

'Reality Sucks'

On Alienation and Cybergnosis

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Paper prepared for:

Concilium: International Journal of Theology
Special issue (2005/1) *Cyber Space – Cyber Ethics – Cyber Theology*
(Editors: Borgman, Van Erp, and Haker)

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1. Introduction

According to secularization theory, the technological and religious realms are fundamentally incompatible in the sense that the development and expansion of the former contributes to the latter’s inevitable demise: “Secularization is in large part intimately involved with the development of technology, since technology is itself the encapsulation of human rationality. Machines, electronic devices, computers, and the whole apparatus of applied science are rational constructs. They embody the principles of cost efficiency, the choice of the most effective means to given ends, and the elimination of all superfluous expenditure of energy, time, or money. The instrumentalism of rational thinking is powerfully embodied in machines” (Wilson 1976: 88).

This logic of secularization, assuming that “the mysterious is merely that which has not yet been technicized” (Ellul 1967[1954]: 142), suggests that technological experts are the pioneers of rationalization and disenchantment, and are as such characterized by a rejection of religion and spirituality. Reversely, religious people are held to consider technology an alienating force, threatening to erode all that is spiritually meaningful. Although such a strained relationship may have existed in the past, it is increasingly undermined by the digital revolution of the 1990s. The movie *The Matrix*, to give the most obvious example, does not simply portray virtual reality as incompatible with religion or spirituality. To be sure, it is Neo’s assignment to liberate mankind from its digital prison, but the matrix is simultaneously

depicted as somehow better than real life – as a world full of magical and spiritual opportunities that endows Neo with supernatural powers and abilities.

Indeed, contemporary authors such as Bey (2001[1996]), Davis (1999[1998]), and Wertheim (2000[1999]) speculate about the ways in which digital technology creates virtual worlds that open up unheard-of spiritual possibilities. In this article, we argue that those authors capture and represent a significant process of religious change that has been driven by the digital revolution of the 1990s. What we are witnessing today is a remarkable convergence of digital technology and spirituality – a ‘cybergnosis’, that constitutes a relocation of the sacred to the digital realm, inspired by the desire to overcome the experiences of alienation, suffering, and impotence.

2. Digital Technology and Its Seductions

“If you’ve ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure – virtual worlds offer you this opportunity”, the website of the internet game *Ultima Online* states.¹ The site contrasts real life and virtual life, boredom and excitement, and routine and adventure. *Ultima Online*, or so we are told, “is the place where you can be whatever you want to be.” It is obvious that we are dealing here with a website that also serves as a marketing instrument. Nevertheless, its representation of virtual reality is strikingly similar to what one of us found among ICT-specialists in Silicon Valley when collecting data for his dissertation (Aupers 2004). Sampled because of their tendency to understand virtual reality as spiritual, those ICT-specialists also feel that virtual worlds enable one to overcome the restrictions and limitations of ordinary life and to realize one’s full human potential.

Gwenny, a female programmer who plays different characters in online role-playing games (among which *Ultima Online*), explains that what makes playing those games a spiritual event for her, is the experience of unlimited liberty: “Playing *Ultima Online*, for me, definitely has a spiritual dimension. In *Ultima Online* you can make your own clothes, and your armor and you can fish and you can talk with people. It’s like real life, only better! You don’t have to pay the rent. I have lots of friends there.” Most respondents agree on the spiritual significance of a disembodied presence in the virtual realm: “You are not at all

confined by your body when you're online. You can go places, you can do things you can't do in real life, you can see differently. You're not of a particular gender, age, color, size or shape". Talking about her project *Placeholder*, a simulated natural environment in which participants can take on the shapes of animals, Brenda Laurel says: "The goal was, frankly, quite spiritual to me. All my work is (...) It's magical. It suggests to us a kind of transformation that we might never thought of being possible" (see Cobb (1999) on the spiritual experiences of other participants in this project). René Vega, a computer programmer with Apple, summarizes the respondents' view that cyberspace simply cannot be compared to real-life physical space, because the absence of gravity, time, and place produces almost unlimited opportunities: "You enter a completely different world. The rules of that world are much more malleable than the rules of this particular world. (...) They can alter the nature of gravity, they can alter the nature of communication (...) When people are immersed into these worlds it can take on, literally, an otherworldly experience. They are in some place else. Their senses are being fed with information of that other world, another universe".

It is precisely this decisive difference from real life that places one in a god-like position, Mark Pesce explains. Pesce developed Virtual Reality Modelling Language (VRML) – the three-dimensional successor to HyperText Markup Language (HTML) – and considers the transformation of the World Wide Web into a veritable parallel universe the principal goal of his life. "Cyberspace," he argues, "gives the impulse to disengage from the suffering that the world is (...) People who pop into cyberspace have to create the world, they have to create their belief system, they have to create the rules. There is no other way! When you pop into cyberspace there is nothing there unless you bring it in. You have to be the magical agent, the god, in that environment for anything to happen".

Bonny de Vargo, a virtual reality expert, tells about a virtual meeting with her colleague and co-worker Bruce Damer, himself also a pioneer of virtual reality: "I remember seeing Bruce once. We spent a lot of time physically working at the same things, not virtually. And I saw him virtually when he was somewhere on another side of the planet. After not seeing him for a couple of months, I went up to him and I wanted to hug him. And I went right through him! It's so weird! You can even stand inside somebody's body. (...) You begin to feel like spirits, souls, you know (...). You feel the sense of penetration into a ghost world or something". And she adds: "In the digital realm, (I could start doing) everything I

¹ See: <http://www.uo.com/>.

wanted to do that was restricted by gravity and geography. (...) When you think of yourself as transforming shape, going out of body... You know: the god person! In our worlds, you just rise up and you can fly over the land and get this sense of scale. You're looking at things from a bird's eye view. So I think this gives you a sense of... sort of the god feeling!" Game designer Brian Mortarty, who dreams of creating a virtual space in which people can live like angels or gods, agrees: "The ability to be everywhere, all at once, without going mad, is the real challenge. Why should we settle for avatars,² when we can be angels?"³

Four respondents are Extropians, one of the best-known and most active posthumanist or transhumanist groups, aiming at the liberation of the human spirit from the mortal body, enabling it to roam eternally through an infinite computer-generated space (e.g., Davis 1999[1998], Dery 1996, Fukuyama 2002). The Extropians are organized in the World Extropy Institute. Their principal spokesman, Max More, summarizes their ambitions as follows in his manifesto 'A Transhuman Declaration': "Seeking more intelligence, wisdom, and effectiveness, an indefinite life-span, and the removal of political, cultural, biological, and psychological limits to self-actualization and self-realization. Perpetually overcoming constraints on our progress and possibilities. Expanding into the universe and advancing without end."⁴ One of the Extropian respondents is Spike Jones, an aerospace engineer, who became interested at the end of the 1980s after reading Erik Drexler's *Engines of Creation* (1990[1986]) about nanotechnology. Another is David Harris, who works for a company that develops biochips and is fascinated by the spiritual implications of downloading human consciousness into a computer: "'Hey, I'm a continuation of David Harris. Yes, I know his physical body went away. But here I am in the computer. And I am faster! I could be transmitted across the universe as bits, instead of a body!' This maps out the notion of being souls, spiritual entities." Another Extropian, a programmer calling himself Reason, believes that mankind is about to get rid of the body and become gods, angels or spiritual entities: "We're becoming gods as soon as we make ourselves the way we want. (...) We are coming now to a stage in the history of humanity where we can do all the things we dream of (...) The ability for me to become more than human, much much more than human until a point where I cannot even conceive of what I will become. I will become a god! Everybody who wants to become a god will become a god. You sit there and just can't wrap your mind

² The term 'avatar' is borrowed from Hinduism, in which it refers to a god's materialization. In digital culture, it refers to the reverse: a digital representation of the self.

³ Brian Mortarty, in a lecture on a Computer Game Conference in 1996.

around it. But it is obviously the way to go. It's inevitable. If you choose that path".

3. Cybergnosis

This discourse resonates strikingly with classical gnosticism as it flourished around the third century B.C., after the decline of the Roman empire. In the cosmology of ancient gnosticism, man is considered an essentially spiritual being, that originally inhabited a divine world of light, but has since fallen into the worldly prison of the body and the material world, created by a false god, the 'demiurge'. Hence, a world-rejecting ethos and strong feelings of alienation and nostalgia – a desire to return to man's divine origin – are characteristic of gnosticism: "The goal of gnostic striving is the release of the 'inner man' from the bonds of this world and his return to his native realm of light" (Jonas 1958: 44). Consequently, gnostics seek salvation in spiritual worlds, especially to be found within the deeper layers of their own consciousness, where the 'divine spark' is held to be still smouldering: "the gnostics of all ages search for God (i.e. for utter reality, meaning and freedom) in the depth of their own souls" (Zijderveld 1970: 108). Like classical gnosticism, the discourse discussed above considers worldly life as unsatisfactory, limiting, and alienating – as a prison that prevents one from bringing one's real powers and potentialities to full expression. Whereas classical gnosticism seeks salvation from the body and the material world, however, this discourse of 'cybergnosis' precisely embraces digital technology as promising salvation from real-life suffering and impotence and as enabling one to overcome man's state of alienation.

This attribution of spiritual meaning to the digital realm constitutes a remarkable change from the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Driven by a desire to escape modern technocratic society and increase individual liberty, the counter culture emphasized the incompatibility of technology and spirituality. It propagated a spiritual quest for meaning in the deeper layers of the self and seeking salvation by means of soft natural techniques such as alternative medicine and psychospiritual therapies (Roszak 1969, Zijderveld 1970). Although the anti-technological stance was not uncontested at the time, the dissident writings and activities of influential counterculturalists such as Robert Pirsig, Ken Kesey, and Timothy Leary were the exception rather than the rule. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1984[1974]), for instance, Pirsig criticized the

⁴ More, 'A Transhuman Declaration', <http://www.extropy.org/ideas/principles.html>.

dualism of technology and nature by adopting a radically holistic perspective and Kesey and Leary explored the mind-expanding and spiritual possibilities of technology – especially, but not only, LSD (e.g., Davis 1999[1998], Dery 1996, Rushkoff 1994).

Since then, technology is increasingly seen as redeeming rather than alienating. Inspired by the work of cyberpunk authors such as William Gibson, Vernor Vinge, Neal Stephenson, and Rudy Rucker, counterculturalists such as Timothy Leary and Terence McKenna exchanged hallucinogenic drugs for digital technology in their quest for mind-expansion and spirituality. Since the rapid development of digital technologies in the 1990s, Silicon Valley has been witnessing a veritable cross-fertilization of spirituality and computer technology, visible in influential magazines such as *Axess*, *The Village Voice*, and *Mondo 2000*. Especially *Mondo 2000* became a platform for cooperation between pioneers of virtual reality such as Jaron Lanier and Eric Gullichsen, cyberpunk authors such as William Gibson and Rudy Rucker, and spiritual dreamers such as Leary, McKenna, and also John Perry Barlow.⁵ Queen Mu en R.U. Sirius, founders of *Mondo 2000* in 1989, reject the 1960's sacralization of nature (“It was boring!”) and propagate the spiritual possibilities of virtual reality instead: “*Mondo 2000* is here to cover the leading edge in hyper culture. We’ll bring you the latest in human/technological interactive mutational form as they happen (...) We’re talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. (...) High-jacking technology for personal empowerment, fun and games. Flexing those synapses! Stoking those neuropeptides! Making Bliss states our normal waking consciousness. Becoming the Bionic Angel (...)” (cited in Sobchack 2001[1994]: 324).

It is even argued today that the spiritual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has contributed significantly to the digital revolution of the 1990s (e.g., Dery 1996, Himanen 2001, Pels 2002) and that ICT experts in Silicon Valley, unlike those on America's east coast, do not so much emphasize the instrumental, economic, and administrative promises of digital technology, but rather “(want) Virtual Reality to serve as a machine-driven LSD that brings revolution in consciousness” (Heim 1993: 142). It is quite telling, indeed, that many pioneers of digital technology in Silicon Valley are rooted in the spiritual and psychedelic counter culture of the 1960s. Examples are Steve Jobs and Steven Wozniak (who have built

⁵ Barlow wrote the lyrics for the psychedelic band Grateful Dead, is co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and author of the influential essay ‘A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’. See:

the Apple computer), Bill Joy (co-founder of Sun Microsystems), Mitch Kapor (Lotus 1-2-3), Stewart Brand (introduced the concept of the PC), and Jaron Lanier and Brenda Laurel (pioneers of virtual reality).

The affinity that New Agers and Pagans display with cyberspace also confirms the convergence of digital technology and spirituality. As today's most prominent offshoots of western esotericism, New Age and Paganism reject belief in 'external' sources of truth and meaning. Those can only be found within the deeper layers of the self: "(...) the most pervasive and significant aspect of the lingua franca of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience 'God', 'the Goddess', the 'Source', 'Christ Consciousness', the 'inner child', the 'way of the heart', or, most simply and (...) most frequently, 'inner spirituality'" (Heelas 1996: 19). As such, New Age and Paganism offer an epistemological alternative to 'faith' (Christianity) and 'reason' (science). In contrast with these two competing epistemological views, they seek for 'gnosis':

"According to (gnosis), truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or 'enlightenment'. Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of reason or faith, it is in principle not generally accessible. This 'inner knowing' cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of faith (...) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience" (Hanegraaff 1996: 519).

The quest for self-spirituality and the sacralization of the self it entails goes along with a demonization of social institutions. Everything that is not self-chosen, but 'artificially' and 'externally' imposed, and that as such subordinates the self to pre-given patterns of behavior, is rejected. More than that: adjustment to institutional role expectations is held responsible for a state of alienation that can only lead to frustration, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorder, depression, physical disease, and violence (Aupers and Houtman 2003). This state of alienation can only be overcome by bringing the divine self to full expression, unhampered by social institutions and role expectations. In those circles, cyberspace is considered extremely attractive for this purpose, judging from observations in recent literature on religion and cyberspace. Many New Agers and Pagans construct the Internet as a deeply enchanted and magical space. They consider it "the tool that can single-handedly transform our world into a Paradise" (cited in Pels 2002: 107), as "connecting everything,"

http://www.eff.org/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/barlow_0296.declaration.

and as “truly magical, since all it is is energy” (cited in Nightmare 2001: 66-67). Equally telling, Berger (1999: 76), Davis (1999[1998]: 184), and Nightmare (2001: 23) declare New Age and Paganism to be the fastest growing religions on the World Wide Web.

We are witnessing today, in short, not only ICT specialists who dream gnostic dreams of total liberty and omnipotence in virtual reality, but also gnostic New Agers and Pagans who see cyberspace as deeply enchanted and magical. Both types of evidence lead to the same conclusion: far from being incompatible, spirituality and digital technology have converged to a degree that strikingly contradicts the assumptions of secularization theory.

4. Conclusion

Since the digital revolution of the 1990s, the familiar antagonism of spirituality and technology, still by and large characteristic of the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, has been questioned and repudiated. Digital technology seems to be increasingly considered the means *par excellence* to liberate the self from worldly suffering and imperfection and to overcome the alienation of modern life. The digital revolution of the 1990s hence seems to have stimulated a radical relocation of the sacred, rather than simply having pushed the contemporary world into an inescapably secular future. The task of mapping and theorizing the relationships between modernity, digital technology and religion has of course only recently been taken up in earnest.⁶ Yet, even at this early stage, good-old secularization theory is unlikely to be able to escape the intellectual battlefield unscathed.

⁶ The research program *Cyberspace Salvations: Computer Technology, Simulation, and Modern Gnosis*, funded by the *Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO)*, aims to contribute to this aim by combining research efforts by Peter Pels, Dorien Zandbergen, Sabine Lauderbach, and ourselves.

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