Augmented Reality and the Posthuman: An (AR) Allegory of the (VR) Cave

By

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AUGMENTED REALITY AND THE POSTHUMAN:
AN (AR) ALLEGORY OF THE (VR) CAVE

ABSTRACT:

There has been a certain romantic disappointment to the end of the broadcast era. Given the means of mediation-production and two-way distribution, society has not simply become unshackled from its Platonic cave chains to trample in the democratic real but have delved deeper into mediation, screens, self-branding, avatars, and the co-mingling of virtual and real. In image reading and creation, this movement has two vectors: a realization of abstract virtuals, as Vilém Flusser describes, in which we are able to forget History in favor of programming and designing its images through data visualization, or alternately a new age of mediation in which the medium is an actor and we encounter images, including images of ourselves, in a mechanical juxtaposition in which images are selected and metonymically contextualized by agents that are not human... that is, Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality.

INT. NYU LECTURE ROOM, DAY.

The HUMAN stands at a lectern, his laptop before him feeds its webcam live to the projection screen behind him. The HUMAN draws a card.

CARD#1
So it goes something like this...

The HUMAN draws another card. CARD#2 shows a cartoon version of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.

CARD#1 (cont’d)
A set of unlucky individuals are chained up in a dark cave, their heads held facing forward their entire lives only able to see shadows projected by firelight. There must be stagehands or such moving props around in front of the firelight so the show doesn’t get boring... But the story doesn’t really focus on that. Instead, the implication is that they get to see all things, but only as shadows flattened against the wall--a sort of minimalist variety show, a
CARD#1 (cont’d)
never-ending telethon combined with
Chinese shadow play.

I’m sure you know the story...

The HUMAN draws two more cards showing visualizations of the
allegory of the cave.

CARD#1
(cont’d)
This allegory comes to us through
layers of mediation. You probably
heard it, like I did, first
anecdotally in grade school, maybe
with a cartoon. Then if you took AP
classes, went to private school, or
studied humanities in college you
might have read the original.

The HUMAN draws a card which shows an image of Plato, and
then another showing Socrates.

CARD#1
(cont’d)
Plato’s Republic, we are told, is
Plato writing down from memory
dialogues of his teacher Socrates.
And in the remembered dialogues,
Socrates himself is remembering a
300 page conversation he had with
some friends the night before. The
Allegory of the Cave comes up in
Book VII, and it’s really just a
small point along the way of
Socrates’ argument that
philosophers should rule the world
and be much more respected.

But that’s not usually how the
story comes to us. If you did
college Media Studies, or Art
Theory, or Film, or
Communications—especially at the
tail end of the broadcast era like
I did—Plato’s allegory of the
cave is told as an allegory of
television, or mainstream ideology
culture at large. It is an
illustration of ‘The Medium is the
Message’, and it’s certainly true
that if you spend your life chained
up in a cave, the nature of the
medium is very important.
It goes something like this: the shadows are like all of culture media that together create an entire world of ideology, expectations, identity, and suffering. The fire worked quite nicely as a metaphor in the broadcast age, it was all that light coming out of the TV, piped in from far away L.A.

The HUMAN draws a card that shows a child enthralled to the xenon tube.

CARD#1
(cont’d)
It was never agreed upon specifically who these stagehands were making these shadow plays... most people suspected the rich, or the government, or maybe Executive Producers.

The HUMAN discards and draws another card. The HUMAN draws another card that again shows the allegory of the cave cartoon.

CARD#2
There’s another important part of the story. One of these cave watchers gets an education in the real world... shown around the fire and then outside on a sunny day.. at first it sucks, but he gets to like it, although he has a hard time keeping up relations with his old friends in the cave. They don’t believe him, and now he finds the cave movies unengaging.

Socrates thinks the libertine a stand-in for the misunderstood, enlightened philosopher. Media theorists think of him as the enlightened media theorist, or maybe the underpaid media artist. To sum it up in the words of McLuhan, "The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."
The HUMAN draws a series of cards showing media artists: Jeffrey Shaw, Peter Campus, Michael Snow... Images of Expanded Cinema, Warhol Screen Tests, Un Chien Andalou, Brakhage...

CARD#2
(cont’d)
How this allegorical sunshine of media enlightenment might look goes something like this: if avant-garde artists can take the larger media apparatus into their own hands--not just the cameras and the editing equipment, but also the cinemas and distribution and the whole production cycle--then they can deconstruct and critique, and creatively realize media criticism through praxis, creating an alternative fire in the cave that breaks the chains of consumer ideology... What Gene Youngblood called, in 1970, an Expanded Cinema of many screens and holographs that must move into a "newer extra-objective territory" What Jean Francoise Lyotard called for, in 1973, an 'acinema'that shocks our consumerist identification through abberant movement in cuts and movement’s absence in the tableau vivante. New juxtapositions like those called for by Giles Deleuze in 1983, calling them the 'Time Image’. Stan Brakage channelled Homer in a 1978 statement calling upon the true spirit of cinema--to be found in abandoning standard optical perspective by spitting on the camera lense... he calls out:

"Oh transparent hallucination, superimposition of image on image, mirage of movement, heroine of a thousand and one nights... The devout, who break popcorn together in your humblest double-feature services, know that you are still being born, search for your spirit in their dreams, and dare only dream when in contact with your electrical reflections.
CARD#2 (cont’d)
Unknowingly, as innocent, they
await the priests of this new
religion, those who can stir
cinematic entrails divinely. They
await the prophets who can cast
(with the precision on Confucian
sticks) the characters of this new
order across filmic mud."

All this is to say that, through
new independent production and
distribution, artists could create
a’dialectic’ in the cave, and maybe
save the world.

The HUMAN discards and draws another card.

CARD#3
Socrates liked dialectics too. So
much so that the big interlocutor,
Thrasymachus, accuses him of just
being annoyingly ironic. ...It is a
fair criticism. But Plato can wax
on as well as Brakhage about the
goals of the dialectic:

The HUMAN draws a card which shows the cartoon sun of
Allegory of the Cave.

CARD#3
(cont’d)
"And so with dialectic; when a
person starts on the discovery of
the absolute by the light of reason
only, and without any assistance of
sense, and perseveres until by pure
intelligence he arrives at the
perception of the absolute good, he
at last finds himself at the end of
the intellectual world, as in the
case of sight at the end of the
visible."

There is a problem with the
particulars these philosophers and
artists seek as a recipe for
freedom and the true dialectic. We
have, for the most part, achieved
them. All of them.

Socrates lauds the ideal forms of
mathematics, 2D geometry, and 3D
astronomy. He says:
The HUMAN draws a card showing digital data vis art.

CARD#3
(cont’d)

"although they make use of the visible forms and reason about them, they are thinking not of these, but of the ideals which they resemble; not of the figures which they draw, but of the absolute square and the absolute diameter, and so on -- the forms which they draw or make ... are converted by them into images, but they are really seeking to behold the things themselves, which can only be seen with the eye of the mind"

Well now they can. They can render them, and in 4K HD video. As Youngblood predicted, cinema has achieved a "newer extra-objective territory."

The HUMAN draws two cards displaying King Kong 1956 and 2005. Then contemporary examples of multi-screen, VR, animated GIFs, Youtube (Baker’s Hello World), and Google Glass.

CARD#3
(cont’d)

We have gone from this to this. But it’s not a transcendent "synaesthesia," but Pixar. We have the predicted multiple screens and holography: webpages and the Occulus Rift. For Lyotards abberant motion we have a world of looping GIF animations playing endlessly. For the entire microcinema movement of independent production and distribution we have instant, ubiquitous, free, networked, amateur, accessible, multiple channels of internet video. Smartphones. Augmented Reality and Google Glass.

This is a little disappointing. Transcendent enlightenment--whether communist or spiritual, material or existential-- doesn’t seem to be happening. I teach 20 year old
college students. Growing up with
the internet doesn’t seem to have
made the difference. Though new
generations have certainly gotten
less punk rock and ironic, they
don’t seem to be free of mainstream
ideology.

(presenting a tablet computer
on which the HUMAN is seen
speaking these last lines)
We’re still in the cave. What
happened to the plan?

The HUMAN discards and draws another card.

CARD#4
We can ask, what are shadows in the
age of the virtual?

Well, first it seems we have left
the age of the avant-garde and art,
and entered an age of Design, with
a capital D as in T.E.D. A kitch
that has subsumed the vacuum of
Art’s rejection of technology.
Programmatically designing virtuals
and ideals... Data Visualization,
Virtual Realities. Wilem Flusser,
writing about Design in the 90s,
instead of art and film in the 70s,
is more cynical than his media
theory forebears. He sees more a
future of shadows, not of
transcendent ideal philosophers. He
announces an overdue end to
modernism in his essay "On Memory
(Electronic or Otherwise)." He
says:

"The ideology of the 'self' has
been long to perish. It should have
vanished with psychoanalysis, with
neurophysiology, and with other
results which show that there is no
hard core within us. But this
ideology remained until artificial
intelligences were invented. It can
no longer prevail, unless it admits
that machines have 'selves'. Our
praxis with electronic memories
forces the abandonment of the 'self
upon us.'" There is no need for
CARD#4 (cont’d)

history, or selves, or the sun shining above the cave when we can visualize math and data. Why play outside when there are video games?

The fire of the allegory, which we thought might be those manipulative rich people is actually the machine itself. The ideology is us. No matter where you go, there you are, even if you leave the cave.

The HUMAN discards and draws another card.

CARD#5

The other current design vector is to play in the cave. Augmented Reality. And this is the part of the talk, when, finally, I arrive at the Medium is the Message moment. AR is inherently a dialectic of virtual and real. A sort of, After Cinema, in which the viewer must take on the role of the projector, enter in to the apparatus, become part of the machine. In terms of the allegory, we get to be stagehands and spectators at the same time. Watch the shadows and also the fire make the shadows.

In AR, the viewer must interact. Work to inhabit their virtual role. Their presence as perceived by the machine has limits and boundaries—the scope of the sensors, the range of their sensibility, the particular actors which cause reactions. If you watch someone interact with an AR object, this is the first activity—a sort of calibration of proprioception, testing the boundaries of their virtual body—what causes reaction, what is repeatable, what is 'noise', what is allowed, escapable, invisible... what freedom remains to the body. The viewer must be "recognizable" to the machine or interface. Instead of trying to provide an alternate
CARD#5 (cont’d)
media that moves beyond the apparatus, AR installs the apparatus and allows the viewer to inhabit an alternate role... the camera, the director, the screen, the model.

Like cave allegory stagehands, we are allowed to play a role in the media machine—bring it to our places, our images, our objects, our bodies; but the price of entrance is the transformation of the human to the machine. Like this performance happening now... the human given the function to reveal each image to the machine... to be seen.

So can we every become true philosophers? Can AR help us become so? ...To the extent that AR helps us with media criticism.

I believe Socrates when he talks of criticism. What we know and are able to distinguish matters. Dogs are good philosophers, he says; they respect knowledge and bark at strangers.

In this 2500 year old dialogue, he puts a call out for a more critical design technology discourse... something beyond TED talks, a Design avant-garde... I quote:

The HUMAN discards and draws another card. In this card he appears in toga with a VR headset. In the below dialogue, the HUMAN and the card perform a dialogue.

CARD#6
This is the distinction which I draw between the sight-loving, art-loving, practical class and those... who are alone worthy of the name of philosophers.

HUMAN

How do you distinguish them?
The lovers of sounds and sights, are, as I conceive, fond of fine tones and colours and forms and all the artificial products that are made out of them, but their mind is incapable of seeing or loving absolute beauty.

HUMAN
True. Few are they who are able to attain to the sight of this.

CARD#1
Very true. And he who, having a sense of beautiful things has no sense of absolute beauty, or who, if another lead him to a knowledge of that beauty is unable to follow --of such a one I ask, Is he awake or in a dream only? Reflect: is not the dreamer, sleeping or waking, one who likens dissimilar things, who puts the copy in the place of the real object?

HUMAN
I should certainly say that such a one was dreaming.

CARD#1
But take the case of the other, who recognizes the existence of absolute beauty and is able to distinguish the idea from the objects which participate in the idea, neither putting the objects in the place of the idea nor the idea in the place of the objects --is he a dreamer, or is he awake?

HUMAN
He is wide awake.

The HUMAN discards.

END.