REDEMPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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"Today it would be no exaggeration to say that, 'Whenever a people can be mediatized, they are!' This being the case, we should be looking at the industrialization and massive commercialization of our communication tools as much as at the proliferation of our nuclear arms—and their joint race for ubiquity and instantaneity. "
Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*[1]

"And myth is always against history"
Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*[2]

It was sometime in the mid-seventies at a screening of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* the first major epic by Steven Spielberg, the baby-boom's Cecil B. deMille. It was during that last interminable scene, the one where the aliens come down in their glorious spaceship-city to return their specimens and pick up a group of encounternauts. The film had already given plenty of clues: the roiling skies reminiscent of the parting-of-the-Red-Sea scene in *The Ten Commandments,* the faith of Richard Dreyfuss' Everyman resisting the doubt of family and philistine authorities, the blinding encounter of man and alien at the level crossing like the revelation of St. Paul. But it was the last scene, with the uplifted faces and the uplifting music, with the Sistine touch of mortal and extraterrestrial repeated in *E.T.,* that cinched it. Here is presented a post-Judeo-Christian redemptive myth couched in the classic glitz of Hollywood's finest. The skies part, the deliverance-machine descends. Even the ultimate Euro-humanist François Truffaut, cast as the scientist-visionary, is elevated. Salvation crackles in the ionized air. All is made right.
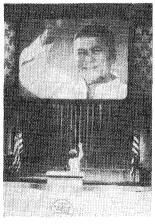
With this film and its juxtaposition of glittering technology and ersatz enlightenment, a new signifying order is offered to replace the belief systems so badly tarnished by the sixties and the two hundred years that led up to them: by the fall of what Friedrich Meineke refers to as "natural law,"[3] by post-Enlightenment class turmoil and the related failure of conventional teleologies by the end of the nineteenth-century under the inquisition of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Einstein, et al., by the collapse of Modernism and its utopian promises, by the assault on the New Deal and radical Socialist experiments world-wide, by the stalling of the V8-powered surge of American imperial enterprise and by the breakdown of faith in nation and morality implicit in the revolutions and trauma of the Vietnam-War era.

In that cinematic medium in which America now couches its values and in an era where the holy epic was no longer producing market-share, Hollywood presented a new transcendence and new possibility of renewal. The aliens, and their superior technology, drop like the City of God on the face of the troubled planet. The format of *The Greatest Story Ever Told,* or *The Robe,* or *Ben Hur,* of all the stentorian Biblical epics that had fueled the cultural hyper-drive of the fifties and early sixties, was redirected toward the lost souls of the disco-dismay seventies. Here was something to carry us away, a heady mixture of overwhelmingly competent technology and truly alien energy, for, though the concept of immigration has become increasingly problematic for Americans, the melting-pot has always relied on alien energy and here was a safe and benevolent variety.

This is quite a different image than that presented by Kubrick in *2001: a Space Odyssey.* There the phenomena are still primarily occult, the message still conventionally spiritual. The astronaut enabled by the primitive resonating monolith, threatened by the bad-guy computer, reaches a mid-space nirvana, becoming the cosmic fetus, dominating the heavens and gazing back at the earth as if that sphere we nothing more than a play-ball, to be kicked, hugged or discarded. In the Spielberg epic, on

the other hand, the men remain small, their wonder is terrestrial and their salvation quotidian. It is the utopian other and its technological advancement that hovers above the tiny men and brings them closer to perfection. The techno-eschatology of *Close Encounters* combines an alien parallel world, a site of virtual hygiene, with the imagery of vast mechanism and total capability. Like the artificial life models formulated in cyber-labs, the film presents immortality, discorportion, the angelic—the equipment of religious enlightenment—silicon perfection replacing the fallen protein universe. In a '70s of failing industrial culture and a rupture in societal systems so wide that all substance seemed to be draining irrevocably, the film offered a new transcendence, a transcendence based not incidentally on a vast retooling of the industrial complex and a potent conflation of the consumer and the believer, a transcendence which increases its pressure and economic impact as we near the Millennium.

America seems to be particularly vulnerable to fears of lost significance, as is evident in our attempts to fabricate simulations of history and tradition in a field in which the originals are quite strong. At the same time Americans are prone to an unreasoned faith that mechanism and means will regenerate that lost significance. We endorse what Marshall Berman calls "the civic faith that America could overcome its inner contradictions simply by driving away from them."[4] Oppressed by chronic feelings of having "lost our way," often exploited in reactionary calls for "values" masking discriminatory practices, we now propose another machine age in which technology and venture capital prepare to restore again certain epistemological structures, or even replace those structures with mechanism itself.

Sitting at the pinnacle of a recomposed techno-mercantile Olympus is the computer, the focus of post-ecclesiastical myth—the embodiment of both the alien web and the technological flash of *Close Encounters*. In extreme cases, this "deus *in* machina" promises device as redeemer, inflating the utopian prescriptions of the first machine age. In fact, the concept of redemptive technologies comes naturally since we are tool-using animals and since it was tools, as Kubrick clearly reminds us in *2001*, that delivered us into our current predicament of authority. And it is not a coincidence that the industrial revolution accompanied a final collapse of antiquated belief systems and that industry itself should provide at least some of the symbolic material for the progressive ideologies that replaced those systems. Although these ideologies have been so conclusively undermined by the history of this century and the critiques

associated with Post-Modernism, America's memory is short. *Zelig* is never exposed. Apocalyptic or millennial fantasies resurface regularly, inevitably accompanied utopian prospects for the next epic. The future is a conveniently disengaged place: no past, no nasty present. The other space of the virtual, like the floating symbolic field of Byzantine or Gothic representation, offers a celestial site for its invention.

Paradox and possibility are the fuel of American culture and some of the contradictions and potentials of the latest instrument of release should be noted. Many have lauded the positive aspects of the movement into cyberspace, sometimes with evangelical ardor, and I share, with reservation, their enthusiasm for the new media of representation, production and spatio-conceptual figuration. The computer is indeed a novel, if not revolutionary, tool for architecture as well as for other fields, but it should be acknowledged that certain commercial gambits and ideological problems attend the qualities that have generated such avid enthusiasm.

The computer has replaced the car as the ultimate planned-obsolescence object of desire. The automobile was stripped of much of its extreme consumerist potential by the 55-mile-an-hour, pseudo-sensible posturing of post-1973-oil-embargo industries who felt it necessary to make small concessions to not confront the basic problems inherent in their product. The computer, on the other hand, took up where the car left off as the extremely expensive and ever-changing consumer fetish. While, in its golden age, the car presented its newer, more seductive, aspect every year with the fall models, the computer has picked up the pace of novelty and obsolescence, incorporating the brilliant consumer double-helix of soft and hardware, each rendering the other uninterfaceable, prehistoric. The car could only rely on the seduction of novelty and shine, but the computer, by injecting the formula of compatible systems, almost instantly renders those systems useless and requires their replacement. As well, the incessant need for new toys, games and gadgets that appears to cut the ennui of the "developed" nations is simultaneously met. Costly (and, in a material culture, cost is the bottom-line of value), excitingly novel, mutating with extreme speed, the computer has upped the consumerist ante while appearing to provide user autonomy. But that autonomy is markedly constrained by the information offered, the impossibility of total access and the capabilities of the instrument and its software.[5]

It is both commercial tactic and redemptive desire that feed the belief that a mere machine presence will solve problems and resolve social ills. On the contrary, there is a distinct class problem here. Bill Clinton and Al Gore offer photo opportunities as they wire classrooms for the internet so all children may surf and at the same time these public leaders engage in what appears to be a losing battle to keep providing lunch for the same children. The fact is that all this technology and information are very expensive and thus users are strictly limited by their economic condition. As well as clearly providing a somewhat alienated and sterile social realm, the internet and similar cyberspaces are a form of alter-urbanism, a clean safe series of intersections with strict entrance requirements, virtual gated-communities. The "web" promises a safe passage for the contemporary privileged flâneur. Despite Newt Gingrich's absurd proposal to give all American poor lap-top computers, there seems little room or welcome for the underclass there. The "real" world becomes the ghetto of its prophylactic other.

At architecture schools the computer is credited with redefining space, representation, urbanity, and method. All these claims appear somewhat inflated. The space of computer projection has been around since Masaccio, its compositional strategies since Kandinsky and Duchamp. The urbanism proposed is, as yet, a limited and lonely place and the techniques seem pedestrian. Nonetheless, architectural curricula are increasingly computer-focused, devoting a large part of didactic strategies and gross funding to this new and very expensive technology. As with all cultural phenomena, especially those that have caught on with such vehemence, a look at the implications, the historical contradictions and the costs, both literal and political, should be undertaken. More importantly, it may be necessary to retrieve some of the phenomena that seem to have become submerged during the rush to accommodate the new technologies while assessing the economic and ideological motivations for that rush.

First it should be pointed out that the new technologies in architecture are largely media of representation or analysis, deriving from the rather specific capabilities and format of the instrument of their production. The journals are full of advertisements for new construction materials and articles outlining new techniques, but these are not the "new technologies" that cause eyes to glitter and pulses to accelerate in the academies. It is a case of pictures not gaskets. Given the televised format and graphic media available, the technologies eulogized are predominantly imagistic.

The representation of our desires becomes a load of drivel, with endless repetition of a few limited themes. The same thing can be said of digital imagery, which merely imitates the special effects and tricks of the old 3D cinema or animated cartoon, while ostensibly running up against the plastic limits of the imagination.
Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor* [6]

While the computer has effectively streamlined the production of contract documents and other dreary aspects of architectural production, computer renderings are not yet so beguiling as to argue that manual drawing has been irrevocably superseded. But it is inevitable that they will come, that the complexity and formal pyrotechnics of which the computer is now capable with time will become irresistibly sexy. And the animations possible now are quite effective although the medium itself limits their capabilities while falsely arguing for their authenticity. But I would still argue that conventional drawing serves other purposes than strictly representational ones. While computer competence must now be accepted as a basic skill for young architects, the ability to draw manually and to construct models should be juxtaposed to computer work. These two ways of visualizing, transforming and conveying information should form a counterpoint, one through the manipulation of a series of commands and spatial matrixes, the other through the muscular mnemonics of vision, thought and action. As well, the intrinsic problems of a shift from manual to mechanical reproduction, problems that have focused a discourse at least since Benjamin, are rife here. It is a movement from painting to photography, with all the concomitant possibilities and devaluations revealed by that extensive discourse.

The defense of the "real" as portrayed by the computer, by walk-through animations, material renderings, and perspective view, is questionable. Though this argument is much too

involved to pursue here, the declared authenticity of this imagery and its automatic ratification through the argument for that authenticity seems to me to be a primary ideological problem with current attitudes toward this technology.[7]

It was, after all, the invention of illusionistic space that bestowed upon the visual language of European culture those dimensions of "negativity" and "remote tense" that are generally taken to distinguish human languages from the languages of animals—since these properties make it possible for us to lie and to imagine convincingly in our speech, to assert what we are denying and to construct narrative memory by contextualizing our assertions with regard to a past and a future, to a conditional or subjunctive reality. For four centuries visual culture in the West possessed these options—and exploited them. Today, for some reason, we remain content to slither through this flatland of Baudelairian modernity, trapped like cocker spaniels in the eternal, positive presentness of a terrain so visually impoverished that we cannot even lie to any effect in its language of images—nor imagine with any authority—nor even remember.
Dave Hickey, *"Prom Night in Flatland"* [8]

Computers, like idiot savants, can perform enormously complex tasks very quickly, although we invariably seem to invent tasks so complex that the computer remains quite slow, always trying to catch up with its cleverer operator and always demanding more expensive doses of memory. In short, computers are stupid but honest. But art demands an intelligence and mendacity that the computer is having a hard time accommodating.

Furthermore, the computer, both by way of its actual technology and given the relatively limited look of the product available through the application of that technology, has generated a new machine-aesthetic that is becoming a graphic "lingua franca" in the institutions and journals. In the first place, the fallacies and strengths of a machine aesthetic should be judged both in relation to the past and current politics. A relation between this aesthetic and architectural culture needs to be more clearly delineated and the significance of the machine, so clear now in retrospect to the first machine age, needs to be equally clear in the second. For Heroic Modernism, the machine itself, the airplane, the automobile, the steamship, but also the factory and the assembly line, were clearly metonyms for a culture both rational and progressive while simultaneously sublime and revolutionary. This Futurist alloy was the stuff of aspiration and cultural change. Our new machine aesthetic does not rely for its symbology so much on the actual mechanized objects as the material they produce, the literal images on the screen, and the mechanisms of that production, the networks, flows, webs and intersections. Along with the dubious argument for authenticity, the result in the end largely relies on complexity and the mystery of replication and masking for its *zeitgeist.*

"What is there to look back at, at the moment when we must smash down the mysterious doors of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. Today we live in the absolute, for we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed."
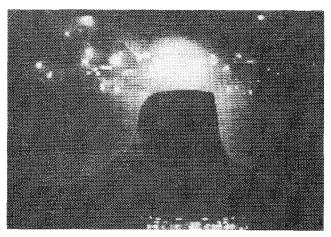Filipo Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto, 1909* [9]

The extremely rich critical discourse of the last thirty years, its overlaps and negations, seems to find an apt medium in the distortions, feedback and congestion of cyber-form. For

instance, an interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari could seem to reinforce the current ethos. Particularly in *Anti Oedipus* but also *A Thousand Plateaus*, the terminology returns ceaselessly to the "desiring-machine," the "abstract machine," "barbarian-despotic machines," etc., even insisting on a non-metaphorical reading of these many references. The subsequent conflation of *machine* with flux, smoothing and rhizomatic structure lends itself to a mechano-fuzziness that allows the fungus and the chip to coexist promisingly, but that promise has yet to gel while its semblance becomes universal.
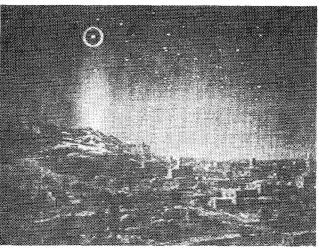
The computer fosters, through the disengaged nature of its production and the promiscuity of its product, an imagistic architectural culture that I cannot embrace with abandon any-more than I can embrace the absolute hegemony of the image in the modern condition. While acknowledging that image is central to culture, as it is and seems to have always been, my position may still appear anti-progressive and thus be automatically labeled conservative. I must again point out that the product of the "new technologies" is largely graphic and image remains the vehicle of commercialism and capital, those political entities that conservatism has always served. To this end, the relations of consumption, the progressive, the neo-avant-garde and the millennial should be critically engaged.[10] To dismantle the machines of ideology as they form seems a worthy endeavor, but I do not wish to appear a traditional Luddite, but only to argue for an historical awareness of the implications of these "new technologies" that would keep them in perspective and best utilize their extraordinary potential and fit them into the militantly conventional curricula and fiscal facts of a down-sizing educational realm.

No, I think that history preserves us form that sort of ideology of the return...History protects us from historicism—from a historicism that calls on the past to resolve the questions of the present.
Michel Foucault, *"Space, Power and Knowledge"*[11]

I would substitute *future* for *past* in this citation. Millennialism is by nature a form of historicism, a medicinal force for social repair that should be viewed skeptically, like all utopian remedies. As was also the case during Modernism and the first machine age, the image in this particular case in not overtly derived from historical sources, although its relation to expressionism, and to aspects of futurist ideology and form, as well as to many of the liberation strategies of the sixties, must be recognized and lessons taken from the cultural binds presented by those periods. But instead we appear to be reexperiencing *fin-de-siècle* anxieties and hopes, and to be proposing many of the same tactics that resulted from these sentiments.

Like the lament in the poem, architecture is a "language that recapitulates" otherness and then acts as its telos. It has no language of is own, and must speak in terms outside itself, the terms of other bodies. In its desire for the material, it profits from these other power structures by using their images. It is a false land of repose. The very act that proposes to transform these power structures into something else is called on repeatedly to use their language to name itself. In this we can understand, in some preliminary way, why the lament is so appropriate to architecture—why it is so much a part of the architectural posture toward the past (the realm that has been left behind). The lament names the kind of power that architecture has traditionally had—the power of recapitulation. And yet, as the

poem and its analysis teach us, lament itself is not doing what it appears to be doing. It recapitulates, not in order to (merely) describe and narrate, but also to appropriate, to displace and repossess the material it claims to have left behind.
Catherine Ingraham, *"Architecture, the Lament for Power and the Power of Lament"*[12]

To conclude, a millennial optimism attaches to the dubiously redemptive qualities of the "new technologies" and to elementary notions of political advancement—projecting a techno-utopia that is familiar and troubled. The future is speculative. This is indeed part of the comfort that derives from devotion to it. A recognition of the individual fabrication of the profile of the possible, also somewhat in place in the study of history albeit, is omnipresent in the creation of the future. It is each of ours to formulate at will. It is science fiction. But the distinction between speculation and analysis ought to be recognized, even given the compromised nature of any such distinction as revealed by the studies of the last thirty-odd years. The relevance of speculation is evident in any artistic endeavor, but a reliance on speculation for an entire world view will necessarily result in the mistakes which plague the anti-historical, and the reliance on a certain tool as the device of that speculation is doubly problematic. An uncritical enthusiasm for the 21st century seems to imply an unwillingness to learn the tough lessons about the difficult nature of political action and the flawed associations of machine and progress that were the primary lessons of the 20th.

This sort of forgetfulness recollects the easy connections made by Modernism itself. As revealed by the history of the Modern Movement and of the avant-garde generally, millennial enthusiasm tends also to avoid the facts of appropriation and economic complicity that would be revealed by study of the present and likewise avoids the contradictions and ironies that are exposed by study of the past. A defense of history and rigorous critical action, and the place of information technology in relation to these discursive essentials is an essential point of this essay.

But the ease with which futurist enthusiasms optimistically reemerge is notable. It can only stem from deep human desire for such optimism coupled with an equally deep desire not to be bothered by the complicities revealed by recent critiques and possibly a desire to in fact give in to those complicities, to enter the marketplace innocent, looking forward down a bright fictional path, as if into limited field of a television or computer monitor, blinders firmly in place, strictly avoiding the trouble to either side or the insistent voices coming from behind.

NOTES

1. Virilio, Paul, *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U of Minn., 1995), p.7
2. Tafuri, Manfredo, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) p.156
3. see Meineke, Friedrich, Historism: *The Rise of New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972)
4. Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, (New York: Penguin, 1982) p.328
5. The computer has personalized all phases of office work, appearing to take over the duties of service personnel, but actually passing them back to the served who now feel more overburdened, spend more time at the office, who are consumed by their machines as they consume them. In fact the vacation may have been replaced by the down-time associated with these devices. The hours waiting for commands to be followed, or booting-up to occur, or for the inevitable crashes and problems to be sorted out: this time amounts to an enormous block of inert expectancy, of vacation in its lowest form—vacant time, equal in quality to idling in traffic or waiting out commercials. Such entropy may substitute for more directed leisure.
6. Virilio, op.cit., p.71
7. see for instance, Damisch, Hubert, *The Origins of Perspective*, trans. J. Goodman (Cambridge: MIT, 1994) or Crary, Jonathan, *Techniques of the Observer On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1990), or Rosalind Krauss, Jean Baudrillard, Hal Foster, Brian Wallis, et al., to touch the tip of the tip of this discursive iceberg.
8. Hickey, Dave, "From Night in Flatland" from *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993) p.40
9. Filipo Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*, as published in *Le Figaro*, 1909, trans. J. Gargus in *Architectural Design 51* (London: Academy, 1981) p.13
10. For instance, conservative is a disparaging adjective used as freely these days to dismiss opinion in the "world reversed" of the academies as liberal is used outside, but it is often used with the market-smarts and shifting criteria that characterize genuinely conservative positions on the outside.
11. Foucault, Michel, in interview with Paul Rabinow "Space, power and knowledge" p.166
12. Ingraham, Catherine, "Architecture the Lament for Power and the Power of Lament" p.63