

*RUSKIN'S HORROR OF THE FLESH:
The Ideology of the Virtual*

Johanna Drucker

Apocryphal or no, the story goes that 19th-century aesthete, connoisseur, essayist, and critic of rapidly emerging influence John Ruskin was so distraught upon confronting the undressed body of his bride, the lovely young Effie Grey, on their wedding night that he failed then and ever after to consummate the marriage. Complex difficulties ensued and eventually the marriage was dissolved. But poor Ruskin's distress might be attributed to a curious triangulation of images: the ideal, the imagined, and the real. We have no evidence to suggest that his repugnance to the (by all accounts) fair (and presumably) virgin bride was produced by sensations of taste, smell, or touch, but we may surmise that it was the sight of the tangled thicket sprung up before the gates to what he had always imagined would be a smooth threshold to heaven that dissuaded him from even the impulse towards conjugal behavior. The images that had nurtured him had left him unprepared for this moment. Classical statuary, bleached in the Mediterranean sun and rains to a condition of white marble purity, aptly suited the chaste European imagination and its hierarchies of purity. Such an image of the body was as closely modelled as one suited to the chaste mind as it could possibly be – limbs supple, poised, and clean, eyes empty, face blank. Ruskin had been also steeped the idealized beauty of artistically rendered nudes from Titian and the Venetians through to the romantic and neo-classical painters of his own day – all with rosy tinted flesh tactfully modified in avoidance of anatomical details. But then, the shock. He had been confronted with real flesh, its particularities and its brambles. Poor Ruskin. His sensual appetites were circumscribed within parameters so absolutely determined by his mediating aesthetics that they existed in a mental remove from any encounter with materiality, let alone the fragrant flesh.

The tale may be disputed, reorganized, reread, but it remains a wonderful account of the pitfalls of training in the higher things of life, a kind of cautionary anti-Arnoldian fable in which virtue is its own downfall. Aesthetics an impediment to pleasure. Easy enough to extrapolate from this to a simple reading of life in the virtual world as always destined for such a disappointing end. As if the denial of the flesh were assured by immersion into a universe of simulation, largely visual, that cannot prepare the viewer for all the many dimensions of chance and serendipity that befall the wondering eye and errant hand and ear and tongue and nose in the world of material forms. But to reconstruct this rather dreadful, judgmental platonic hierarchy through or as an analytic frame for the virtual feels just too predictable. After all, this simply repeats the smug prohibitions against fleshly delights so dear to the already sobering forces of conservatism – those that have robbed the first world of its sense of taste and smell through a campaign for hygiene, of heft and weight and voluptuousness by its desires for dietary regimes, and of revelrous excess by its chaste adherence to programs of health-minded or other religious reforms and restraints. The cautionary mood that suggests negative outcomes from the virtual turns out to be oddly complicit with the forces it would seem to oppose – largely because they all divide the world according to the same oppositions, as if it were the Natural Order of Things to see mind and body, imagination and material, image and materiality, visuality and sensuality, intellection and physicality on opposite sides of very regularly drawn lines. Underlying such strict disciplinary control is a lurking fear that there is no line to draw, not that we find ourselves on one side or the other of it. What happens when we perceive the “real” from a virtual perspective. Do we appreciate that it is an image of supposedly “actual” life sustained by those same differentiations? Virtual phenomena are removed from material phenomenon by several levels of representation and digital encoding. But the mind apprehends neither the real nor the virtual (nor the ideal for that matter) in a direct or natural way. The more it looks like nature, the more cultural any experience of the lived is likely to be. Can we redraw the divisions between real and virtual, mediated and apprehended, according to a dotted, zig-zag, broken and unruly lines? Or shall we simply impose, again, the same retro-minded reinscription (dreadful aptly disciplinary-sounding term) of tedious oppositions that only sustain outmoded ideologies for the sake of the same old status quo?

For instance, ever notice that in the tropes of dystopic film and fiction, grit and grime always symbolize the real and its capacity for decay? The efficient streamlined zones of data function resist wear and tear. The real is impure, fleshly, sinful, and degraded, needing to be policed and subject to regimes of discipline. One of the much-touted virtues of the virtual – every copy is the same, no degradation of generations of production through reproduction – has a horrifying genetically engineered rhetoric of eugenics in their love of the pure data stream.

Thus the judgment passed on the virtual aligns very conveniently with a long-standing cultural binarism, as deeply Manichean as it is xtian or otherwise religious, that just loves to see the world divided into zones of pure and impure. Such alignments have made it hard for the fantasy aspects of fantasmatic virtuality to be properly perceived – or for the virtual aspects of the real to be fully recognized. In this context, for instance, misconceived confusions about the reality of porn (heavens!) allow the silliest of debates to rage in the name of protecting the innocent from exposure to imagery far tamer than that of Greek mythology (cannibalism, incest, patricide) or Grimm's Fairy Tales in their original. The current fear of fantasy is charged by the potency ascribed to digital technology as an enabler of the virtual domain.

We seem to have forgotten that the mind is the body, that the skin of the brain lies on the surface of our awareness, reaching outwards, towards it with projected fantasy. We think always in terms of input and implants and pollution of the pure condition. No doubt because such a fantasy suits by the conviction that anything which can be packaged for consumption can generate a profit. Packaging the virtual as a set of consumable modules (entertainment, health, security and safety) allows the gate-keeping meter to be set very efficiently. But when the production of meaning blurs the boundaries of self and other, thing and experience, somatic and imagined pleasures, what then?

The standard reading of the Ruskin incident is that he spoiled himself for the real by exposure to the ideal. Mapped onto contemporary culture, such a tale justifies the terrors that give the virtual its potency. How ruined our children shall be by immersion into a synthetic universe that gratifies their every dream of power in a simulation where they pay to subject the random forces to their infantile wills. Or, how perversely self-absorbed the adults shall become, able to indulge in sexual gratification without the task of dealing with an Other. Sex and violence and domination. The usu-

al fare of western culture, all promise to get out of bounds in the virtual world, exceed all limits. Of course it is that *promise* of excess, and not its reality, that is so useful for the hyped sales pitch. Was Ruskin cheated of the real by his ideal? Was his capacity for lived experience spoiled by his indulgence in virtuality? Or was the shape of the real he inhabited such that for whatever reason he preferred not to engage in intimacies with his young wife? The basis of Ruskin's actions doesn't matter. We can't recover them in any case. What carries over from this tale at a distance of nearly two centuries is that the lines of distinction are still operative within the cultural mythology.

Indeed, the current ideology of the virtual exists at the intersection of cultural mythologies about subjectivity, materiality, and illusion. Each of these is shifted in the discourse of the virtual. Subjectivity becomes linked to a cultural myth of the self, materiality to a discourse of body/mind sensation balanced between control and ecstasy, and illusion to a techno-science of absolute authority and mastery. The virtual appears to promise that reality can be replaced by and/or manipulated through symbolic representations in data form once this real is "recognized" as an information pattern. The hyper-rationality of an Enlightenment scientific mind, with its desire to objectify all matter, mind, and phenomena meets the equally extreme self-centered absorption of a Romantic self projecting its unbounded, expansive, imaginative drives and desires onto the infinitely expanding field of experience. A peculiar blend, if ever there was one, of quantifying reason and qualifying desire. Will they be synthesized in an utterly mad vision of the empire of the sentient and sensate? Or lost, plunged into an oblivion of immeasurable proportions?

Probably neither. The ideology of the virtual, though it encodes these apocalyptic possibilities within it, germlike and potent, is produced by cultural forces whose mythologies are more familiar to us, even as they masquerade in their new simulacral clothing. Self, body, and power, all find their latest extreme of cultural mythmaking in the technology of the virtual. But the technology didn't make these myths. Quite the contrary, the idea of the virtual is created by the same cultural conditions that are sustained by and sustain these myths. I'll look at each of these notions in turn and see if I can synthesize any insights in the process.

Self/Subject/Subjectivity

In *Virtualities*, her book on television, media art, and cyberculture, Margaret Morse defines the virtual as “a fiction of presence” (Morse 1998). This definition lacks heavy critical baggage or value judgement, and provides a workable conception of virtuality independent of any specific technical apparatus. Morse sketches the parameters of “the virtual” within the theoretical framework of subjectivity and enunciation. As developed by structuralist linguists Emil Benveniste and Gerard Greimas, subjectivity is created in a reciprocity of I/you exchanges. These pronouns, known as “shifters”, are empty of any specific identity and therefore capable of being identified with by any speaker or listener. They function as placeholders, or positions, rather than as substantive entities. Extrapolating from this linguistic base, Morse suggests that the symbolic construction of self in social and cultural systems of communication and representation is always in accord with this simulacral (but functional, operational) concept of the subject.

The conventional forms of address used in television, in human-computer interface, and in other apparatuses that use forms of direct address (as in the multiple choice menus of an ATM machine) create these conditions of subjectivity. We are always, Morse points out, being constituted as subjects, and never more so than in our engagement with various modes of technology. The virtual, with its fiction of presence effected through all manner of representations (traditional storytelling to digital media environments), engages the individual viewer in a game of simulation. In the contemporary context this process isn't new, only the degree of fictional intensity created by illusion devices that augment the condition of “reality”. The self is a construct produced through the mediation of symbols – whether these exchanges are human/human or human/machine. Virtuality functions as an extension of traditional modes of symbolic communication and exchange, but the current context gives it a specific twist.

Morse's theoretical position emphasizes a fragmented self created in a symbolic network of social and cultural systems. Her insights into virtuality distance her radically from the creators of systems of illusory mastery and ecstasy that presume the self as a rational, intact, and essential

entity. The sense of self-identity that produces us as social and linguistic subjects is riven with gaps that must be crossed. Morse's insights go far towards contextualizing the discussion of new media technology within familiar (but not always so well articulated) notions of individual subjectivity and its cultural and social conditions. She makes clear that technological conditions, such as head mounted displays, body-gloves, and immersant environments are not the only way to understand the concept of the virtual. But even so, Morse's careful discussion of "the subject" stops short of grasping subjectivity as an extension of the romantic self. This extravagant image of ecstatic, consuming, desiring subjectivity is one of the dual engines of mythic virtuality, of which the corollary fantasy of mastery is the other. The concepts of body and power are the means by which these become engaged in the discourse of the virtual.

Body/Mind/Sensation/Sentience

The body invoked in sophisticated discussions of virtuality is never immaterial or dematerialized (Moser & Macleod 1996).¹ The new body is an embodied mind, not some cerebral intellect having a dry game of golf from an armchair, but a fine bit of wetware happily stimulated by its interconnections to lips and fingertips, the taut and receptive epidermis, and the well-wrought meat of muscle, sinew, joint, and bone. In the resulting reciprocity, the stimulacral-sentio-sensate networked circuit of projection/ingestion-and-exchange loops somatic/intelligent awareness together before the virtual inserts its extenuating capabilities onto the surface of the body-flesh. But in the new technological conditions of immersant environments, body is subject to new technological conditions in which it can be experienced and forgotten simultaneously, lived to the fullest and left behind, overwhelmed and obliterated. I suspect there is a flaw here, and that the flaw is central to conceptions of "the body" as "the" body.

The "immersed" body of the virtual domain (whether immersed in a traditional fiction or slipped into the full body glove of pseudo-proprioceptive heightened illusion awareness) is not the body of poor old René Descartes's mind/body split. No way. That body did not know what it knew, or that it knew. That body was a mere vehicle for the mind, a flesh bucket in which to carry the real substance of spirit and sentience, and

probably best when mortified. Descartes's was a whole body, a body that had a totalized existence as a thing-to-be-perceived, known to be one with the identity of its possessor (odd but apt word given the peculiar distinction that was made between the body and its perceiving self) even as it was distinguished from that self in its spiritual and sentient dimensions. But centuries have passed. We know better. The body is the mind; we live it and know it and cannot fathom the peculiar distinction that separated the two according to some peculiar Manicheean system of oppositions, value-laden as these are within traditions that line up their moral codes along the great divide of flesh-and-spirit.

No, we know we do not live in a mind/body duality, in a schizophrenic axis of cross purposes and oppositional impulses. But "the body" invoked by the entertainment nexus of fully immersive oblivious awareness (whether the indulgent/wicked image of pleasure-centered ecstasy or the virtuous/extended body capable of unprecedented feats and noble acts) is nonetheless a distorted concept. Why? The conception of a whole body, a body whose wholeness is defined by the contours of skin (to which the body glove clings), takes the defining boundary of itself as a delimited totality. The boundary is not what is troublesome here, though its absoluteness might be argued. No, the perversity resides in the weird sense that bodily wholeness makes sentient and somatic existence into a single integrated unit. If the body of Cartesian rationality is "other" than the self, then the body of embodied knowledge pretends to be the same as that self.

Nell Tannhauf notes that this conception is problematic because it substitutes a new kind of objectification for the old one (Tannhauf 1996). I would argue that there is a lurking essentialism in this attitude, with its reduction and integration of matter and awareness, corporeality and sentience, materiality and spirituality. I don't want to pull these apart as opposing and discrete forces or entities, but conceptualize them within a dialectical body, fragmented in its own existence, productive of the constituted subject Morse describes, and riven at its core by the impossibility of full awareness.

To do this, I invoke the lessons of (old-fashioned, out-moded, but still theoretically-useful-for-descriptive-purposes) psychoanalysis and (the slightly less old-fashioned but still imaginatively-fruitful-for-conceptual-purposes) phenomenology. Both psychoanalysis and phenomenology take quite seriously the way subjectivity is a function of the fragmented body. A body of zones and incompleteness. A body that cannot know itself entirely and thus a self that cannot be fully cognizant in or through its em-

bodiedness. A body that cannot ever perceive itself as a whole, that is fundamentally and primarily the site of fragmented and partial experience, felt and censored, allowed and prohibited, places of pleasure and darkness, of known and unknowable dimensions, extremes and thresholds, limits and fears and also imaginings. All of sensation, perception, conception, cognition is linked to the processing of these fragmentary bits and zones into belief in self as conscious of itself within that bodily domain. But never reduced to being one with it.

Taking “the body” away from a fantasy of totality, even that newly enlightened condition of embodied sentience, creates a gap, a break, a fissure – a fundamental space between, within, so that desiring is always *towards*, experiencing is always *of*, knowing is always *about* – in short, so that there is always some relation of awareness to limit and its possible transcendence or surpassing.

The body’s fantasy of the virtual is one of total immersion. The hype myth of full-body perceptual virtuality sits at the intersection of entertainment and onanism, in a fantasy of masturbatory gratification supposedly unparalleled in any prior experience afforded to human creatures by their imaginations. The fantasy may come in the form of video games, immersive films, or other entertainment environments. But let’s face it, virtual sex is the ultimate reference for these consumable fantasies, with the image of a cyberperfect avatar experience fulfilling the embodied-out-of-my-own-ordinary-body dynamic of ultimate gratification. Or if this fantasy doesn’t reference virtual sex, then it certainly revolves around an image of ecstasy of a particularly intense variety. But that fantasy only operates if the concept of totality extends to the body itself as a full site of mapped and integrate singularity of perceptual consciousness and of the self as autonomous, sufficient, and also one with its delimited body.

Such fantasies link quickly to fantasies of mastery.

Power/Mastery/Technoscience

In the digital art world, the end of the spectrum that is closest to the production of virtual environments tends to be moderate and circumspect in claims for the effects of fiction and illusion produced by head mounted displays, telematic communication and projection systems, and other im-

mersant forms of experience. But as we move across the spectrum towards the popular imagination and the promotional rhetoric of simulacral industries (and tellingly, farther from actual engagement with production) the mythology of virtuality looms to gigantic proportions. Howard Rheingold, in his journalistic enthusiasm, could hardly keep the superlatives from overwhelming his observations when he wrote *Virtual Reality* in the early 1990s. (Rheingold 1991)²

Simulacral industries. That phrase is meant to invoke several realms of current fascination with virtuality and their accompanying rhetorics. In the first realm, a prophylactic extension of human capabilities is enabled by the use of technological innovations that make use of user interfaces that transform computational data into graphic, and to a lesser degree, tactile and auditory experience. Medical imaging to study aspects of living organisms in real time either for analysis or intervention, military simulations that perform acts of defense and destruction through manipulation of symbolic representations, and other uses of virtual visualization and telerobotics to enable human activity in environments hostile to actual occupation – all of these scenarios engage a primary myth of mastery and control.

Not surprisingly, these scenarios are all intimately bound up with for-profit and for-power gains. The entrepreneurial instinct, so well-rewarded in contemporary culture, the context that academic criticism loves to refer to as “late capitalism” (as IF that phrase somehow contains the phenomenon by giving it a name that sounds temporally circumscribed!), isn’t so much a necessary evil as it is a manifestation of a belief system whose premises have their roots within Enlightenment fantasies of the human mastery of nature. Suggesting that capitalism is the root cause of all evil or pointing out the interlocking nexus of power relations that knit the military-entertainment industry together misses the underlying, legitimating, fantasy of mastery.

Total. Complete. Integrated. The very terminology of virtuality bespeaks a loss of that separation so valued by the critical theorists of the early 20th century horrified at the ways in which mass entertainment and industry provided models for absorption of human spiritual energy and moral capability. The qualities of voluntary complicity, of loss of all judgement about self-interest and collectivity, the evaporation of the social contract and the premises on which it was presumed to operate – these were characteristics of a 20th century culture fairly tripping over itself to lose all

critical distance between self and system. The radical aesthetics that characterized one aspect of negative social critique, introducing at least a sign of resistance if not an organized political or structural force, kept alive a discourse of opposition within the domain of cultural activism. Inarguably important, this position produces a relatively easy critique of virtuality that is hardly news: the hype around virtuality is merely another in the long line of promotional campaigns through which the culture industry functions. The commodification of experience that underlies the virtual is an extension of the same process that turns us into little clones of the consumer culture, driven by brand-name experience, superficial and unconscionably selfish, the feeding-frenzied narcissistic bourgeois first-world late-capitalist condition of total image and spectacular consumption. We know that, of course. The virtual is part and parcel, full speed ahead, fist in glove and foot in mouth of that perverted condition.

Virtuality, in a slick triumph, functions as the latest manifestation of enlightenment thinking, with its techno-scientific truth claims for the symbolic manipulation of life forms as data. But perversely, this thinking now functions in clear complicity with a hyper-romanticism that threatens to extend subjectivity into a boundless expenditure of desire that loops back into a grotesque commodification of that same subjectivity. Ultimately, the objectification of subjectivity within the pseudo-reality-industry experience-theaters of virtual technology leads to a grotesque vision of the commodification of that objectified subjectivity. Your experience will be sold back to you, packaged, pre-packaged, purged, cleansed, hygienic in thought deed and spirit and aesthetics. Prosthetic aesthetics, proper and proprietary proprioception, laundered sex and safe thresholds of ecstatic excess. But how can this be critiqued without invoking a retro-nostalgic anti-techno-knee-jerk prude attitude of the worst sort? How to allow for thrills and chills rides into hyper-awareness as an aspect of human experience, the life-saving rescue of innocent pups from toxic environments through virtual robot helpers, the microsurgery entry of expert systems into clogged organic tissues and so on?

Virtuality offers the grim possibility of the double cheat. Virtuality offers the closing of the romantic imagination into an awful dead-end of self-occupied engagement with its subjectivization of everything. All experience, from that locus of self, turned into a sensate, sentient, solipscistic and self-serving extension of the self, the fully absorbed but vulgarly bankrupt version of romantic imagination. Such a system precludes the Other,

closing the subject into the self, the somatic sentience into the body, and the imagination into the master control booth. And it passes the truth-seeking, desire for knowledge of the world into a systematized regime of subjugation, in which we survey the totalized topography of a fully known universe. The ideology of the virtual is merely the condition of all ideology turned on its head, privileging the “virtual” condition of ideology itself, passing itself off as totally natural.

That’s the apocalyptic vision. The totalizing impulse damns and condemns. But in the peaceable kingdom of possible dreams whose reality exceeds our expectations, all is well in the house of the augmented lived in which we emerge slowly towards the unobtainable rewards of an unfettered imagination. Whither we go and whether by machine or modest habits of mind hardly matters, creatures of illusion, we delight in our complicity, participate in our corruption, and will wake later to go on in our condition of fallen but recoverable innocence. Perhaps.

NOTES

1. See particularly articles by Katherine Hayles, Frances Dyson, and Nell Tannhauf in Moser and McLeod (eds., 1996) on this point.
2. An excellent treatment of virtuality is also to be found in Hillis (1999).

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