

Meta-Visual Spaces: Visualization of the Invisible

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*When we use the term place to describe the virtual or when
virtual and reality are combined as if there is an empirical
configuration into which the experience of viewing is meant to fit,
what do we mean?*

*Is this "place" in the final analysis nothing but an image?
or have we, in Baudrillard's sense, arrived at a point where the
distinctions of image and place, image and self, are irrelevant?*

Ron Burnett (71)

Until a few years ago computers lacked a graphic interface. This lack made software invisible to some extent. As long as software remained invisible and unvisualizable, the use of the computer was fetishized and idealized. I would like to remind you what a computer screen was like in MS-Dos text mode, with a command asking the computer to do something (image 1). When the user typed the command and pressed *Enter*, she could not but *believe* that 'her' command had been executed. As long as computers used text mode, the average user should *believe in* her computer and not *trust* her machine.

The need of the non-technically oriented users to secularize computer usage and make it less a matter of *belief* and *faith* and mostly a tangible fact, was met by the introduction of Graphic User Interfaces (GUIs). Of course, in our civilization a fact is never *tangible*: a fact is always *visible*. A new state of events came forth: in text mode a non-technically oriented user could not understand what a hard disk was—except, of course, for the "tangible" metallic box she could hold in her hands. As long as this remained true, the fact that this box could "hold" data was a matter of metaphysical belief. But along with *Windows* (and probably other GUIs) came a program called disk defragmenter: a program based on a spatial metaphor assigning dimensions to data and presenting them as occupying a two-dimensional space on the disk surface. This metaphor was visualized and was accompanied by legends, like a map (image 2).

Let us take a step further. Not only what is called Human Computer Interaction (HCI), but also electronic networks and Computer Mediated Commu-

nication (CMC) have set up metaphysically charged situations which—in my opinion—construct a wider *experience of virtuality*, an experience of being online or, as N. Negroponte put it, an experience of “being digital”.

Facing this new experience of “being digital” and trying to articulate it, both scientists and users turned to metaphors. Most of us are acquainted with these metaphors and rarely ask about their metaphorical substance, as well as about their ideological charge, or—so to say—their metaphysical connotations. To name the most common metaphors, we should mention *information (super) highway, home page, digital city, digital library, electronic labyrinth* etc. All these metaphors bring along a kind of mental visualization, which makes our experience visualizable and meaningful.

At this point one should remember that metaphors are in fact metaphorical structures. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proved in their *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), metaphorical structures have certain properties: they are *systematic*, they either *highlight* or *hide*, they *orientate*, they are *culturally coherent*, they have *ontological aspects* and they *personify* reality. In this way, a metaphorical structure literally constructs a “virtual” world *in the place* of the “real” one—if this distinction between the real and the virtual still holds.

As long as metaphorical images remain mental, their structure is mostly rhetorical and one should employ a verbal analysis to re-construct them, realize their systematicity and undermine them—if one should undermine them and attempt to impose the “correct” metaphors, as sometimes has been proposed (*cf.* Stefik, 1997). It is interesting to follow how this metaphorical system works its way out to produce also visual—in fact *meta-visual*—representations of what we call (metaphorically) *cyberspace* or virtual reality. Once people construct mental images of cyberspace, they start to proceed to second-level visualizations or, what we shall call *meta-visualizations*. I will take as a starting point some cover-pages of technical and scientific or fiction books about cyber-reality. I could use science fiction films or even snapshots from home-pages that produce the same kind of secondary level visualizations.

Even browsing the cover-pages in the virtual shelves of an electronic bookstore would prove that there is a certain trend for literal visualization of *hyper-reality*, as long as the network with all the servers, the personal computers and the cables seems to hover winding around the globe. This image is familiar, at least in Greek popular imagery, as some saints of the 19th and early 20th centuries are said to have predicted that “one day, a cable will wind around the earth”. This image is slowly but steadily pushing forward the idea of the existence of a new crust, surrounding what we considered as the earth’s crust, transforming this former crust to a core, constantly shrinking in order to become the nucleus of a microcosm (images 3-7).

In the framework of this global shrinking, the foundations of highways are now supposed to be on the Euclidean *point* outside the earth, in *hyper-space*, surrounding the globe and giving the impression of an extension, an exit from the suffocating confinement to the narrow surface of the planet (images 8-10).

One should not forget that from the beginning, imagery concerning the Net attempted to awaken the remembrance of the great journeys, such as discovering America, that opened up space and broke open the suffocating confinement felt in Europe.

Netscape has used up all symbols of the journey over the sea, promoting the systematicity of the metaphor: with its software converting surfers to Navigators, the famous navigators who knew the difficulties of sea-traveling, instilling in the users the feeling that they are holding the helm-trade mark in a discovery journey. Without a definite purpose, perhaps, but definitely heading towards a new continent hidden behind the ocean. And then, Netscape promoted Navigators to Commanders. The appropriation of the metaphor, along with its naturalization through images, brought its software to the fore among similar program packages (images 11-15).

Microsoft soon understood that the Net was the market of the future, and became aware that the stake was not browser software but server software. And, of course, Microsoft did not only produce its own package, but also *its own metaphor*: the package was *Internet Explorer*. Instead of the sea-journey, Microsoft proposed the metaphor of land-exploring. Instead of the journey of Columbus, Microsoft proposed the exploration of Africa. The success of this new metaphor, based on associational elements similar to those of Netscape's metaphor, brought Microsoft in close competition with its opponents (image 16).

Similar is the way another metaphor is visualized, and another meta-visual space is constructed, based on a shared experience: the metaphor of the *electronic labyrinth*. One may consider that cyberspace, as an informational environment of cosmic or universal dimensions, is a kind of Labyrinth "of unknown size", "without a center or exit point" (Burnett 67). This environment may at first seem threatening: a structure that overcomes persons; a dangerous meeting with the monstrous; the inevitable virtuality which appears to be more definite than reality. But labyrinth has also its own charm. It is a game of mirrors, as ancient as the most primordial fears: the labyrinth—the geography of the chaotic—paradoxically introduces *order* and *classification* at the very moment that it appears to be the abolition of any pre-existing classification system, obstructing *orientation*.

To describe this labyrinth, most writers call upon ancient cosmologies. According to Ron Burnett, we know that the labyrinth is *finite*, that the labyrinth has *borders*, but still "it seems as if an *infinite* number of things could go on within its hallways and rooms" (68). The *infinite* confined by the *finite* is a contradiction. But we have been acquainted with this contradiction in theological thought. This mention of theology is not accidental. It aims at exploring the ascertainment that "we do not know the designers" of the labyrinth (Burnett 68). (It could be such a plural team that results in seeming impersonal. It could even be true that there has been no such person as Daedalus.¹ There is, though, a *Daedalus-function*: in the labyrinthine structure—which we discover, or even invent,² in order to stand the labyrinth—we realize the existence of a purpose.

Our way—personal or joint—; our meetings in the *carrefours du labyrinthe* (the crossroads of the labyrinth); the distant voices that fade away: all these “bear witness” to the fact that *the labyrinth is limited* and that, even if there is no architect, the structure is still an architect’s labor serving some purpose. The nodal point in this concept of labyrinth is not *choice*, but the *possibility* of choice and—even more—the *multiplicity* of possibility, possibility *ad infinitum*.

The Labyrinth is the place for a host of computer games, like *Pacman* (image 17). In this game, the labyrinth is fixed in dimensions and form. The user has a total surveillance of the place, where Pacman and four ghosts move around. The ghosts are trying to trap Pacman and eat him (or ‘her’ in *Mrs Pacman*). On the other hand, Pacman, a kind of voracious mouth, devours anything. Four “vitamins” in the four corners of the labyrinth transform him temporarily from prey to hunter. An ancient rule of hunting holds true here: the hunter has to control his instinctive disposition to hunt (*cf.* Vernant 19), in his limited time, all the ghosts. If he can’t, they will trap him and he will surrender the moment that the roles change again.

By the time Pacman has eaten anything, the game pauses for a moment, and then starts again, in the same hallways, with the same opponents, over and over again until his “lives” are spent. By default, the ghosts will finally win. The virtuosity of the user can only prolong the game. His temporary victories, his pass to next “levels”, only postpone his final defeat.

Pacman is alone in the labyrinth. He will never meet fellow-travelers. Even in versions with a kind of *exit*, this is only a door *opening to the inside*: Pacman exits from one side only to enter from the other. *A Labyrinth is the inescapable place par excellence.*

One might detect the same pattern in several games. I should even suggest that games which do not visually reproduce the image of the labyrinth, and use open spaces, e.g. sky (Flight Simulators) or space (games dealing with the invasion of alien creatures) are structurally connected to the labyrinthine model. Gamers are forced to choose among their enemies all the time, to confront and eliminate them one by one. Enemies are finite, even if they are many, but they become infinite, as there will be more of them, faster and smarter, in the next “level”. Gamers are doomed. Their capacity can only prolong the game and give them time to eliminate more enemies, so that they will receive a glorious virtual death.

In the games of this category the labyrinth is structured at any time by *the moves of the gamer on the screen*. So, one could suggest that PC-games images, repeat and widen the mental images, constructing—at a second time—the “material background” that will naturalize metaphors, by consolidating them.

In conclusion: the metaphors we have used in order to understand our new experience, are gradually constructing a series of visualizations with a purely symbolic value. These visualizations, though, reconstruct the reception of basic values and concepts of western civilization, such as *presence*, along with its socio-political connotations; the *body*; *time* and *space*. These visualizations also produce

a series of meta-visual spaces constructed by manipulated (and heavily connotated) visual signs. After all, this is the essence of “virtual reality”: a constructed (i.e.: meta-visual) visualization of a non-existing space, of a concept or a metaphor that strives to become true.

Notes

1. “Of course, the myth meant something important when presented Labyrinth as the work of Daedalus, a human being” (Castoriadis 8).
2. We invent, since thought is always the entrance to the Labyrinth. As Cornelius Castoriadis put it, we think “means we enter the Labyrinth. More precisely, we make a Labyrinth to be and to appear, whilst we could have been ‘laying on the flowers, gazing the sky’ (Rilke). It means that we get lost in the hallways that exist only because we ourselves dig them tirelessly. It means that we turn round and round in the edge of a dead end while the entrance has closed behind our steps—until this rotation will incomprehensibly open passable paths to the inner wall” (Castoriadis 8).

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