

Digital Mirror Stage: or The Pixelated Gaze

In a recent media report a new system of digital surveillance was promoted to parents wishing to screen (block out) their children's pleasure in consuming internet pornography. The system works as follows: a digital eye is installed in the bedroom so that it looks over the child's shoulder (eternal parental gaze) in a position to take in the flow of images displayed on the computer monitor. As the stream of images pours forth the cyclops-like digital eye feels each image, judging it for moral integrity. If a pornographic image is recognised the monitor screen is blacked out temporarily. Repeated infringements result in the computer shutting down completely. In trials of this domestic surveillance system a number of complications have come to light. Firstly, the digital eye is programmed to respond to Caucasian colour-coded expanses of nakedness. Since rounded white/pink/blond shapes trigger the censorship process, images of bald men's heads are also blacked out. And by default, black bodies fall outside the spectrum of hot menu items. In short, this system is a joke. While no programmatic system of remote moral surveillance can fully encompass the universe of erotic, fetishistic and perverse images (pleasures) careering down the digital highway, the desire on the part of parents, and by extension, other policing bodies, is insatiable. Like so many checkpoints staked out along the highway, a rash of companies have sprung up flogging software packages that chase the reading/viewing experience.

Home but not alone

BioPassword, Cyber Patrol, CYBERSitter and Net Nanny screen and block any words, phrases, sites and content according to their particular values. Net Nanny provides users with site lists, "researched by our staff and other 3rd party children's advocacy groups". Net Nanny monitors everything! Nanny watches not just the entry point to a file or address, but also the activity or content taking place inside the site - in real time. Net Nanny isn't limited in types of content. Bomb-making formulas, designer drugs, hate literature, Neo-Nazi teachings, car theft tips, bad poetry, rotten art. If you can define it Net Nanny can block it! Playmate.gif. is out for starters! Tracking the gaze also has applications beyond marketing strategies. Net Nanny silently monitors what and when hits occur without shutting the system down. "This allows the parent to address the situation without "coming down hard" at least to begin with." What parents fear is the loss of their babies to a second mirror stage, the digital mirror stage that would prepare them for entry into

the hypermedia Oedipal phase. Parents feel left right out (of the picture). They are not being asked to hold the helpless baby up to the mirror this time. No smiling responses, no gentle and joyful recognition of "so I'm not really connected at the psychic hip to mummy after all... phew...thanks Dr Freud!" No, It's home alone or rather it's modem not mummy who does the "goo goo" sound effects. In fact the absence of the real parent is a pre-requisite for entry into the digital mirror stage. The cyberparent takes the place of the actual parent. Parental revenge is the usual childish response. Hit 'em with even more software, hardware and curfews. "Make the little bastards tread water through hours of super-chlorinated moral netsurfing...that'll fix 'em!"

Mirror mirror on the Net...

The terms mirror stage and mirror phase are often used interchangeably to describe the process whereby a baby becomes aware of its identification in the symbolic order as a subject. The digital mirror sets up more of a stage than a phase. The notion of a phase suggests a passage, a transition from unknowing state of unity ("me") to knowing state of separation ("I") in relation to the social order. A stage, on the other hand, draws on the theatre, on performance, drama and striking poses. The most popular software application for constructing interactive CDROMs, Macromind Director, takes the theatre stage as its metaphor for organising and motivating multimedia cast members in time and space. To experience the internet (gazing back at you) is to engage with a digital imaginary. That is, the formation of a cyber self (ego) is achieved by identifying with virtual images that are mediated by service providers (reflected in and by mirror sites). Increasingly, a sense of self, identity is being formed metaphorically and metonymically by bonding with digitally mediated faces, texts, objects, sounds in a virtual environment. The familiar Lacanian psychoanalytic theoretical scenario of the six to eighteen month old child sitting on mother's knee in front of bedroom mirror must be updated to incorporate a mirror stage that both reflects and generates. The child sees fractured polymorphic reflections of mummy and me that are and are not familiar objects. Symbolic, real and imaginary images are constantly refreshed, downloaded, uploaded, reflected and erased in real time.

The digital monitor/screen/mirror is constantly refracturing into many tiny crystal reflectors and projectors like an anamorphic Luna Park installation with eyes. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, in *Digital Delirium*, state that "in the electronic mirror, digital and human reality have been twinned: the interface

is complete between human and synthetic identity.” (pxi) They see this state of being as delirious, in the sense of going off the modernist rails of singular, personal, private identities, since the Web “reflects back to our nomadic bodies its fate as it is externalised in a world of artificial intelligence, recombinant genes, and spliced data streams.” (pxiv) The heterological shattering of singular images of identity into a series of non privileged windows all accessible and all erasable, raises the prospect of a new state of consciousness or state of being in the world that takes as its starting point this digital self in bits and pieces. This is not meant to suggest an image of chaotic psychotic indeterminacy but rather a recognition that the unconscious is structured like a digital (bits) rather than a digital (analog) language—to update, a little bit, the famous Lacanian slogan. We are facing a graphic interface rather than an opaque mirror.

Digital bits 'n PCs



Fig 1. Kate Sparke Richards, Red Iris CD+, 1997, Interactive CDRom

The Lacanian term “*corps morcelé*,” meaning the non totalised body in bits and pieces, is also useful here to draw an analogy between the analog directed self and the digitally motivated being. All digital images are made up of (the DNA of information) or exist as bits and bytes— a sea of 0s and 1s. The language and metaphors of using PCs may be interfaced around desktops and office codes of practice but the deeper architecture and interactive habits formed at the terminal, gazing at the screen, are psychoanalytical. Getting anything worked out (resolved) with computers is always a little psychodrama. The user is the analysand and the computer the analyst. There is also a sense that it is the computer eye that is watching you rather than the other way round. We can extend this psycho-techno analogy one step further by saying that screen images form the conscious field of symbols and signs in all their historical, social and cultural specificities and (dis)unities. Memories drawn up from banks to be grabbed as screen dumps then saved as files for later reference. The pre-conscious, underlying psychic

state finds a parallel in hypertext markup language (HTML). The unconscious of raw drives, neurotic images and anxieties can be likened to raw programming code—the 0s and 1s that are processed into commands, computations and actions (intelligent responses).

The gaze of the other eye



Fig 2. Logo for CBS TV, William Golden, 1962

The famous CBS TV logo of a stylised electronic eye was designed by William Golden in 1962 during the age of total marketing where TVs had personality and audiences were targeted. Products were overtly constructed with a social 'image' or identity that 'worked' psychotherapeutically on the consumer. The heyday of TV gave rise to ideas of the *mirror-effect* of advertising persuasion spoken of by Vance Packard in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). Such marketing voodoo theories were fostered by applied psychology, sociology and moral paranoia. The image of advertisers as body-snatching brain eaters, sympathetic with B-grade Hollywood movies, paralleled the development of cold war spy (eye in the sky) aircraft missions that prepared the way for the logic of satellite communications systems.

The digital mirror



Fig 3. Eyespace, Merlin Integrated Media web site. 1997

The digital post-informational mirror is the *other* mirror, the psychic substitute that is now an indispensable prosthesis connecting us to cybermummy, our universal information service provider (ISP), everywhere already at once. Information is predigested and feed to us via various electronic media slave applications such as applets, filters, sorters and

managers. These intelligent software servants look out for us, watch TV for us, seduce passing vendors and catch the eye of cool sites. Our digital eyes scan through the invisible electronic domain of data banks for us. From supermarket checkout scanners to ATM eyes, from electronic police eyes to public service and corporate office surveillance systems, the omnipresence of the digital gaze is increasingly mythologised as a natural organ of the social corpus.

Narcissus at the terminal pool.

There is no return from the seduction of the digital gaze. No going back to our old analog selves. Virtual and actual are collapsing along many technological and social fronts. The worlds we inhabit (medical, economic, political or artistic) are now imagined in either bit mapped or vector modes of thinking and seeing. A current net advertisement for Adobe web fonts declares that “Everywhere You Look, Adobe Systems Fonts Catch Your Eye”.

The gaze, in psychoanalytic terms, is the ideal turning point, a psychic trope from which identification is conceived to take place, that is, where the image becomes fully and undistortedly visible. That point is where sense and being co-inside. There is also an aspect of narcissistic love involved in gazing. The viewing subject sees the digital mirror image as an image site of virtual perfection (of and for her or his ideal self) to snuggle into. Getting comfortable is an impossible task however (the reflection never can be fully grasped—it dissolves at the precise moment it is apprehended) and the subject is gripped by anxiety (the fear that the self is only an illusion performed by mirrors).

Prolonged mirror-gazing, as Freudian psychoanalysis cautions, results in narcissistic identification. The virtual effaces the actual and the actual assumes the virtual in a mobius strip of indistinct meaning. A vertigo of seamless (she/me—virtual/actual) visibility, is felt as a certain anxiety only made worse (trapped in) by gazing incestuously into a virtual image world of our own making. The digital terminal (mortality) pool throws back images of an enchanted illusionary world (more real than imaginary) which we can lose ourselves in.

Digital Evocatio

The digital mirror (monitor/screen) is more a surface of absorption than reflection. It is not so much that the net reflects back to us our true state of multimedia beingness as it evocates (carries off) all our analog idols into the

digital realm without betraying its own secret name in the same way as the Romans kept the name of Rome a secret from the enemy and as Coca Cola keeps its drink formula a secret from rival companies. The digital gaze seduces because there is no reflexive distance between us and the virtual image. In *Seduction* Jean Baudrillard, argues that the narcissistic mirror acts as an absence of depth as “a superficial abyss which others find seductive and vertiginous only because they are each the first to be swallowed up in it.” (p68)

CU-See-Me-Effect



Fig. 4. CU-See Me promo image for web site. 1997

The promotional blurb for domestic video conferencing software package CU-SeeMe (out of Cornell University) declares that digital seeing is all “in the eye of the reflector”. Using a bit of software called SELF-REFLECT the reflector sends your own CU-SeeMe stream back to you so that you can check if it is really you you are gazing at or just an other. Digital mirror reflectors don’t simply return a neatly framed repetition of an image (of you), they reinvent you, they reverse the order of “me” through the eye to a state of hyper-real otherness, more telling than you imagined. The digital mirror doesn’t return a single image but a multiple set of faces, a peacock-like array of eyes (“Is”) that all see slightly different visions of you. There is a disruption

set in motion between the reality effect and the subject effect of the digital image in the process of making the viewer visible to her or himself. There is always something missing, lacking, hiding or left out of the picture. There is also something shocking, revoltingly too apparent in the digitally reflected image. Something smelling of decay, pointing to a return to an inorganic state that precedes all life. The antiseptic blow-dried air-brushed look of 3D modelled avatars, animated characters and virtual environments reek of sterile death. There isn't enough dirt, chaotic mess and rough edges to arouse passions or direct libidinal flows. Computer art by and large is seduced or caught up with absolute repression of hyper rendering— there is nothing more to add, no where to sit down, nothing to give in return. The myriad of 3D modelling and Photoshop Kais Power Goo and other morphing plugins add to delirium of high definition fantasies lost in the autism of the infinitesimal; the smoothness and accuracy of reflected mirror surfaces; and the endless revolving motions of objects (logos) lost in space. In such fascinating and obscene (spread out and unfolding like electric bank doors before you arrive) displays of eyes that never blink (Residents style), sci-fi worlds built on of spectacular deserts of visible exactitude. Nothing escapes the digital gaze, the pixelepsy of anti-aliasing and dithering the real. Web sites such as Merlin's art page Eyespace (www.merlin.com.au/eyespace) display images that collage the techno with the organic in a play of mechano style plugins out of deep black space. These images are tagged with titles such as *metabodies*, *transconsciousness* and *cymborgs*. In this virtual eyespace, the gaze wanders like a free radical agent looking for a gene port to dock into in a soup of dismembered signs.

Digital Voyeurism

Although most of the surfing on the net is done in pursuit of the shameless erotic experience (note the vast number of pornography and chatup sites) the images themselves are always a disappointment. In cyberspace, Thanatos lives it up while Eros has a hard time. On the net, the pleasure of gazing is not anchored directly to images at all, (even including real time live action response sex lines), rather the erotic pleasure of netgazing is bound up with the process of exposition: in scrutinising, treasure hunting, revealing the secret, undressing and stripping (up and down loading against the odds). The novelty of viewing in apparent privacy of your home or office (your every hit is being tracked by someone out there then on sold) coupled with the promise of on-demand-satisfaction (constantly being feed the latest clip or interactive experience) fuels the attraction of surfing for sex. The most shocking and

disturbing cases of voyeurism and sexual assault on the net however have involved text rather than images. Note the well publicised cyber-rape actions via MUDs and MOOs. The voyeuristic netgaze is invisible. The evil eye is felt as a shadowy hidden presence via e-mail flame messages bounced off anonymous mirrors or via online chat groups under the cover of an avatar. Net violence of this kind is all the more insidious for being unseen, just as the anonymous phone caller or blackmailer is.

Super Poke in the Eye



Fig 5. Laurens Tan, *Octomat Series 1 (SuperPoke 1)*, 1997, Mixed Media (wood, video and computer animations).

Laurens Tan's installation *Octomat Series 1* is a sculpture come gambling machine gone Automatic Seduction Machine. Shown recently in the *Lawyers Guns and Money* show at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide this prototype for serious consumers neatly fetishises the power of high tech digital poker (desiring) machines. Tan's machine seduces the art gambler with the promise of eternal love and riches (total description only, no prescription guaranteed). The immaculate assemblage is made up of a 1950s TV eye head (from the golden age of rosy plastic optimism and alien sci-fi B-grade movies) on a neoclassical shoulders plinth that incorporates the functionality of an ATM with the ergonomics of a Maxwell Smart cone of silence. The illusion of multi functional customisation is complete. Interestingly, Tan never makes his machines as unique objects but rather as multiplies to be endlessly reproduced, marketed and installed on site for public interaction. The art gallery is merely the show room, the launch pad,

the make believe revolving stage (a la Darling Harbour motor show) for impossible mirrors of consumption.

Red Iris Visions

Multi media artist Kate Sparke Richards has produced an interactive CD Rom titled RED IRIS CD+ on musician Stevie Wishart (release date Oct 97).

The CD overtly positions the viewer/listener as a scanning eye/ear who voyeuristically hovers over three images of C14th frescos from Tuscany. These are the canvas come interface screens for an historically informed rereading of connections between music and visual arts in Tuscany in the late C14th. Richards notes that:

“RED IRIS CD+ works as *ekphrasis* - a modern interpretation of medieval music and frescoes undertaken in another medium - the multi media interactive. The player explores the screens by moving closely over the surface of each in search of hot spots. The player’s eye thus engages with these very detailed screens, teasing meaning from the arcane symbology, be it musical or painterly. During player scrutiny, the interactive reveals and plays with the techniques employed by the fresco artists. Notably, the frescoes employ direct address to the audience; quotation; the combining of pictorialism with allegory; commentary on the means of production.”

Recent interactive multimedia productions such as RED IRIS CD+ are conscious of how the logic of digital gaze works to scan, blowup, capture and download information. Hotspots and image maps turn everything into a potential communication wormhole or data channel. The entire monitor screen is in effect a mass of tiny phosphor eyes blinking at you— some shut, some open—some so slowly it is not discernible while others move too fast for the naked eye to see.

References:

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Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, MacMillan, London, 1990.

Kate Sparke Richards, Interview Notes for CD Rom titled RED IRIS CD+ Music of Stevie Wishart (1997).