

**On Emediacy:
The Internet as Occult Space / Perceiving the Human in the Electronic Realm**

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The internet is a place where absolutely nothing happens.
-Strong Bad, www.homestarrunner.com/sbemail51.html

What is the purpose of life? . . .
To be the eyes and ears and conscience of the Creator of the Universe, you fool
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* 67

Before commenting on the nature of emediacy, and justifying the need for such an awkward neologism to describe the relationship of human sensory perception to the new media – the digital landscape, which is neither land nor “-scape” yet imbued with lexical physicality – it is necessary to establish the meaning of the “occult” as it will be applied to the various manifestations of transpositional technology discussed herein. Turning to the *OED*, we find this definition, the first offered, now considered a rare usage: “Not disclosed or divulged, secret; kept secret; communicated only to the initiated.” Under what circumstances might the internet, one of the most egalitarian and available technologies, be considered secretive? Of course, socioeconomic factors determine access to the internet; one must have access to the technology, and sufficient understanding of its operation, to “begin” an association with it. But these limitations warrant the description select, or elite, not necessarily “occult.” Rather, it is in the idea of the internet as a space that its occult-ness exists. The language of the internet implies a geographical presence. The user enters a site, visits a web-space, chats in a forum, owns a domain, collects cookies like stamps in a passport, and emanates from an I.P. address. If the internet exists as place, even a virtual place, it exists nowhere on this earth. As a place

with no physicality, the internet is analogous to human sensory perception, which translates the physical into sensation, bringing the world into the body. Just as human senses mediate the physical world, the internet mediates the virtual world and allows for the multilocational and transpositional presence of the subject/user in a way that no other technology has previously allowed: rather than extend the senses, the internet transports the user. Emediacy is the attempt, aided by digital media, to erode the distinction of object and the perception of the object, to breach the skin of sensation, to transcend physical boundaries, and to minimize the perceptual delay of sensory mediation. The internet as an invented technology is a wish, a plotted destiny; it is a model of the potential of human perception.

There is a television advertisement for a popular soft drink in which a dull-eyed zookeeper slouches over a guardrail while an alligator chomps on his arm. Families stand around him, laughing; but the zookeeper makes no attempt to extricate himself from what must be an uncomfortable and potentially dire situation. The camera tracks over the heads of onlookers into a close-up shot of the man's ear. Entering the ear canal, we see a control room with many buttons, levers, and flashing lights. The far wall of this room, apparently the zookeeper's brain, is a video screen on which the zookeeper and alligator engage in their lazy wrestling match. Three "technicians" in lab coats, portrayed by the same actor, sit and lounge in various poses; asleep at the switch, as the saying goes. The soft-drink's logo fills the video screen and a greenish liquid washes over the sleeping technicians, who immediately awaken to dance. The camera cuts "outside" to where the zookeeper dances a similar jig. The alligator is gone. Once again, the logo appears, but this time claims the entire television screen. A heartbeat passes, then the words, "Feel

Alive” flash beneath the logo. A robotic voice accompanies this last image. “Feel Alive,” it commands.

The irony of the above statement – “feel alive” – is perfectly at home in the simulacrum of the television realm, where appearances *are* reality. In that space, it is enough to feel alive to be alive. What is interesting about the above commercial is its depiction of the human as a mechanism, a sensing machine operated by diminutive versions of the larger body. The question arises: who is driving the little technicians inside the zookeeper’s head? Perhaps even tinier technicians exist within these, fractal versions within each smaller brain. And yet more interesting is the choice of a vocoder-enhanced voiceover. A robotic voice on television commanding the viewer/consumer to “feel alive” is no subtle message – it is an insinuation. And while the fiction of human as machine can be entertaining, it is not a sufficient explanation of human consciousness. The depiction of human as machine explains more about our technology than it does about the nature of the organism. It seems, in fact, that the explanation of human consciousness mirrors the technological/philosophical beliefs of any given time. As Jodey Castricano writes in “Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* and the Strange Case of Trans-Subjectivity,”

At the turn of the century, social, cultural, and psychological interest in telepathy, hypnosis, and survival after death was paralleled in the reception of new communications technologies such as the telegraph and the telephone, which appeared like other paranormal phenomena, to defy the limitations of time and space [...] (Castricano 3)

In this way, we assume that our technologies are models of human consciousness. Instead, these technologies provide only a theoretical understanding of human nature. They are the technological projection of the experience of being human, manifestations of humanity's self-image. In this context, it is not unusual to hear a robotic voice tell us to feel alive. However, the experience of feeling alive, of being alive, is much more complex than televised image and sound can represent.

There are fundamental differences between the tele-technologies of the fin de siècle and the internet. McLuhan's definition of media technology as the means "by which we amplify and extend ourselves" (*Understanding Media* 64) works well for the telegraph and telephone, both of which bring distant voices to the immediate senses. Likewise, the telescope extends the eye. These technologies – prefixed by the Greek *tele*, "far off" – bridge distances by enhancing the senses, by bringing the distant near: as Castricano writes, to "appear to defy the limitations of time and space" (3). The telephone enables the seemingly instantaneous exchange of language and sound, and videophone technologies add to this a visual representation, but these devices do not provide the apparent, or "virtual," manipulation of circumstance. The internet is a remote technology that allows for multiple presences. One sits at a computer terminal, projecting consciousness into an interactive environment. Interactivity, the illusion of real influence, in turn affects the body.

The process by which the brain distinguishes between what we call real and imagined, internal and external, stimuli in relation to computer generated stimuli has been hotly debated. In "Reality Monitoring," psychologists Marcia K Johnson and Carol L.

Raye address the production of memory in subjects by the perception of external stimuli and internally-generated thought (67). Johnson and Raye

propose that, as a class, internally generated memories may differ from the class of externally generated memories along specific dimensions. First, externally generated memories in general may have more spatial and temporal contextual attributes coded in the representation of the event than internally generated memories do. Second, they should also have more sensory attributes [...]. Third, [they] propose that externally generated representations are more semantically detailed – that is, contain more information or more specific information – than internally generated representations. (71)

The difference, it would seem, is in the details. According to Johnson and Raye, the human mind equates vividness of memory with the real experience. But as computer simulations become more life-like, their place in memory may change. There is an intrinsic difference between an afternoon playing Pac-Man at the local arcade and a session in a flight simulator. The former situation is imbued with the sounds and smells of the physical space. One might remember the cacophony of videogames, the curses of the players, and the stale scent of an enclosed room. In contrast, the flight simulator anticipates a real-life situation, and trains muscle and reflexes to respond to a machine. The simulator teaches the user the language of the aircraft. The next level of human-computer interaction is all-sensory virtual reality. As Erik Davis writes in *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, although virtual reality technology has not reached the “immersion” point, wherein the simulated world

stimulates all senses and creates a version of the world almost indistinguishable from the real one, the technology has become a part of popular culture, depicted as the Holodeck of *Star Trek Enterprise*, and in movies like *The Matrix*, where the technology is the star of the show. Davis writes:

What is it about virtual reality that can stoke such imaginings?

Technologically, VR can be described as an immersive simulation, a digital construct that users engage, as it were, from the inside out. At the very least, VR exploits and even celebrates the phenomenological fact that we are mind as well as body, and that the twain do not always meet. But VR is not simply a technology; it is a concept that exceeds mere gadgetry and all its inevitable bugs and breakdowns. The concept is absolute simulation: a medium so powerful that it transcends mediation, building worlds that can stand on their own two feet. (247)

As Davis points out, the current concept of virtual reality is, at the core, Cartesian.

Virtual reality, as depicted say in *The Matrix* series of films, assumes the primacy of the mind, that the “outer” world is a product of internal perception. In essence, virtual reality is the complete indwelling of human experience. It is the gross, physicality of life projected inwards. Virtual reality promises to make the body a container for experience, rather than the enabler.

Digital production diminishes the physical presence.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin writes of the reproducibility and authenticity of the artistic work. As Benjamin states, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its

presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). While this is true of a painting, sculpture, even to an extent film, which can trace its origins to a specific exposure on a specific reel, the distinction between original and reproduction erodes with digital art. The “painting” composed with a computer program is not an artifact, as there is no original work. The digitally rendered work of art can be reproduced infinitely, altered infinitely; nor do the elements degrade it. Only when transferred into another medium, printed for example, does the original become distinguishable from a reproduction. The question arises: Where does the original painting exist? It cannot exist solely in the hard drive of the computer upon which it was composed, nor within that from which it is stored and projected, because the designer of the work could just as easily transfer files between computers during composition, using several machines to complete the work. If an original exists at all, it exists in the act of creation. Art as a product is a representation of its creation. In this, digital and pigment painting are no different. Both emanate from a moment and an act and leave very different sorts of artifacts. Digital art reminds the viewer that the value of art lies in the artistic impulse, not in the artifact it leaves as evidence.

A similar reevaluation of human creativity is evident in the phenomenon of online journaling, known as weblogs, or blogging. Journaling is a dialogue with oneself. But it is also a dialogue with an unknown and anticipated audience. Journaling is the deliberate archiving of experience and thought for posthumous retrieval. In this way, the act of journaling, keeping a diary, is a prosopopoeic impulse. Once written, the diary entry becomes the voice of the absent dead speaking to the reader. The phenomenon of blogging transcends this dependency on time and mortality. With a blog, the journal is

available and interactive. The solitary musings of the diarist become communal events to which the reader may respond. The blog's interactivity turns the process of journaling into an immediate dialogue with a contemporary audience, and transforms the diary from an artifact into a dynamic forum. The electronic blog eliminates the intimacy of the journal by universalizing the diary and multiplies its singularity by disembodiment of the physical, paper-bound artifact.

Interactivity creates the possibility for revision.

No longer are journal entries static testimonies to specific place and time. The immediate nature of the blog allows the poster to change or remove entries. And while the website may document that edits have been made to the text, no record of the original necessarily remains. The plasticity of electronic media overrides the obsession with static documentation, of record, characteristic of the print era. Of course, all media are vulnerable to the corruptions of time and the elements. Medieval manuscripts vary from generation to generation, altered by the scribes' embellishments and errors. Yet, the degree of metastability found in the electronic text far surpasses previous media. Not only are complex and energy-dependent devices necessary for the transmission of digital information, the physical housings in which electronic memories are stored are vulnerable to magnetic and electrical fields. The ephemeral and malleable nature of digital information makes it more analogous to oral/aural transmission than it is to the literary mediation. Information travels through digital portals without the delays and complications associated with the printing and shipping of texts. Digital information spreads as if by word of mouth, meme-like. As well, the liberties taken with language in email messages – often a source of frustration for university professors, who might

receive a missive from a student reading: “Yo. S-A cmng ALAP TLK-2-U-L-8R” – reassert a plasticity in spelling and an informality in grammar not generally seen in other media. Email shorthand, which consists mostly of acronyms, initialisms, and dropped-vowels, underscores the apparent immediacy of the technology. In the digital world, it would seem there is no time for correct grammar and spelling, and superfluous vowels. The popular language of email is visual, similar in form to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry; very different from the language of the telegraph, for example, which similarly favored brevity. And while electronic writing allows for the revision of “published” documents and an interactivity unknown in pulp communication, it also promotes a dissociation between sender and receiver that manifests in impulsive and voluminous messaging. A social phenomenon that could be called “email dissociation,” the awkwardness that sometimes accompanies the mixing of spoken and emailed communications wherein one party makes a public reference to an emailed message, results from the blending of the physical realm with the electronic. Although the electronic text may be alterable, it often carries with it more authoritative weight than a spoken rebuttal, if only in deference to its apparent, although not intrinsic, similarity to the printed contract. For, email, blogs, and other forms of electronic textuality can be as ephemeral and expedient as the spoken word.

The electronic media, in addition to liberating language from set forms and expectations imposed by and inherited from the age of the printing press, have exposed what seems to be a new physicality, somewhere between thought and form. As Donna Haraway writes, “[T]he boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us” (“A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late

Twentieth Century” 153). As previously stated, the language of the internet implies geographic presence. The physicality of the virtual world is supported further by the development of laws to protect against “computer trespass” by hackers. The question of where the internet happens – on the monitor, in the hard drive, or in the mind of the user – is central to the ontological debate surrounding the medium.

But physicality and the internet intersect in numerous ways. In the short story, later a novel, “Ender’s Game,” science fiction author Orson Scott Card extrapolates a future in which young computer game enthusiasts are drafted by the army and trained on flight simulators in preparation for a battle with a vicious, intergalactic invader. The children play the combat games only to learn that the simulation is indeed real and that the “virtual” warships have inflicted real damage to a civilization in a galaxy far, far away. In 1977, when *Analog* first published “Ender’s Game,” remote warfare was in its nascent stages. Present day war technology would rob Scott Card’s story of its surprise ending. The United States Air Force and Navy have recently announced the construction of a “killer drone,” an unmanned war craft remotely piloted from land and sea (www.darpa.com). These devices are the next stage of a dissociation that enabled fighter bombers to dump deadly cargo on invisible targets below. The new target is an infrared shadow on a video screen, nothing more. Another primal manifestation in the internet’s liminal physicality is a website called Live-Shot (www.live-shot.com), which bills itself as a “real-time, on-line, hunting and shooting experience.” For a yearly fee, plus the purchase of bullets and targets, members can practice shooting from the comfort of their computer den. The website intends to offer live prey, including auodad, antelope, sheep, and wild boar, which users can shoot, have mounted and delivered to their door. The

company founders suggest that hunters donate the meat from the kill to “a charitable organization [sic] or to an animal orphanage” (<http://www.live-shot.com/species.shtml>). There are life-saving applications for remote technology, as well. As G.H. Ballantyne writes,

“The first robots introduced into clinical practice served as camera holders. In 1994, the FDA approved AESOP [a voice-controlled device] for clinical use as a robotic camera holder [...]. More recently, surgical robots have evolved into telerobotic surgical platforms that permit surgeons to operate on patients from remote locations using robotic instruments. The surgeon and the telerobot work in a master-slave relationship. (“Robotic surgery, telerobotic surgery, telepresence, and telemonitoring” 1390)

Hegel’s master/slave dialectic aside, the telepresence of a skilled surgeon in the form of a robot is the most extreme manifestation of the transpositional aspects of emediacy. And while the devices described by Ballantyne are directly mimetic, moving in sympathy with the operator, they are a form of Artificial Intelligence (AI), able to “remember” and repeat the doctor’s movements. In a sense, the operator is both distant consciousness and operator of the remote device.

As the operating conscience of an imitative machine, the user functions in a manner similar to the doctrines of immanence. In other words, humans make mechanical vehicles, or extensions, to carry out human will because we consider ourselves, to borrow Ryle’s refutation of Descartes, “ghosts in machines.” Androids and robots, electric golem, people our technological fantasies. In envisioning AI, we meet a synthetic version

of humanity. Perhaps the attempt to construct machines that think and act as humans – and “feel alive” – is rooted in, or at least expressed by, the Genesis myth, that God created “man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (I:26). Similarly now, like father like son, the new human gods attempt to replicate themselves in their mechanical offspring. The Toyota Company recently unveiled the “partner robot,” a bipedal, self-operating, mechanical trumpeter (www.toyota.co.jp/en/special/robot). Although the partner robot performed impressively at a stockholder meeting – footage of which is available online – the machine is little more than a windup toy. Scientists insist upon inventing ever more complex representations of human beings and believe each to be a prototype toward an independent AI entity. Fundamentally, it is a cosmetic approach, one that privileges appearances. In the search for AI, we reveal ourselves. Yet, we are not inventing intelligent machines, we are inventing machines to embody intelligence. The compulsion to create intelligent machines is a procreative impulse. When it comes right down to it, humans do not understand human consciousness – its source and function, its relationship to other natural phenomena – well enough to reproduce it in mechanical form. And as long as we pattern robot behaviour after what we believe to be human behaviour, we make drones not beings. The AI technology of the future may contain intelligence, act as a vehicle for intelligence; but the source of that intelligence will remain as mysterious as our own.

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