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Ken Hillis has written an wise interrogation of the impact of virtual environments and the marriage of new digital and visual technologies. Carefully balancing between the dangers of all-too-common and too-easy scepticism and the risk of being seduced by the new medium, this book analyses the manner in which the use of technologies to produce virtual environments (VEs) changes the bases on which assumptions concerning democratic politics and identity flourish. By first marshalling the historical lessons of earlier technological changes affecting the paradigms of sight - the pinhole camera, microscope, and cinema - he is able to present a reasoned critique of the assumptions behind VR and VEs, the required suspension of disbelief in virtual environments, and to reveal the relation of people to the new virtual worlds which promise a manufactured freedom. His analysis goes beyond these assemblages to include technologies of sight, including Renaissance perspective, the panorama, and the moving screen convention of cinema.

These are related in turn to techniques of embodiment by which subjects are positioned in relation to, or as part of, the representations which constitute virtual environments. Hillis focuses on the privileging of the visual within VR technologies, and demonstrates that the most important ethical debates about these technologies are not about hardware but about social relations that come into existence around and through them. They include not just immersive virtual environments (for which illustrations are provided) but also the more mundane computer interfaces (the ‘windows’ of games and the computer-animated films) in which visual and digital technologies are brought together.

The ambition of this text to present ‘a form of criticism which generates theory’ (p.xxxxvi), moves it far beyond mere documentary. Indeed, the author manages a critique of most of the preceding theories of cyberspace for their naive acceptance of the terms on which technology has been developed and the language and metaphors by which it has been described. Hillis takes pains to clarify for the reader the reasons for his selection of examples of use, historical cases, and areas of impact. Because he is not only discussing VR technology, but also other, earlier, visual technologies, the status of the body, environmental perception, spatialisation and social relationships made through visual media, the book stands apart from many of the more general texts on computer-generated environments and computer-mediated communication.

Over several chapters Hillis concentrates on the relationship between vision and light, between sight and space. Tracing the sight line connecting seeing subject and object, he examines the spatialisation of human relationships with themselves and with alterity. The privileging of a distance bridged only by sight establishes the borders of subjective interiority, what Elias (1968)
refers to as a conceptual distance which imposes an ‘invisible wall’ between thought (or emotion) and action. This peculiarly ‘Western’ critical distance cuts people off from complete spontaneity, for better or worse. Hillis argues that this spatialisation of subject and object is fundamental to Western metaphysics; ‘the sense of moving forward contained in the notion of progress, itself a visually dependent spatial overlay onto time, together with sight’s particular construction of distance, prods the subject to link up with the object of vision, with the “other,” which must nevertheless continue to maintain its (visual) distance from the subject. The separate identity of the object also depends on its dialectical position at the other end of the sight line that must never disappear or stop being maintained’ (p.103). Immersive environments, ‘are an attempt to supersede the modern constraints imposed by this distance or “wall” between the subject and object’ by allowing the illusion of direct engagement in a scenario, even while perpetuating this alienation (p.105) in the repression of the sensual ‘motility’ of the body - touch, body motion and vision - in favour of sight alone (cf. Jonas 1982:152 cited p.116). Hillis dubs this a contemporary form of ‘optical unconsciousness’ (cf. Benjamin 1979).

The proffered virtual spaces are examined as interiorized spaces of truth-seeking in which vision is unhampered by distance. Boundaries between sacred and profane are collapsed in a carnivalesque. Hillis sceptically probes the parallels with Bakhtin’s metaphor of the medieval marketplace, of which he is critical: a site of social interaction in which those otherwise separated by caste, class and urban-rural divisions supposedly encounter one and other in an almost presocial manner. First from the face-to-face world of speech into the novel, thence into other media, this text argues that ‘The disappearance of the polis as a site for political performance in favour of the creation through technology of a mediated public sphere that corresponds to the “public square” [that] it appears to render antique is a victory of applied technology over politics.’ VE technologies substitute for the engagement and presence required of earlier fleshy collectives. ‘Equating public performances with their representations—without giving sufficient attention to the ownership of access and commodity forms [icons, avatars, etc.] that users must adopt— ...obscures a process whereby aspects of user’s independent agency are given over to forces controlling the technology’ (p.153, 153-4).

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References

Books Received


