

PLACE AND IMAGE

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“Right away I would like to clear up something that was in the program. It presents me as a high-definition expert while I completely disavow this notion of the expert.

I am not an expert: there are other people who could better fill that role. In fact, I find myself in a slightly atypical position, for in the “fourth world” of telecommunications the presence of a philosopher is somewhat incongruous, and in a certain way surprises people. What *is* a philosopher doing in the middle of such an industry? I work for the Parisian Department of Visual Materials and I specialize in identifying and, if possible, developing and organizing policy for a high-definition production program with a view to multi-media and multi-support development in a large number of fields.

Why talk about the museum? Well, quite simply because amongst the sectors identified as being important in the field of high-definition visual materials, the museum claims that it can contribute. The museum exists; the works of art exist; and there is a need for the representation of those works. As a result, in a certain sense, I am betraying the spirit of this conference by leaving today in order to return to Paris to film the works of Monet at the Musée d'Orsay. But I can tell you, the philosopher in me is laughing.

It is possible you might think: “You’re just trying to present a kind of opposition to everything that we have seen at this conference.” Certainly not. In my opinion, the dangerous or nihilistic aspect of the panels that I’ve attended today is to be found in the opposition which is posed between man and technology. As we know, the virtual is not the opposite of the real, but rather the opposite of the actual [*actuel*]. The virtual and the actual are not modes of reality, they are something else; they are, more precisely, manifestations of the real. In reality, however, we *can* work with these possibilities.

I teach in a school of architecture, and, for a long time, architects have known perfectly well what the virtual is: even if it’s not today’s binary virtuality, even if it’s not as sophisticated or refined. Architects have, for a long time, worked hard with the mental image. They didn’t wait for the invention of information machines before beginning to somehow construct in their heads, and force into existence a certain reality, even before it existed in a form that we, as so-called pragmatists, could call reality.

In any case, the story of virtuality is an ancient one. New technology, in a way, modernizes and reactivates this concept with its own force, its specificity, and gives it both proper form and content. It has, without a doubt, a completely unequalled strength. Yet writing, drawing and model making, (and the intellect that constantly builds itself up with the large number of prostheses that make up art history, as well as both technical and scientific histories) all reflect, in some way, this capacity to seize an immediate pre-

subversive power that the creator must oppose in order to produce a work for which there is no guarantee, it reminds me of a story of a student of Picasso whom one day asked him: "Master, are you sure that what I'm doing is art?" To which Picasso answered, "I do what I do, the future will decide, that's its job." Similarly, today the people who go into this area of art and technology must avoid being crushed by the pedagogical presence of the artistic classics flaunted in the museums. I think Picasso's is the best answer for their doubts. On the other hand, they must also be aware that the minute they take a single step into the artistic world, they will pay dearly for producing a genuine creation and not simply a gadget, special effects or specious effects.

It appears that speciousness is quite the specialty today in certain domains... The worst architects go into computer sciences. Since they were terrible architects, they turn to the making of 3D imagery. Cézanne said: "Do you have any idea what it's like to touch the third dimension?" Cézanne said it but we have forgotten it. Today, we approach the third dimension shamelessly, brutally, with a rudeness that gives you pause.

So, I'm going to show you a little video. This is something that claims to be a representation of ancient Cluny, with a set-up that permits a Parisian art historian and a Catholic intellectual to take an interactive tour of the digitally 'restored' Cluny church. Incredible! I'll show it to you and then I'll tell you what I think of it.

After this experience, I know myself that I'll never again visit a site without being reminded of this virtual tour. So, we must examine this performance with a certain degree of ambivalence — and it was quite a performance, when it took place at l'Imagina studios two years ago. It was created with the same technological media that you saw earlier in the conference — binary technology, the same technology as the telephone. Clearly we could have done much more sophisticated things, but they also would have been more expensive. On the other hand, it's done in real time, which means that the spatial arrangement is organized interactively as a function of different viewers' perspectives.

So, what exactly were the intentions of the producers of this program? "Our wish," said the filmmakers, "in making this film, was to show, thanks to the extraordinary power of these synthesized images, the Roman era to a contemporary audience; the Roman attention to beauty, Roman grandeur, and perhaps also Roman uncertainty. We will be able to merge the dream and the reality even better than Hugues, a monk of the Cluny church who died in 1095." This is where I switch alliances. At this point, I have to say: Let's not go overboard here. I would say: Let's not get *too* excited. This is unquestionably a communication tool, but it's not architecture.

Actually, I think that the issue of what words actually mean is an

essential question these days: the word “art,” the word “architecture,” the question of space. The man who spoke before me, who has done some serious research in this field, addressed the issue of perspective, which is much too serious an issue to be left in the hands of engineers. Much too serious. Excuse me for saying this, because I don’t want to be xenophobic about engineers, but as soon as you pose the question of architectural space, and thus question our understanding of space — that is virtuality’s objective — we must be all the more sure that we know what we’re dealing with.

Roman architectural space is defined, specific, extraordinarily complex but quite varied, but CAI (computer-assisted imagery) sidesteps this provocative subject. This is where CAI is doing us a disservice by claiming that it will resolve our spatial communication problem, and will, in time, redefine and replace industrial design by giving us a tactile way to conceptualize architectural space. If ever this displacement occurred, I think we would experience devastating losses, not only in terms of representation and visualization, but also in terms of construction. In recent memory, for instance, we can see that the history of modern architecture has been linked to this rather weak, mismanaged relationship between visual information and spatial functions in the real world of people like you and me.

All throughout history, an organic link between art and technology has maintained itself. We don’t have to give an a priori blessing to every user — because CAI presents problems different from other types of image construction. On the contrary, all users should be warned: “Be careful. You must try hard as well, you must implicate yourself in this issue.” Still, there remains the problem as to whether industries, or those in the information market, really intend to go that far. For me, this is a matter of deep concern. I’m not at all sure that they will want to. . .

Having said that, I would not be too pessimistic, because in the end “the proof is in the pudding.” So we must move forward, we must get our hands dirty. Of course, this must be done without knowing for certain if we are creating art or not. Nevertheless, we must move ahead without staring too intently either into our rear view mirror, or into a sort of cave at Lourdes that would call itself technology, or the immaculate conception of technology.

I’m a philosopher, and I cannot change that. In other words, I am not religious in any way. And while there are more and more Ayatollahs appearing daily, while there are many high priests and gurus . . . I believe simply that we must get to work. As Nietzsche said, we must assume the risks of our epoch, and we must truly support our pretensions with true convictions.”