the ladder of hierarchy it sits. Thus the big multinational corporation will really dominate cyberspace. And, whereas government-funded network providers offered free access, commercial pro-

viders are in the market to make profits. If cyberspace is the new gold mine, it will be exploited to the full with trade organizations dictating and shaping cyber policies.

Already, the really big thing on cyberspace is business: foreign trade, trillions of dollars swashing around in a hyperparanoia of electronic transfer, chasing profit in the 24-hour global market. The Internet is becoming more and more inviting to business interests and within a few years it will become the vehicle for shopping and other forms of consumerism. Today, one can't log on to a commercial network like CompuServe without receiving an invitation to visit the 'Shopping Mall'. Soon, in the not too distant future, the bank, the post office, shopping centre, library, job centre, video store and newspapers will disappear into cyberspace and the computer, telephone, TV, VCR and hi-fi will all be replaced by a magic box in our living rooms. We will be logged on, tuned in and staying at home and shopping to our heart's content. Life, as they say, will never be the same again! Indeed, cyberspace has done much to boost business—trade is growing twice as fast, and foreign direct investment four times as fast, as national economies. But privatization and deregulation mean that cyberspace is a space without rules; where it can promote business, it can also advance crime.<sup>16</sup> Cybercrime is going to be *the* crime of the future. Organized crime is a \$750-billion-a-year enterprise, the drug trafficking generates revenues of \$400 billion to \$500 billion; much of this money finds its way into cyberspace, where it is totally out of governments' control, and where it can lose itself in split-second deals, and where it is legitimized by the international movement of more than \$1 trillion a day. Within ten years it will become well nigh impossible to trace ill gotten revenues, giving organized crime an unparalleled boost. 'Currency collapse' from dirty cyber-money is something that even gives that gung-ho bible of cyberspace, *Wired*, the 'creeps'. It is one of the ten technological developments on 'The Wired Scared Shit-list': 'corrupted currency destroys global markets'.<sup>17</sup>

The cyberspace frontier, then, is set to follow the patterns of the old West. And like the old West, it is a terrain where marshal and lawmen roam freely bringing order and

justice whenever and wherever they can. The lawmen of cyberspace and the new heroes of the West are hackers, whiz kids who break into computers, punish those who break the code of 'netiquette' and generally terrorize other users. While hackers are essentially lonely and social inadequate who can relate only to computers,<sup>18</sup> films like *Sneakers* and *Hackers* have turned them into champions of the electronic frontier. 'A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age' describes them as heroic individuals 'who ignored every social pressure and violated every rule to develop a set of skills through an early and intense exposure to low-cost, ubiquitous computing' (so did Billy the Kid but in his days the new technology came in the form of repeater revolvers!) and who created 'new wealth in the form of the baby business that have given America the lead in cyberspatial exploration and settlement'. But not all hackers have created wealth; quite a few have created crime and have led the way for total demolition of privacy. Cellular 'phone (these 'phones give off signals even when they are switched off) hackers can tap into any conversation and trace anyone, almost anywhere.

But with or without cellular 'phones, soon there will be 'nowhere to hide'.<sup>19</sup> Almost every computer transaction would be hacked, every conversation amenable to tapping, and mountains of personal data about individuals routinely collected, such as medical history and financial records, would be available to anyone who wants it. Online terrorism is not too far away and most of the early proponents of this sick art are hackers.<sup>20</sup> While some hackers will be causing increasing havoc, other hackers will be tracking them down. A few will become fully fledged marshals. One self-designated marshal of the new territory, a real equivalent to *Hologram Man's* Decoda, is John Perry Barlow, Wyoming cattle rancher, lyricist for the Grateful Dead, and co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation which is dedicated to protecting 'freedom of expression, privacy and access to online resources and information'. Barlow, who is safeguarding cyberspace freedom for us all by riding shotgun, captured the essence of frontier freedom

when he posed for the glossy photocover of his Wesleyan University alumni magazine standing heavily dressed in a twilight snowscape along-

side a barbedwire fence, with a ranch cabin invitingly aglow in the background. An Apple computer stands atop a fencepost and Barlow packs a double-barreled shotgun under his arm. Barlow's clumsy and unthinkingly malevolent symbolic exercise exemplifies themes of anti-social monadism and implicit violence [of] . . . the history of American narrative. The ideal client for this old-new ideology is the one who writes a letter to the editors of *Wired* damning the Clipper chip because 'secure encryption, like firearms, represents an insurance policy for all citizens against future tyrants'. Mounting guard over private electronic property, not embracing social needs and human interdependency, defines this ethos of isolation and self-privileging. The essential solitude of 'don't tread on me' attitude and laissez-faire electronic frontier politics contain walloping measures of anti-communitarianism.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Others are on the other side of (actual) reality**

One of the most pernicious myths about the Internet is that it provides free access to all the information about everything to everybody everywhere at any time. To begin with, access to the Internet is not free. Individuals working in organizations, universities and research institutions have 'free' access because their institutions pay. For individuals, without institutional support like myself, Internet access is an expensive luxury: there is the cost of the computer and necessary peripherals (£2000, recurring every two years as both the hardware and software become useless within that period); payment to the Internet provider (£180 per year) and the telephone bills (around £500 a year). One can feed a family of four in Bangladesh for a whole year for that sort of money. Thus the Internet is only available to those who can afford a computer and connection and telephone charges that go with it. In the West, this means educated households with income in the upper brackets. In the USA, for example, households with incomes above \$75 000 are three times more likely to own a computer than households with incomes between \$25 000 and \$30 000.<sup>22</sup> That leaves most of the black households in the cold! (But Asian and Pacific Islanders are more likely than whites to own a home computer and therefore have access to the Internet). In the Third World—that is, countries *with* telecommunications infrastructures—only the reasonably well off can

afford access to the Internet. That leaves most of humanity at the mercy of real reality!

Moreover, not everything on the Net is free and, as I have argued, it will be less and less so; and contrary to popular belief computers themselves are not becoming cheaper. It is true that the price of computing power falls by half every two years. But as soon as the price of a model falls, its production is discontinued and manufacturers move to higher-specification machines to keep their profits growing. In any case, new software does not run on the cheaper (lower-specification) models; consumers have no option but to upgrade. So the presumption that the average citizen can purchase increasingly sophisticated computers at decreasing prices is a gigantic myth. Neither is information on the Net free. Much of it, really useful stuff from the Pentagon to research on advance commercial technologies is encoded. Not all the information in the world is on the Net (thank God for that!); and unless all the world's cultures are willing to be digitized it will never be so. The Net, in fact, provides us with a grotesque soup of information—statistics, data and chatter from the military, academe, research institutions, purveyors of pornography, addicts of Western pop music and culture, right-wing extremists, lunatics who go on about aliens, paedophiles and all those contemplating sex with a donkey! A great deal of this stuff is obscene; much of it is local; most of it is deafening noise. Our attention is constantly being attracted by someone trying to sell us something we don't want, some pervert exhibiting his perversion, groups of cyber-freaks giggling in the corner, while giant corporations trade gigabytes of information about money and death.

Most people on the Internet are white, upper- and middle-class Americans and Europeans; and most of them are men. Indeed, women are conspicuous largely by their absence: less than 1% of people on-line are women; most of these are bored housewives, and perhaps quite a few are actually transsexual man. This is not surprising: cyberspace, like earthspace, has not really developed with women in mind.

The binary coding of cyberspace carries with it another type of encoding: that of gender relations. Most video games are designed with a very white, Western

male view of what children find interesting; killing, shooting and blowing things up. In games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Comanche Maximum Overkill*, which contain horrific scenes of violence, the object is simply to kill or hunt your opponent; *Doom* and its various sequels involve nothing more than relentless and perpetual digital killing. The women in these games, if there are any, are either simply cyberbimbos, electronic renderings of Barbie dolls, or are as psychotic as the male characters. In most cases, however, female characters are absent from these narratives as women from the Internet; at best, they are there to be rescued from evil villains, as in *Prince of Persia*—which is one of the best games in this genre—and its sequel. Given this background, it is not surprising that women have not taken to cyberspace.

Cyberspace is inhabited not just by the white, middle-class male, but a *particular* type of white middle-class male—or more appropriately two main types of white, middle-class males. The first and the most predominant type of male on cyberspace is the college student.<sup>23</sup> Seven out of ten institutes of higher learning in the USA provide free Internet access to their students. Apart from spending most of their time 'netsurfing', game-playing, chatting on-line, these students also create 'home-pages' as advertisements for themselves. There are countless such homepages on the World Wide Web containing 'information' on what they eat and excrete, what they would look like if they were Martians, and their musings on God, Hegel, the Chicago Bears and the Grateful Dead. When they get bored they create such home pages as 'Nymphomania' (brainchild of a Duke University freshman) or simply put pornographic pictures on their servers. When they get really bored, they write stories: the case of Joe Baker, a 21-year-old sophomore at the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science and Arts, is only one example—the Net is full of them! In February 1995, Baker posted a story to the Usenet newsgroup alt.sex. stories in which he graphically described kidnapping and torturing one of his fellow students. In a later e-mail correspondence, Baker even described how he was going to carry out his fantasy!<sup>24</sup> And when they really get bored they have cyberweddings:



Two eWorld users (eWorld is an on-line service from Apple), Mandi and Art from Texas, got married computer-style. They met several months ago on-line and have spent more than their fair share of hours on-line chatting and mailing each other . . .

their marriage was witnessed, albeit on-line, by hundreds of users. Since theirs was an electronic wedding, their bridesmaid and best man were also people that the couple have met on-line . . .

So what were their wedding vows?

Art: I searched the vast oceans for a soul mate, plundering and looting everywhere I sailed, and finding no one, to share the adventure of my life. And now I have found an angel to help me sail my course. My eMate forever as we set sail, I promise to love and cherish you as my eWife, to let you be free. I promise to be faithful to you on-line, I will always sail as a free pirate but my heart is yours alone. And I pledge you my love, my soul, and my heart throughout all time.

Mandi: I longed for a sailor to capture my heart; a hero to set my passion free. My eyes searched the seas from the shore far away. Nothing but water for miles for so long. Suddenly, one clear, blue day you appeared before me—strong, passionate yet so lonely. With the look of the lost sea in your eyes, our souls connected. Our hearts met and melted. My heart beats with yours. My thoughts are with you always. I promise, as your eWife, to be faithful on-line, to stay true to the meaning of this joining, and above all, to keep my heart in time with yours always.<sup>25</sup>

This group of Internet users has the same demographic profile as *Playboy* readers: that is, they are both aged 18–35, 80–90% are male, they are well educated, and have a higher than average income.<sup>26</sup>

The 10–20% of white, male Internet users that fall outside the *Playboy* demographic profile—they have just as high level of incomes but are, perhaps, not that well educated—are the kind of individuals who, in the days of the Empire, were rounded up and shipped off to Australia, the ‘New World’ or some other part of ‘the colonies’ to murder, rape, sodomize or otherwise tame and civilize the natives. In the new frontier that is cyberspace, these chaps are forging digital colonies on behalf of Western civilization. Frankly, many of these individuals are genuinely psychotic; real projections of the holographic Slash Gallagher, they live on various homepages maintained by numerous right-wing militia groups or belong to newsgroups like ‘alt.sex.amputee’ and ‘alt.sex.nasal hair’. These are the kind of individuals who,

hours after the bombing of Oklahoma City, posted diagrams explaining how to make bombs similar to the lethal mixture that blew up the Alfred Murrah federal building, with the message: ‘There you go . . . Thought that might help some of you’. Or the kind of individuals who regularly post ‘stories’ that explain the best way of kidnapping children and how to torture, mutilate and sodomize them, and the best way of ‘snuffing’ (murdering) them. There is an abundance of this kind of stuff on some 60 internet newsgroups whose titles begin with ‘alt.sex.’ and literally thousands of privately run bulletin boards which pander to such horrors in the name of freedom of expression. One of the oldest and best known bulletin boards is the WELL, which was established by the founders of the hippie journal *Whole Earth Review* (formerly, *Co-Evolution Quarterly*). Here’s a subscriber to the ‘Well community’ giving his reasons for resigning his membership:

Racism, sexism, and pedophilia are alive and vigorously protected by the subscribers. ‘Jokes’ about sex with 3- and 8-year-old children are available to anyone who cares to log on the WELL—including your children. When I asked that such graffiti be placed in a less public conference, the outrage came in surprising salvos, including from Howard (Rheingold), who went on to discuss ‘First Amendment Rights’—and to leave the ‘jokes’ on-line, no restrictions. It was explained to me that, ‘after all, the material was labeled ‘Sick and Disgusting’—I had been warned. From his safely isolated keyboard another told me, ‘if you can’t take a joke then FUCK YOU!’ . . . I try to imagine what a battered woman or a victim of sexual abuse feels when such material scrolls into view. I prefer bigots face to face as opposed to some computer-hooded adolescent scribbling on cyberspace toilet walls.<sup>27</sup>

The problem is that the half of cyberspace which is not commercial is largely a toilet wall. On alt.sex.stories, for example, you can read stories about how infant girls have their nipples cut and throat slashed; tales of fathers sodomizing their baby daughters; mothers performing fellatio on their juvenile sons. Even in the less psychotic arena of the alt.sex colony, sex is just another blood sport, like killing Nazi Germans of *Doom* or shooting hostile aliens in *Daedalus Encounter*. It has nothing to do with intimacy, tenderness or any other human emotion. Just what is going on in the mind of the individual who wants to place

digitized sound samples of his sexual encounter on the Internet? Or what kind of humanity is embodied in a person who provides an informed description, on alt.sex. bestiality, of how to mount a horse:

If you are seducing strange horses you should bring them food. This is a good way to start a relationship . . . Standing behind a horse is safe if you are no farther than a foot from its rump. If the horse can move forward you might fall into kicking range, so try to tie it up or use a stall . . . No one should attempt vaginal or anal intercourse with a stallion unless they are experienced in fist fucking or have taken a dog in to the max . . .

There *are* a lot of these people on the Internet—all hyperventilating, hyperabusing, hyperself-abusing, sitting alone in front of their computer screens ‘chatting’ to people they have never met and are unlikely ever to meet, projecting their darker side on the hypertext world of cyberspace.

### **Give me nothing, or give me something else**

Hypertext is becoming the norm in cyberspace from ‘edutainment’ CD-ROMS like Microsoft’s *Ancient Lands* to tax-preparation programmes to the multimedia tours of DNA and Dinosaurs (as, for example, on the Field Museum of Natural History’s Home Page) on the World Wide Web. One can log on to the Web and cruise for hours, jumping from page to page, subject to subject, country to country, computer to computer—‘surfing’ the Net’ in a frenzied journey to nowhere. It is important to appreciate that surfing is the essential metaphor here: one does not stop anywhere one carries on at the speed of light. This is totally different from looking for information. When you need information you go directly to it; and if you do not know where it is you use a whole array of excellent tools on the Net that can take you where the information that you want resides. No, this is not about information retrieval; or learning; one can’t learn simply by perusing information, one learns by digesting it, reflecting on it, critically assimilating it; or indeed about education. It’s about boredom.

It is probably not recognized by anyone that boredom is a cultural phenomenon unique to Western culture (but now, unfortunately, being spread like a virus to non-

Western cultures). Bedouins, for example, can sit for hours in the desert, feeling the ripples of time, without being bored. Traditional societies know nothing of boredom. Traditional life is a goal-orientated existence where the goals are deeply embedded in the worldview of the tradition and have real meaning for those who imbibe the tradition. It is enriched by countless face-to-face, intimate relationships, based both on extended families and communal life; personal relationships in traditional societies tend to be shared, close, and intimate leading to a host of duties and responsibilities that give orientation and meaning to individual lives. In most Third World societies, individuals and communities are normally too busy trying to survive to be bored.

Boredom is a product of a culture where individual and communal goals have lost all their significance and meanings, where an individual’s attention span is no longer than a single frame in an MTV video—five seconds. In such a culture, one needs something different to do, something different to see, some new excitement and spectacle every other moment. Net surfing provides just that: the exhilaration of a joyride, the spectacle of visual and audio inputs, a relief from boredom and an illusion of God-like omniscience as an added extra.<sup>28</sup> But, of course, travel at such a high speed has a price. Hypertext generates hyperindividuals: rootless, without a real identity, perpetually looking for the next fix, hoping that the next page on the Web will take them to nirvana. The individual himself is reduced to hypertext: a code of information. And this process seems to be accelerating. The more we come to rely on computers, the more we use them for work, education, entertainment, communication, the more we become an extension of cyberspace. Our concerns are largely limited to discrete data or information at best. Knowledge in its true sense, let alone wisdom, never really enters the equation. We are constantly moving towards the left of the axis:

discrete data—information—knowledge—wisdom.

In the continuous tracking of cyberspace, the mind loses all sense of assimilation and synthesis as discrete data jumps out at us from one page to the next, from one hyper-

link to another, often without logical sequence. Human perception itself becomes discrete as we jump from page to page, here taking in a text, there listening to that sound, and over there looking at a video; everything occurring at the click of the mouse, with the speed of intuition. The individual's Self is reduced to discrete bits of binary code; our humanity is digested by cyberspace.

The loss of humanity is quite evident in how the rhetoric of cyberspace is being used to give new definitions to community and identity. Cyberspace, it is argued, will provide through electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do: connect us rather than atomize us. 'Cyberspace', says 'A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', 'will play an important role in knitting together the diverse communities of tomorrow, facilitating the creation of "electronic neighbourhoods" bound together not by geography but by shared interests'. Virtual communities, the mindnumbing cyberforecaster Howard Rheingold<sup>28</sup> announces, will bloom like wild flowers in the future; and every individual will be able to choose the community or communities they want to belong to. 'You want identity?', scream Usenet groups and countless bulletin boards. 'Select from the menu and sign on!'. 'Or start your own community! Create a new conference!'

Cyberspace, then, is the place to discover what has escaped Western man in mundane reality—community and identity, the two prerequisites for being human. Computer networks provide the ability to transcend geography, time zones and social status and develop relationships on 'forums' and 'newsgroups'. Conferences, online chats, bulletin boards are supposed to overcome the atomism of society and lead the individual to develop multiple bonds that urban life denies. For, out there in the real world, communities have broken down, social institutions lay derelict, family has come to mean a collection of atomized individuals thrown temporarily together by the accident of birth, cities are little more than alienating perpendicular tangles, inner cities resemble bombed sites and fear and loathing stalk the streets. But belonging and posting to a Usenet group, or logging on to a bulletin board community, confirms no more an identity than belonging to a stamp collecting club or a Morris dancing society.

And what responsibilities does an 'electronic neighbourhood' place on its members? Can one simply resign one's membership from a community! And, is identity simply a matter of which electronic newsgroup one belongs to? Communities are shaped by a sense of belonging to a place, a geographical location, by shared values, by common struggles, by tradition and history of a location—not by joining a group of people with common interests. On this logic, the accountants of the world will instantly be transformed into a community the moment they start a newsgroup: 'alt.accounts' (with 'alt.accounts. spreadsheets' constituting a sub-community!). John Gray:

We are who we are because of the places in which we grow up, the accents and friends we acquire by chance, the burdens we have not chosen but somehow learn to cope with. Real communities are always local—places in which people have put down roots and are willing to put up with the burdens of living together. The fantasy of virtual community is that we can enjoy the benefits of community without its burdens, without the daily effort to keep delicate human connections intact. Real communities can bear these burdens because they are embedded in particular places and evoke enduring loyalties. In cyberspace, however, there is nowhere that a sense of place can grow, and no way in which the solidarities that sustain human beings through difficult times can be forged.<sup>29</sup>

Real community creates context. It generates issues which arise with relations to time and space, history and contemporary circumstances, and require responsible judgment—which is why so many issues are difficult, they require balancing of opposing pressures. A cyberspace community is self-selecting, exactly what a real community is not; it is contingent and transient, depending on the shared interest of those with the attention span of a 30-second sound bite. The essence of real community is its presumptive perpetuity—you have to worry about other people because they will always be there. In a cyberspace community you can shut people off at the click of a mouse and go elsewhere. One therefore has no responsibility of any kind. Where community has come to mean not knowing that your old neighbour has died until this body begins to rot and driving for miles to go to a shopping mall for essential groceries,

cyberspace provides an easy simulation for the sweaty hard work required for building real communities. But virtual communities serve another purpose: they protect from the race and gender mix of real community, from the contamination of pluralism. Even when ethnic and race user groups establish themselves on the Internet, they are invisible, accessed only by others from the same backgrounds and interests. Thus the totalizing online character of cyberspace ensures that the marginalized stay marginalized: the external racism of Western society is echoed in cyberspace as online monoculture. Cyberspace provides an escape from the inescapable reality of diversity in the actual world. Moreover, it fulfils the desire of community by the neat trick of labelling users with communal tags. 'In the midst of desire', writes Joe Lockard, we sometimes function under the conceit that if we name an object after our desire, 'the object is what we name it. Hard-up men buy large blow-up figures of women and hump desperately, admiring the femininity of their "girlfriends" and groaning women's names over them. But whatever their imagination, it's rubberized plastic, not a woman. Likewise, cyberspace is to community as Rubber Rita is to woman'.<sup>30</sup> In fact, desire is being ideologically manipulated to endanger familiarity and acceptance of the hardware and software that goes to make cyberspace.

Let alone generate community, cyberspace does not even enhance communication. Listen to a newsgroup or a bulletin board conference: are people *talking* to each other, is there real communication that transforms both the sender and the recipient: what sorts of relationships are really being forged? Is it 'discussion', or is it people shouting at each other across a crowded bazaar, or simply gang warfare?<sup>31</sup> Everyone on the newsgroups or bulletin boards seems to be looking for something or someone—a particular bit of information, clients, files, 'how do I do that?', or, much more frequently, for 'hot' sex—'are there any girls on this thing?' When they are not looking for something, correspondents are usually abusing each other; even serious, research-orientated newsgroups appear to be burning with 'flame' (abuse) wars. This is hardly surprising: how is it possible for people who can't even say hello to each other as the door shuts on an elevator begin

to discuss the meaning of life over a modem with complete strangers. Just what is going on in terms of the very best in electronic communication is represented in Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen's *Imagologies*,<sup>32</sup> which comes complete with glowing recommendations from the high and mighty of cyber- and other intellectual spaces. A sample: 'creates new ideas and vocabulary', says the virtual reality pioneer, Jaron Lanier; a 'profound and prescient book', declares Cernel West, the black scholar and activist; 'if you want to get a headstart on the 21st century, *Imagologies* is required reading', announces Terry Semel, President of Warner Brothers. Taylor and Saarinen claim that they wrote their book 'for an age in which people do not have the time to write or read books' (presumably because they are too busy flaming each other on the Internet) via e-mail between the USA and Finland. Their aim is to produce a new form of 'media philosophy' for the postmodern age. The book thus has no logical structure, it simply strings together musings and reflections on such topics as style, speed, virtuality, cyborgs, pedagogies and other concerns of cyberfreaks in haphazard and panicky manner. We are treated to such gems of wisdom as 'in simcult, excess becomes excessive'; 'the play of surfaces exposes depth as another surface'; 'the televisual reflects the presence of absence that is the absence of presence', 'reality is only skin deep', 'electricity is an occult force that is the light of the world'; and 'philosophy lacks the courage to be superficial'. This is what two serious analytical philosophers were communicating to each other via e-mail for God's sake! One-liners, sub-Forest Gump textual debris, amounting to some 300 pages, all in the pretence of inventing a new paradigm for cyberspace communication. One gets better graffiti at the public convenience in London's Oxford Street! Is it really possible to believe that communities could grow out of such breathtaking banality? To a more discerning eye, 'electronic communities' that exist on the Internet consist of millions of isolated, insatiable, individual desires feeding blindly on each other's dismal projections.

Apart from promoting community, cyberspace is also projected as a panacea for most of our political problems. All the problems of representative democracy are going to be solved, we are told, when

everyone gets online and starts voting on everything.<sup>33</sup> In cyber-led society, citizens will not only be better informed but will also be able to sidestep varieties of pressure groups to participate directly in decision making. For Democrat Vice-President Al Gore, the information superhighway is required 'to promote, to protect and to preserve freedom and democracy'. Speaker of the House, the arch-Republican Newt Gingrich, sees in cyberspace the beginnings of a 'virtual Congress' in which power is transferred electronically 'towards the citizens out of the Washington Beltway'.<sup>34</sup> 'A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age' also presents a vision of cyberspace, 'the latest American frontier': it will empower American people through unhindered access to information. The problem with this vision is that it does not actually change the system which in fact constitutes *the* problem—it simply places its faith in information technology to make the system run more smoothly. Most democratically elected governments do what they, often ideologically, have decided to do. If cyberdemocracy could get governments to change their minds, if 'push-button voting' in 'electronic townhalls'—to use the terms of Ross Perot—could force elected representatives to listen to their constituencies, then opinion polls would be just as effective. The Western democracies are not lacking public feedback; what people lack is faith in politics, politicians and political institutions. Would electronic democracy make politicians more upright, more moral, more conscientious, more responsible? Would cyberdemocracy make the Pentagon more open and accountable to public? Would CIA operations be open to public scrutiny? What electronic democracy offers is more of the same: more instantaneously mushrooming pressure groups, more fragmented politics, more corrupt public life. As *Time* magazine notes:

Some of the information technologies that so pervade Washington life have not only failed to cure America's ills but actually seem to have made them worse. Intensely felt public opinion leads to the impulsive passage of dubious laws; and meanwhile, the same force fosters the gridlock that keeps the nation from balancing its budget, among other things, as a host of groups clamour to protect their benefits. In both cases, the problem is that the emerging cyber-democracy amounts to a kind of 'hyper-democracy': a nation that, contrary to all Beltway-related stereotypes,

is thoroughly plugged in to Washington—too plugged in for its own good.<sup>35</sup>

Citizens become no more responsible simply because they give instant opinion through cyberspace than when they decide to join a lynch mob. Cyberdemocracy is lynch law. It fosters the delusion of the frontier that you can get the laws you want—but laws are not products of individual clamour but of collective and consultative acts that have to reflect the balance of the community. To be humane, just and protective of all segments of society, laws need the context of discussion, information and testing against the needs of all—the very things you cannot get from an instant reflex in cyberspace. Instant decision by cyberpolls obviates the need to understand and consider, thereby taking us further and further on the march from knowledge and wisdom.

The romantic, liberating notion of information technologies draws our attention away from its more real potential: to enslave us in its totality. Beyond the rapture of free access to unlimited information and the dream of controlling all human knowledge, lies the reciprocal threat of total organization. All newsgroups, bulletin boards, Web pages—well, everything in cyberspace—are managed by invisible system operators (sysops) who ensure that the system runs smoothly and who hold unrestricted power to deny entry, cut, delete or censor any communication, and who observe all that is going on their system. On bigger networks, Big Sysops can not only monitor what is going on but also have the ability to intercept communications, read them and reroute them in different directions. Private e-mail is not really all that private! Those who control the system, economically, technically and politically, have access to everything on the system. Absolute Sysop holds infinite invisible power. Underneath the fabricated tranquility of cyberspace lies the possibility of surveillance by the all-knowing, all-seeing, central network system operator. Who can handle so much power without being corrupted? The monopolistic tendencies of those who control cyberspace reflect the ethos of the East India Companies. Just like the imperial companies, the access providers, like Sprint and Pacific Bell, are monopolies licensed by central government with the mandate to chart new territories

and are working to promote a particular worldview. And just like the companies, the access providers seek total dominion over the 'new world'. Soon, 'common carriage', the public-policy means by which free-speech principles are safeguarded, may not be all that common: privately owned carriers are not too concerned about free speech<sup>36</sup>—just as imperial companies were not too concerned about the rights of those they colonized. We are thus set to move from the physical colonization of the Other to virtual colonization of everything by virtual capitalism. Virtual capitalism is not just about profitability, it is about cynical power: *vide* Microsoft's Bill Gates' megalomaniac obsession with absolute power.<sup>37</sup> Virtual colonization is the new dimension of European colonialism: 'a reinvigorated recolonization of planetary reality that reduces human and non-human matter to a spreading wake of a cosmic dust-trail in the deepest space of the blazing comet of virtual capitalism'.<sup>38</sup> One of the worst nightmares of *Wired* foretells of a possible future to come:

Redmond, Wash., Noon: Jan. 20, 2001 (Via *Microsoft Network*)—During swearing-in ceremonies held today on the step of Whitehouse 97 (formerly building # 9), Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates shocked the business world by announcing a hostile takeover of every company listed on the New York and Nasdaq stock exchanges minutes before taking the oath of office as 44th president of the United States.<sup>39</sup>

### Suicidal twin kills brother by mistake

If cyberspace is the newly discovered Other of Western civilization, then its colonization would not be complete without the projection of Western man's repressed sexuality and spiritual yearning on the 'new continent'. The notion of 'free cyberspace' is nothing more than the 'virgin land' concept of the original explorers of the New World. In the days of the Empire, the colonies provided the White man with an arena to live out its wildest sexual fantasies, unrestrained and uncontrolled by the modes of European social behaviour. These fantasies were projected on the natives themselves, in for example, numerous colonial fictional and travel narratives, and generated, in the words of Rana Kabbani, a 'sense of reality in the midst of un-

reality'.<sup>40</sup> The first pictorial representations of America are of a passive female virgin figure! Eastern mysticism had an equal seductiveness—it provided an answer to arid Christianity and Western man's spiritual angst. Cyberspace provides both: an arena for the projection of erotic fantasies as well as a gnostic trip.

The potential for sexual union and spiritual high is best manifested in virtual reality (VR) technologies. Virtual reality is nothing more than computer-generated, three-dimensional, simulated worlds in which individuals, geared up with suitable apparatus, can project themselves, move around, and interact directly by means of the senses. Virtual reality is a product of the collective consciousness of Western culture: it has its roots in the military, space programme, computer industry, science fiction, the arts, cyberpunk and computer hacker culture. The counterculture played a major part in its evolution and embraced it as its own; during the 1980s, cyberpunk magazine *Mondo 2000* became the main platform for VR. The old-hippy-acid gurus, like Timothy Leary, see VR as a new form of electronic LSD. Jaron Lanier (he who provided zealous endorsement for the dumbfoundly ignorant and crude tome, *Imagologies*), sees VR as the answer to 'the American stupor' or moral and spiritual crisis of Western civilization; 'Virtual reality is the first medium to come along which doesn't narrow the human spirit' and 'all you can do is be creative in Virtual Reality', he declares.<sup>41</sup> A blind man leading so many blind moths towards a lamp that gives no light!

What we are actually being sold, by cyberpunks, the computer and entertainment industry, magazines like *Wired* and mindless hype of books like *Being Digital*,<sup>42</sup> is a designer techno utopia. And it is a utopia that delivers what capitalism has always promised: a world where everything is nothing more than the total embodiment of one's reflected desires. When morality and politics become meaningless, when social, cultural and environmental problems seem totally insurmountable, when injustices and oppression in actual reality become unbearable, then the seduction of the magical power of technology becomes all embracing. Cyberpunks are latter-day utopians, the counterpart of Sir Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Tommaso Campa-

nella and other European utopians who cannibalized the ideas and cultures of the 'New Worlds' to construct their redeeming fantasies. As a subculture, the merging of bohemia with information technology, cyberpunk first appeared in the 1980s; it is basically a mutant of the drug and hippie culture of the 1960s. Just as classical utopians envisaged that the encounter with the people of the new worlds could produce a better society in Europe, cyberpunks believe that virtual reality would lead us to a better human understanding. And just as 16th and 17th-century utopians saw the indigenous communities of America and elsewhere as a source for discovering new styles of communal living, the cyberpunks see virtual reality as a new well of social awareness, freedom, love and spiritual enlightenment. From reshaping the realities of Others to suit the European man, we move to a new form of technological utopianism geared to shaping the reality inside a computer.

The fascination with virtual reality is not simply functional or even aesthetic; it is, for the want of a better word, tantric. In the first instance it is purely carnal; but beyond that virtual reality holds the promise of magical sex leading to mystical rapture. Western society has always considered the body to be little more than a machine, so it is hardly surprising that it is so ready to extend its limitations by merging it with other machines. When reality becomes indistinguishable from binary code in virtual reality, then even sex and mysticism are reduced to binary communication. After all, what is sex? A simple exchange of signal blips between two genetic machines! And what is mysticism? The dance of binary code in virtual space:

Two men are staring into a computer screen at Apple's research and development branch. While the first, a computer nerd straight out of Central Casting, mans the keyboard, beside him sits the other, John Barlow, lyricist for the Grateful Dead, psychedelics explorer, and Wyoming rancher. They watch the colourful paisley patterns representing fractal equations swirl like the aftervisions of a psychedelic hallucination, tiny Martian colonies forming on an eerie continental coastline. The computer operator magnifies one tiny piece of the pattern, and the detail expands to occupy the entire screen. Dancing microorganisms cling to a blue coral reef. The new patterns reflect the shape of the original picture. He zooms in again and the shapes are

seen again and again. A supernova explodes into weather system, then spirals back down to the pods on the leaf of a fern plant. The two men witness the creation and recreation of universes. Barlow scratches his whiskers and tips his cowboy hat. 'It's like looking at the mind of God'. The nerd corrects him: 'it is the mind of God'.<sup>43</sup>

The mysticism of the Mandelbrot sets are perplexed wonders for those who have lost all connection with the natural world and spirituality, who are used to thinking of the world as a machine and have no idea of the function of a soul. The tantric dimension of cyberspace in well captured by William Gibson, who first described the term cyberspace as a 'consensual hallucination', in his seminal novel, *Neuromancer*.<sup>44</sup> Case, the burnt-out, suicidal protagonist of the novel, has an intense relationship with cyberspace. For him, it is a place of ecstasy and sexual intensity, of uncontrollable desire and total submission. Ordinary experience is boring and artificial by comparison. He despairs at not being able to get back into cyberspace, of being trapped in the meat that was his body, it would amount to the Fall. Again and again, the computer wizard is obsessively driven back to the information network. He desires nothing less than to become one with cyberspace.

In direct opposition to non-Western cultures, which enhance body awareness by directing the mind towards the body in such systems as Tai Chi, Yoga, Tantra and acupuncture, Western culture seeks liberation from the body by dissolving into the machine. To escape his utter loneliness, his inability to relate meaningfully to nature or other cultures, even his own society, Western man seek union with the only thing that he sees as redemptive—technology. Postmodern relativism provides no other root for escape. Only total dissolution in his own products, in the will of his technology, can bring relief from his all-embracing solitude. This is like *fana*—the total annihilation of one's Ego and Self in the Will of God. 'Who are you?', they asked the Muslim Sufi al-Hallaj, when he reached the state of *fana*. 'I am the Truth', he replied. For Western man the Truth lies in the projections of his desires that shapes his technology and constitutes cyberspace. Whereas al-Hallaj sought liberation from desire, the Western man seeks enslavement to desire; whereas Western man seeks

release from tradition, disciplined experiential knowledge and pursues short-cuts to nirvana via drugs, borrowed gnosis and redemptive technology, al-Hallaj laboured long and hard, within tradition and disciplined experiential inquiry to reach his desired goal; whereas al-Hallaj sought annihilation of his Self in a higher Being, Western man wants experiential knowledge and hence salvation through his own gadgets. Just as Western man seeks community without the burdens of belonging ('community at zero cost'), instant identity without the confinements of tradition or history, and spiritual enlightenment without the troublesome bother of believing in anything higher than himself or his technology, he seeks sex without responsibility. The quest for absolute freedom, without any responsibilities, duties or burdens is central to Western man's being. Cybersex promises intimacy without the necessity or even desirability of giving to another. It's a one-way street: in cyberspace you enter the simulacrum of your desires, you feel what she (it?) feels, she is yours but you don't belong to her, while she is your puppet you are totally free. Cybersex CD-ROMs, like *Virtual Valerie*, already offer this scenario. Soon there will be full-scale interactive movies offering totally immersive experiences. One potential of virtual reality is that it could make actors totally redundant; if virtual images of a herd of dinosaurs can be made to stampede across a movie screen, what barriers are there to synthesizing human actors digitally as well? When the actor Brandon Lee died during the shooting of *The Crow*, the producers continued with the picture by pasting digitized images of the actor into unfinished scenes. In *In the Line of Fire*, digital sequences of Clint Eastwood (playing a CIA agent trying to protect the president) were pasted on to old newsreel of a George Bush motorcade; in *Forest Gump*, Tom Hanks pops up digitally in a whole range of historical footage. Not just that real actors can be replaced with their virtual counterparts, but the movie itself can become an interactive experience. Interactive games like *Under the Killing Moon*, which combine live and digitized action show the future possibilities. Within a decade, one will be able to shoot/dine/sleep with Julia Roberts and/or Sylvester Stallone and have virtual reality software that allows you to

design your own mate and have your own way with her any way you wish.

Beyond that lies the possibility of a whole new breed of 'human': in the first instance it will be more like *Digital Man* than *Hologram Man*. Once the processor circuitry miniaturizes enough, it could be put inside a tiny rice-shaped piece of bio-compatible material and placed under the skin. This is happening now to identify lost cats and dogs. Soon, criminals may be tagged like that. Then children—so that those kidnapped can be traced. Then everyone. In less than a decade, nanotechnology will make it possible for micro-machines to be connected directly to our body tissues, even to our brains—and cyborgs, 'the ultimate transhuman, who can choose the design, form, and substance of his/her own body', will walk the earth.<sup>45</sup> But holographic man is not too far, either. Real-time holographic videos of full-colour, shaded images, which float freely in space have already been developed: 'about the size and shade of a teacup or a dumpy-looking Princess Leia'.<sup>46</sup> In less than 20 years, Princess Leia will grow up into a fully developed hologram person.

As they enter the virtual reality of cyberspace and become a mere extension of the machine, what still continues to be human about humans? What humanity is there in a digitalized tantric trance? How dispensable is the human in cyberspace? As the Sufi agitator and anarchist guru, Hakim Bay, argues, information-induced 'gnostic Trace accumulates very gradually (like mercury poisoning) till eventually it turns pathological'.<sup>47</sup> What emerges out of virtual reality is Slash Gallagher, a hologram without a body, a disturbed mind trapped in an agitated soul. Cyberspace is not a new, unknown territory; it is an artificial creation where the creator(s) and the computer already know everything—every nook and cranny, every secret behind every door. 'Remove the hidden recesses, the lure of the unknown', writes Michael Heim, 'and you also destroy the erotic urge to uncover and reach further; you destroy the source of yearning. Set up a synthetic reality, place yourself in a computer-simulated environment, and you undermine the human craving to penetrate what radically eludes you, what is novel and unpredictable. The computer God's-eye view robs you of your freedom to be fully



human'.<sup>48</sup>

### Friends, what country is this?

The digital quest for absolute freedom ends with information, the strings of ones and zeros, taking the form of physical entity. But the personal and social relationships engendered by this entity have already been engineered by those who make the machine that makes information so palpable and those who write the software that gives it its physical attributes. Cyberspace is social engineering of the worst kind. Those who have made cyberspace inevitable have shaped its datascape with their subconscious perceptions and prejudices, conscious fantasies and fears—all of them pulled out from the dark well of colonial projections. The frontier, as Frederick Jackson Turner recast it in a series of writing dating from 1893,<sup>49</sup> was merely a trick of the light to make people perceive similarity and continuity as development and change, the declension that they had indeed a new identity. Turner's raw material was the same substance that Cristobal Colon brought to the New World, Vasco de Gama took to the East, and various colonial corporations took to India and South East Asia. The goal of getting to India and fulfilling Colon's dream was a notion alive in the minds of the founding fathers of the American Republic. The frontier was a merchant venture, just like the opening of the New World, and now cyberspace. But this venture cannot be envisioned without the context of an ideology and the mechanism of control. These, whether it be 'discovery' of the New World, the spice empires, settling the American West, or cyberspace are all the same: White supremacism, the West as the yardstick of civilization, the divine right stuff and military force—from armed galleons to the Seventh Cavalry to the armed citizenry with their right to bear arms and vote through the computer terminal. The supposed democracy of cyberspace only hands control more effectively back to a centralized elite, the ideology of the free citizen making everyone oblivious to the more enduring deep structures of control. Decentralized domination solves two problems simultaneously: it makes the new territory manageable and submissive to the structures of control while keeping the

citizens happy giving them a sense of their importance as they are being used. Thus the mythic notion of the frontier is constructed to bring the past into an organized, re-interpreted unity whose main function is to give a new interpretative emphasis to desired aspects of how the dominated territory is to be controlled in the future and establish that 'progress' has been achieved.

William Gibson describes cyberspace as 'an infinite cage'.<sup>50</sup> The cage is the contours of the colonial history within which the darker side of the West is given an infinite reign. Manufacturing fantasies that provide escape from the injustices of the mundane world is so much easier than dealing directly with real people, with real lives, real histories and real emotions, living in their own non-programmed, real communities. Under colonialism, these fantasies framed and controlled non-Western cultures of the world. In the new colony of cyberspace, they bounce right back to surround Western man in the darkness of his own projections. Cyberspace, with its techno-utopian ideology, is an instrument for distracting the Western society from its increasing spiritual poverty, utter meaninglessness and grinding misery and inhumanity of everyday lives.

Prepare for holographic Slashers to break out of 'alt.sex.stories' and stalk the earth!

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