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The Art(ifarce) of Virtual Reality

by Richard Evanoff

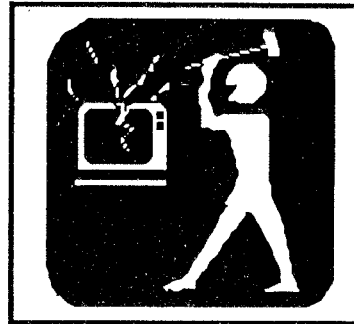
Virtual reality is the latest technofad. Based on technology developed by NASA in the mid-'80s, VR allows people to "enter into" computer-generated landscapes instead of simply viewing two-dimensional representations of reality on a conventional screen. A pair of goggles called Eyephones presents a 3-D simulated environment and a special Dataglove acts as a computer console so that the user can interact with the graphics. Unlike conventional visual technologies (television, video, etc.) which encourage passivity, VR is touted as an "interactive" technology with innumerable applications: Doctors will be able to take simulated "incredible journeys" through the blood vessels and organs of their patients' bodies. Soldiers will be able to experience "first-hand" what it's like to be in a battle situation. People will be able to "experience" a vacation in Tahiti without ever leaving their living rooms.

VR technology might eventually have some useful applications of course, but the technofans' recent uncritical praise of virtual reality is only telling us about all the marvelous things VR can do, not about the potential side effects. VR is being hailed as the biggest revolution in communication since the television — a correlation which should certainly give us pause for serious reflection. Undoubtedly there are many gullible people with an unquestioning reverence for technology who will buy into VR no questions asked, but more discerning individuals may want to read the "fine graphics" before losing themselves forever in the cyberspace of virtual reality.

While it's true that interactive technologies increase the amount of control a user has over the machine, it's still the machine which ultimately defines the parameters of the experience. Rather than opening up new vistas of human experience VR encloses them by substituting the contrived for the real. Instead of making us aware of the real possibilities of the world and the self, it fixates on the possibilities of the technology. We end up interacting more and more with machines, less and less with people and nature. The artificial replaces the natural. A lack of empathy with the "real world" outside only exacerbates prejudice, war, and ecological devastation.

Ultimately VR will be marketed as a consumer good by capitalist firms which are interested mainly in their own profits, not in helping people "expand their capabilities." If VR follows the profit-mongering course computers have taken, each new technological advance will be little more than marketing

devices to get people to shell out more money "upgrading their systems" and installing "more powerful programs" that can "do more things." For the time being the expense of interactive technologies makes them an upper class diversion, not yet an effective tool for the transformation of society and certainly not a means of empowering the disadvantaged. Technologies are *not* politically neutral. While VR may help the human mind absorb jillions of gigabytes of information, it doesn't help us to think any more critically or to make sounder value judgments. Wisdom, concern, and engagement are what we need most in modern society, not an information overload.



Rather than focusing our attention on the real problems of society and the revolutionary action necessary to correct them, VR can become simply one more palliative to keep our minds off what's really going on. How convenient for the powers that be, which can make profits at the same time they dissipate revolutionary energy! Better to have everyone sitting at home stimulating their own minds than getting together and organizing for a better society. Better to increase isolation and alienation by getting people to interact with machines than to increase their social solidarity through interaction with other people. Better to let people create their own beautiful virtual realities than deal with the ugly real realities in the world outside. No need for real birds, forests, and mountains when VR substitutes will do!

A friend of mine tells me that there are rooms in Tokyo where people can go for a half hour and listen to "nature sounds" in the dark to feel they're really "getting away from it all" — at considerable cost (i.e., profit) of course. Whether it's the visions of occultism (as it was in the middle ages), LSD hallucinations (as it was in the '60s), or virtual reality (as it's becoming in the '90s), these are all simply ways of avoiding, rather than facing up to, the problems created by modern society and our responsibility to build the new society in the shell of the old. VR simply offers us the artificial world of illusions/self-delusions instead of authenticity. It replaces interactive social intercourse with self-indulgent technological masturbation. Given the choice between virtual sex or the real thing, I'll take the real thing every time. Ditto for virtual reality. ☐

This is the beginning of an occasional series of essays by Richard Evanoff.