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 traipse 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 onf 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

                        CARD#3 (cont'd)
          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 tehir sensibility, the
          particular actors which cause
          reactions. If you watch someone
          interact with an AR object, this is
          the first activity-- a sort of
          callibration 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
                    criticial 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?

                    CARD#1
          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.