

## **Infiltrations and Interferences: Scientific Methods in Art and Architecture**

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Thomas Pynchon describes in his novel “The Crying of Lot 49” the way his protagonist, Oedipa Maas perceives the urban landscape of Southern California, when she drives in a rented Chevrolet Impala down into a valley:

*“She looked down a slope, needed to squint for the sunlight, on to a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about transistor radios than about Southern California, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding”.*

A “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning”: Rossi’s analogous city, minus the monuments. I propose this as an adequate reading of the digital city: a “picturesque” view that is less interested in functions and meanings, than on the patterned surface, the “swirls of houses and streets”. There is a sense of order, a sense of currents of electricity, temporal processes, but no “meaning”.

For Pynchon’s protagonist, electronic space is analogous to urban space which is both temporal and simulated. The emergence of virtual technologies is a natural extension of the way in which twentieth-century urban communal spaces already constitute virtual environments. The shopping mall is an environment in which sensorial perception has been affected in way which may only be described as virtual. Such spaces are linked and defined not through technology but through the way urban society forms them and interact in them. In this lecture I am concerned with this new environment which we observe not only from above, like Oedipa Maas from the California hilltop, but in which we have to navigate.

I will begin with an analysis of the situation after World War II, when in the United States an aesthetic discourse with the participation of urban theoreticians and artists has been supported by the so-called military-industrial complex. The decline in urban communal space was a major issue, which led to proposals ranging from a nostalgic “New Urbanism” though Rem Koolhaas’ “Picturesque”, and “Junkspace” to the rise of virtual technology. Finally, I want to consider an example of virtual urban space, one from the margins of conventional urban space (Citiwalk in Los Angeles).

Through this analysis we can establish that there is often little or no gap between the so-called “real world” and the “virtual world”. With such a realization comes the understanding that conventional means of analyzing the city are no longer adequate. There is a strong and growing need to consider that zone where the boundaries between the physical and the virtual are completely blurred.

Order and chaos, and the value judgments that were attached to these two terms, defined and delimited the debates over the present and future of what was called “the exploding metropolis” in the United States by 1957. The New York metropolitan area, including most of New Jersey, was a popular case study for this phenomenon. The topic was extensively discussed in many public and private fora among individuals and within organizations representing a wide variety of personal and professional interests.

Bringing the metropolitan environment into focus as a visible and legible image also usually meant describing it in terms of a number of already established metaphors, such as the “agora”. These metaphors were meant to temper the newness and strangeness of the “landscape” by revealing its ordering logic in familiar terms or well-established conventions. Some theoreticians and critics used biological metaphors to describe the metropolis as a living organism that grows according to a cell- or plant-like logic. Others borrowed the idea of organizational structures from the physical sciences, particularly regular crystalline structures or grids.

Those who worked with the concept of “imageability” in the 1960s, shared a certain binary structure of their arguments. Their explicit or implicit ideological values were the significant shared components of the dominant models of perceiving the metropolitan landscape, including its inhabitants. Their use of visual metaphors shows striking similarities as well.

In his 1964 book *God's Own Junkyard*, the architectural critic Peter Blake exemplifies the conservative response to the new American metropolitan landscape. He criticizes the lack of a clear “image”, its formlessness and eclecticism. Symbolic forms which were originally developed for particular types of buildings, are now being used in random combination with various, previously unrelated symbolic forms. What Blake criticizes most, many contemporary buildings display oversized signs announcing their actual use because they no longer represent their function on their own in way that people would understand. Because of this situation, the built environment shows no apparent ordering principle system of symbols that society can “read”. Blake criticizes that people can no longer perceive their visual environment. He accuses the architects and landscape designers of carrying responsibility for the their visual alienation of the inhabitants and visitors of the metropolitan landscape: “people without ties to the landscape or townscape in which they live, people whose eyes have lost the art of seeing.” This intellectual elite, he writes, has abandoned important principles of order and clear forms to embrace an undisciplined “newness” of form and design, innovation for innovation’s sake.

The photographs in *God's Own Junkyard* illustrate the visual chaos which Blake criticizes. The intended effect is a visual "junkyard" of images of disorder and urban decay. Using a strategy of confronting pairs of good and bad examples (mostly "before" and "after", a method first introduced in Augustus W. Pugin's *Contrasts*), the photographic illustrations in Blake's book imply that a "pop" collage sensibility may be the cause of this deplorable situation, while the clean geometric forms and transparency of modernism still followed the order of past centuries.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown regard the same American landscape and contemporary American art, which was the target of Blake's bitter criticism, with much more understanding, discovering its social and formal potentials. Rather than rejecting its confused appearance, they observe the presence of certain principles that have a different, novel kind of coherence. While driving along the American highway, Venturi and Scott Brown discover a new and vital visual experience. In their important book *Learning from Las Vegas*, the two architects emphasize that learning from the present situation, instead of "ordering" it according to certain concepts of applying elitist principles, is indeed an alternative "way of being revolutionary."

Venturi and Scott Brown accuse the academic position of orthodox modern architects for not only being out of touch with the present, but also "boring", unable to talk to the American lower middle class. They call for the return to a more vibrant language of "complexity and contradiction", informed by the everyday examples of anonymous roadside architecture.

The only important distinction that Venturi and Scott Brown are ready to make between the two types of using historical precedent has to do with the way architecture is now experienced: "The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs."

Venturi and Scott Brown observe Las Vegas with the same kind of scientific rigor which was usually reserved for the classic architectural buildings and ensembles of the past. Two elements of the commercial shopping street, the sign (billboards etc.) and the strip (street, highway etc.), lead them to witty and useful conclusions regarding the ordering system behind the apparent chaos of the new cityscape and the collage of architectural elements and signs present in these sites. They are crucially important for an increasingly complex and increasingly automobilized society. Venturi and Scott Brown stress that Blake's plea for an architecture that is able to represent both its function and its meaning has lost its significance under such circumstances. Furthermore, the sign plays a more vital role than the building itself in informing the urban population, since the billboard must compete for visibility and legibility within the extremely dense visual environment of the street.

Certainly, the commercial strip strikes the observer as chaotic. Still, Venturi and Scott Brown claim that it is based on a system that has its inherent logic: “It is not an order dominated by the expert and made easy for the eye. The moving eye in the moving body must work to pick out and interpret a variety of changing, juxtaposed orders, like the shifting configurations of a Victor Vasarely painting.”

Vision in motion, the perception of the “moving eye” is not an entirely new theme. The American post-war discussion was shaped by artists and theoreticians who took these ideas over from the European avant-garde. I would like to stress the role of Hungarian artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes, even of the founder of the “op-art”, Victor Vasarely. I should also mention lesser known figures such as Dénes Gábor, the inventor of holography, or Béla Julesz, working with two-dimensional dot patterns, that appear three-dimensional when observed with both eyes.

In terms of a synthetic vision of art and architecture in the modern city, György Kepes played probably the most important role. In his student days in Budapest, Kepes had been moved by social utopias, including the dream of working in a community of artists. He himself experienced the optimism and commitment of such a cooperative work of artists with a social mission at the time in Hungary, when he was a member of the Constructivist-oriented group *Munka* (labour). Though Kepes did not join the Bauhaus, his experience in Hungary was that of a communal effort between artists and artisans dedicated to developing a new aesthetic with social commitment.

### ***Pattern-Seeing***

In the United States, Kepes was the founder and director of the Center of Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In the Center, artists, architects, engineers and scientist explored new creative possibilities for a contemporary public art, which is responsive to real needs.

His contact to his colleagues in various departments of M.I.T. was essential for Kepes's work. In the late 1940s, he participated in some of the weekly debates on new developments in science. These discussions were motivated by the famous computer scientist Norbert Wiener. As World War II had just ended, Kepes enjoyed the optimistic atmosphere, that stimulated the scholarly exchange. Probably the most significant scientific insights that affected Kepes at this time were Wiener's thoughts on cybernetics and the research done by neurophysiologists that bolstered the view that one's capacity of orientation in the environment is based on the capacity of the neurological system to discern invariance in continuous transformation. Kepes understood many of these ideas as metaphors rather than models to work with. He was convinced that the real task of art was to help people regain to a sense of harmony and order beneath the surface transformations of life. He regarded art as a “feedback system” (Norbert Wiener) which expresses the higher goals and symbols of a given society.

For Kepes science and technology could serve as models for public art in crucial ways: as a source of new images, as a dynamic way of problem solving where the basic units are structures, flows, processes and organization. Science and technology are "systematic, disciplined, collaborative approaches to chosen objectives." He regarded the scientific laboratory as a model for creative teamwork in non-scientific fields as well – an idea that influenced such important projects of Louis I. Kahn like the Richards Medical Laboratory in Philadelphia or the Salk Institute in La Jolla.

From 1947 to 1952 Kepes collected a rich collection of images from science, art and engineering. In 1951, he organized "The New Landscape," an exhibition at M.I.T.'s Hayden Gallery. The topic of the exhibition was the "new frontiers of the visible world", which was "until now hidden from the unaided eye." Among the exhibits were photo and electron micrographs of biological forms and crystal structures and examples of structure in art and architectural works. In his subsequent book *The New Landscape in Art and Science* (1956), Kepes published this material together with essays by well-known scientists and artists: Norbert Wiener, Fernand Leger, Jean Arp, and Walter Gropius were among the contributors. The exhibition and the excellently produced book contributed to the synthesis of art and science. According to Kepes art could aid science by providing it with new resources for visualization. Scientists and artists could work out new visual idioms when they work together.

Kepes was also involved in the organization of advanced seminars for graduate students in the School of Architecture of the M.I.T. on a range of topics of mutual interest to scientists and artists. These ideas came together in *Vision + Value*, the book series devoted to the examination of problems common to science and the visual arts. The purpose of the series, Kepes wrote, is "to systematize our knowledge about the role of vision, to find competent methods to develop it, and to map the concrete territories where creative vision is to be applied." Seven volumes have been published: *Education of Vision; Structure in Art and Science; The Nature and Art of Motion; Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm; The Man-Made Object; Sign, Image, Symbol and Arts of the Environment*.

The Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), was founded by Kepes originally to experiment with light "on a grand scale". Kepes's intention in founding the Center was to provide a framework where artists and scientists would collaborate on projects, experimenting with new media and working toward an "art of the environment". A publication at the dedication of the Center in the year 1967 presented themes for collaborative projects in the "exploration and development of the fundamental creative principles necessary for an environmental light art." Among the initial projects, Kepes suggested the orchestration of the urban nightscape by "developing simulation devices of light patterns coupled to a computer," in order to achieve "creative use of kinetic light designs on an environmental scale." Another project was the development of a "monumental kinetic light form for the middle of Boston Harbor, to provide the urban environments with a focal hearth, a monumental

gateway matched to the age of flight. Such a project would engage artists; structural, electronic, computer, and systems engineers; a city planner; psychologist and sociologist."

Kepes proposed installing mirroring surfaces floating in the harbor and a mile-long luminous wall with programmed effects. His intention was to introduce a "new aesthetic dimension of urban landscape through the controlled exploitation of the luminous accidental richness of the urban nightscape." The purpose of the Center's projects was to raise social consciousness and to intensify the visual and acoustic experience of urban areas, creating nuclei of attraction.

Kepes' Center for Advanced Visual Studies organized several exhibitions for large-scale environmental art to raise what Kepes called "ecological conscience and consciousness, values, ideals, and technological perspectives". "Explorations," an exhibition by Kepes and the Fellows of the Center in 1968 for the Smithsonian International Art Program, was intended to look ahead "toward an art scaled to the expanding scientific-industrial urban world and revealing its latent richness." Kepes designed and executed for this exhibition a "Photoelastic Walk", composed of fluorescent lights and screens which changed color when visitors walked on them. This work was a model for a planned, non-temporary installation conceived as an element of the future urban environment.

Kepes recognized and identified himself with the general political-cultural situation of the time: he wanted to conduct scientific analyzes, and work on theories of biological self-regulation. As he wrote, the artist is capable of making "the link between art and life, between man and man, and between man and environment, which provided the vital source of all the great art of the past". Speaking about visual patterns, he stressed: "The importance of pattern increases with the complexity of the things, from simple nuclei, electrons, mesons, crystals – enzymes + hormones, organs, man's body", pointing towards a social unity. "In art form the pattern is a common pattern, from the physical arrangement – to the psychological, emotive, perceptual configuration" as a common patterning.

Kepes developed his ideas of urban imagery and symbolism in a study which he directed together with the urban design theorist Kevin Lynch, his old friend from Chicago, from approximately 1954 to 1958 on the "Perceptual Forms of the City." Their investigations of various cities influenced Lynch's thinking. This is clearly present in his books, such as *The Image of the City*, and the later *View from the Road*.

Visibility, legibility, and what Kevin Lynch called "imageability" were the primary criteria used to evaluate the changing landscape of postwar United States. Without these optical and symbolic qualities, he thought, the inhabitants of this metropolitan landscape would be lost; they would not be able to navigate in their respective environments in a geographical, social, and cultural sense. Lynch stressed the importance of this issue for the contemporary city: "The very word 'lost' in our

language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster."

For many people, this sense of being lost had a broader meaning, particularly regarding the danger of losing their coherent identity: "People who live and work in an urban area have a deep emotional need to have 'their city' stand for something worthwhile in the world and to present to themselves and to mankind a strong physical image of this spiritual ambition in the structure of the city, in its vistas and in its major monuments. Through these, men venerate the past, remember the achievements of those who have gone before, reach for the future and affirm their self-respect and idealism." Although the terms "visibility," "legibility," and "imageability" do not carry the same meaning, they all describe a visual order that makes the navigation in the metropolitan landscape possible, as well as the consolidation of a coherent identity.

Kevin Lynch's book *The View from the Road* can be compared to Venturi's and Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*, as it was concerned with the visual aspects of intercity highway design. Lynch and the other co-authors of the book, Donald Appleyard and John R. Myer Assistant developed a particular graphic system to represent the driver's visual experience of cities and landscapes by driving along the highway. The book also contained sequential photographs and night scenes. The diagrams owed much to the theories of Kepes and his Hungarian friend and colleague, László Moholy-Nagy and his significant, pioneering work *Vision in Motion*.

In the mid-Sixties, the American artist Robert Smithson introduced a new argument into the discussion of the cityscape. Entropy was for Kepes and for most artists and engineers contributing to Kepes' books still a pejorative term, which describes the visual decay of the city with a scientific precision. For Smithson, however, entropy had the potential of a "new monumentality", a generic architecture (to use Rem Koolhaas' later label): banal and empty. Entropy is a fitting term to analyze the new corporate architecture of power, an architecture of gridded facades, an "undistinguished" form without qualities.

Smithson developed the designs for his earlier three-dimensional work by splitting apart and by layering two-dimensional representations. The works exhibited in the first room of Smithson's 1968 Dwan Gallery exhibition caused some confusion among visitors, since they did not see what they expected to see. They had to think hard to bring expectation, representation and imagination together, to re-order the exhibits mentally. This is an unusual task, requiring that the visitor participates in the process of "mapping" and "map reading."

*Postmodernism and Mimetic Science*

The artistic avant-garde and the scientific avant-garde shared the idea of intellectual and social progress. The first cracks on the surface of the image of common work, which Kepes and his exhibition and publishing activities presented, started to show later, with the so-called postmodernity, as the values of an industrial society based on progress were called into question – in an economical as well as ecological sense. Rationality was called into question as an instrument of hegemony.

The new social movements of the Eighties and the Nineties received their ideological goals and discursive topics by rejecting any enthusiasm for natural science: alternative medicine versus school medicine; esotericism and New Age versus a rational-scientific world-view are just some of the well-known issues of the debate. The ecological movement was originally critical of technology and industry; as some of its representants carry today government responsibilities in countries, they find it difficult to balance between their earlier utopianism and today's technological pragmatism.

Science has difficulties in providing explanations, and it provokes artists to fill the gap in explaining or interpreting the world. Artists see a chance in introducing a parallel strategy seen as research; they are fascinated by the methods and results of natural sciences, they find their themes and motives there, but they don't accept this serious methodology as a sole basis of their work. The situation in architecture schools shows well the dilemma: theorizing design as research makes it easier to compete with technological departments for money and staff. At the same time, architects consider themselves as artists, regarding their work as a subjective self-outing and self-realization. For this reason, they articulate a strong opposition to a rigorous methodical-systematic research, which they find too narrow.

In the general public, the admiration for the advances in communication technology goes hand in hand with the fear of excesses and even possible catastrophes. Greenpeace accused a Swiss chemical firm of illegally introducing a genetically altered sort of corn that is resistant against insects; there are many such examples showing that "genetic engineering" is a term triggering high public emotion. For society, the issue is more complex than that of nuclear energy, ranging from copyrighting genetic information until the cloning of human embryos. Even information technology raises the danger of a totalitarian society of supervision and control.

The resulting work of artists oscillates between political posters against Xenotransplants and a kind of entertaining exhibit, like the hybrid animals of Thomas Grünfeld, titled "Misfits". Such artworks are frequently perceived as gags, not unlike the "manimals" of Ben van Berkel that exemplify the possibility of fluid, not collage-like transformations and metamorphoses in architectural form.

Catherine David, the curator of Documenta X in 1997 in Kassel emphasized her concern for urban and sociological phenomena, global migrations, and local gentrification. By exhibiting the work of artists such as Lois Weinberger, Olaf Nicolai, or Rosemarie Trockel, she decided for the “research” principle, according to her motto “Laboratory instead of picture show”. The fact that no closed, generally accepted world-view exists today, explains why the traditional picture as a “framed” entity, as a representant of the single, obliging world-view became almost anachronistic. Still, many artists working with methods and images of molecular biology, physics or neurobiology end up producing exactly such “pictures”, since they reject the basis of natural sciences, operating by verifications and falsifications toward an idea of “truth”. Of course, there is nothing to “falsify” on the field of artists’ hypotheses.

The “Spurensicherung” of the Seventies, the “true lies”, the imaginary archaeologies of Anne and Patrick Poirier, or of Jochen Gerz needed moments of intuition – just like Peter Eisenman’s “Cities of Artificial Excavation”. The formal results iterated and superposed the layers of a site, which were related to so-called “narratives”. This systematic work with true and false documents was art camouflaged as science (archeology); counting on the interpretations of the observer.

Now the question is the possibility of developing concepts and deductive methods valid in science as well as in culture. Collecting, classifying, ordering have for Rosemarie Trockel an entirely different meaning than for the Poiriers before; just like the territory has a different meaning for Rem Koolhaas compared to Eisenman’s artificial excavations.

We see this new strategy emerging in the 1990s and moving rapidly away from the traditional concept of art and architecture. Catherine David was interested in responses of artist to phenomena such as global migrations, the transformation of cities and landscapes under pressure. Rem Koolhaas presented in Kassel the results of his “field work” in China, introducing “a number of new, copyrighted concepts, that ... represent a new conceptual framework to describe and interpret the contemporary urban condition”. Artists such as Olaf Nicolai and Rosemarie Trockel exhibited their biological crossover-experiments. Mutations, biopsy, implant become part of the architectural terminology, used in a metaphorical or in an empirical sense, like the Dutch architectural firm MVRDV.

Art, architecture and urbanism appropriate the terminology, concepts and visualization methods of science: “a world of numbers turns into diagrams. These diagrams work as emblems for operations, agendas, tasks. A ‘datatown’ that resists the objective of style” – is what MVRDV wants to achieve, according to their statement in the book *Metacity-Datatown*. Still, we must be suspicious: are they “elaborating a style”, after all?

Satellite images are particularly important for presenting the urban condition of Europe, like Stefano Boeri and the Multiplicity group. The Studio Basel of the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich are working on comparable research projects. Artists like Peter Fend and Ingo Günther are using satellite photography of crisis regions to create the utopia of a “Refugee Republic”, which does not need a territory to defend, and therefore needs no war either. Can we detect here a self-image of the artist as demiurge, Weltbaumeister, global creative genius, whose tracks lead from the art theory of the Renaissance to the metaphors of Cyberspace? The use of the latest imaging and communication technologies, the invention and control of virtual worlds and the impressive ways in which they can be turned into concrete or erased again suggests parallels to old concepts of the ingenious creator who has the means and power to create an ideal world as a “Gesamtkunstwerk”.

According to Ingo Günther, the purpose of art is neither to illustrate an experience which can be lived outside the artistic realm, nor to confirm the previously known in a sensual way. Art, as he understands it, should enable us to surpass what we already know, are aware and have thought about. “If art helped to portray and interpret the metaphysical world, maybe it can now be expected to describe, if not to shape the metamedial world”.

Artists work with sensitive “authentic” material SDI (satellite derived intelligence), but also with blood, earth, animals, waste... Architects conduct research in shantytowns and bidonvilles. Not the romantic world of “dirty realism”, not the individual artifact (as closed entity, reflecting an subjective world-view), but the research lab is the center of attention. Still, we can detect how a fascination with the “*picturesque*” replaces the scientist’s search for truth. Picturesque is a term that emerged in British context, as the result of territorial improvement, allowing even the low, the disgusting, or ugly to become part of the larger “picture”. Already in the Eighteenth century the picturesque landscape was explained with Chinese influences, therefore it must not be surprising that Rem Koolhaas brands PICTURESQUE © as one of his keywords when analyzing in the volume *Great Leap Forward* the contemporary landscape and cityscape in China.

Koolhaas and his co-authors state that the PICTURESQUE © facilitates the development of southern China by visually preparing the viewer to receive any and all chaotic fragments of construction by integrating them into a pleasing and inhabitable vision. This has become crucial to understand the incredible speed of the development of the Pearl River Delta area, “since it transforms the most extreme juxtaposition of contrasting elements into pleasant, coherent, inhabitable scenery that delights the mind’s eye and titillates the geomancer’s compass... (...) An aesthetic visual consumption, the PICTURESQUE © becomes the aesthetic framework in which rampant development can take place and transform every last fragment of wilderness into an inhabitable scene. In the PRD, every view from every point is now inescapably

PICTURESQUE ©: equal parts highrise, golf course, billboard, tree, sky, and distant (exploded) mountain”.

Many questions remain, of course. Remarkable is the role of the artist-architect-researcher today. As a “star”, he is in the center of attention, as the cult of a “great scientist” wanes. But where is the place of this new art? In the exhibition gallery, in the magazines, or in scientific conferences?

As contemporary artists use the imaging and reconnaissance technologies developed by the military, and feel obliged to grasp public attention (and feed this attention with new images and actions), are the artists now giving up their critical stance?

Particularly in architecture, the transition between uncommitted aesthetic production and meaningful social acts is an open question since the historic avant-gardes. Today the question is being raised if criticism in the traditional sense still is a suitable way or effective means to change an increasingly complex reality, or it is time now to try out new, media-based strategies. But according to which criteria should the results of a „research“ or „experiment“ be evaluated?

Cyberspace and virtual reality have generally been considered as a technological matter. They have seemed to offer some kind of technological repair for a world becoming increasingly homogenized, promising the restoration of a sense of community via new technological means. We are told to think of them as alternatives to the real world and its “entropy”, to stick with our terminology. Still, I would argue that we must stop thinking of the reality as mere projection screens for the imagined identities of politicians, the tourist areas, the shopping centers with their atmosphere of perpetual fun. The ideal of common interests, however, is an illusion. We must recognize the constitutive role of differences in social life.

The question of technology is not primarily a technological question. In considering the development of techno-communities, we must continue to be guided by social and political objectives against the wishful euphoria of virtual communities. The enthusiasm for cyber-society can be explained with the metaphysics of technological progress – no matter comes next, it must be better than what went before. It is time to reconsider this kind of justification, as we are concerned with new questions of power and democracy today. We can all too easily regard cyberspace and virtual reality as a new kind of space and reality. But is it possible to create a “new” reality, which would be free of the kind of problems we had to face in the “old” reality? Can we really substitute a reality more in conformity with our hopes for the unsatisfactory one? The new communication technologies promise to offer a chance for re-creating the world anew and better. Like utopias before, what such hopes display is first of all the dissatisfaction with the present condition.

The mythology of the “digital society” appears more persuasive than its sociology. It is time to re-locate virtual culture in the real world (the real world that virtual culturalists, seduced by their own metaphors, pronounce dead or just before extinction). Through the development of new technologies, we are more and more open to experiences of de-realization and de-localization. But we continue to exist as local, physical entities. We must consider our own place between these extreme conditions.

Paul Virilio imagines the coexistence of two societies. One is a society of “cocoon”, where people hide away at their homes, linked together by channels of communication, but immobilized and inert. The other is a society of the congested megalopolis, where people are actively participating in urban life. Some people, those in the virtual community, will live in the real time of the world-city, but others will live in the actual city, in the streets. In the first society, you may be stimulated by the pleasures of the internet. The other society will accumulate the reality that has been repressed. But Freud tells us that what is repressed cannot be kept out of the dreams.