Televisual Designing: Defuturing and Sustainment

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**Tony Fry has been working
on design philosophy since
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*A New Design Philosophy:
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'The televisual' is used here to name a relational domain that constitutes an ever expanding immaterial environment created by the interaction of all electronically inflected visual media – digitised film, TV (in all its transmission modes), video/DVD, computers/the internet, cell phones.

The televisual is a new kind of commodity sphere in which technology, instrumental use, entertainment and shopping all fuse into a single experiential domain.[1] This digitally dominated environment is, however, not discrete. Its manufacture, hardware and its designing of the propensity of user-subjects all impact on other environments, not least the biophysical. In common with this material environment, the televisual is only partly knowable.[2] Its scale and rhizomatic complexity has effectively taken it beyond the reach of human control.

While there is ability to input technology and creative content into the televisual environment, there is a very limited grasp of the ecology constituted by the televisual and even less understanding of how this ecology acts on other worlds. To create, or intervene in, something is not necessarily to fully know it. The televisual environment

has 'evolved' beyond human control – it is a constant, global flow unable to be closed down.

Like the weather, while we can shut it out it is always just there. Although we can turn off an individual machine or a particular TV station can be closed down, the televisual flow constantly delivers perceptual constructions, mediations, imaginaries, tastes, values, knowings and unknowings. Thus the agency of the televisual is not reducible to moments of radiant emissions from screens, because it has been internalised to form a perceptual framing through which our world-viewing passes. We thus look at the world via the televisual rather than just seeing it as an object of and in view.

It's worth confronting ourselves with something we implicitly know – while images seemingly bring the world close it never gets near. No matter what appears before us on screens, or how much we give ourselves over to the image, the televisual image always maintains its untouchability, coolness and spatial abstraction. We are never in the same place or time as what we see.

Fundamentally the televisual, as a designing of how we see, has become one of the ontological forces that designs our being-in-the-world. This meta-medium has reconfigured need, exposing us to a universe of things we lack, not merely objects to want but things we require to fully realise ourselves. Perfect bodies, beautiful clothes, lavish homes, fast cars, exotic holidays, exciting relationships, extensive culinary skills, creative talents – no matter where or who we are and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, what we need becomes positioned between our endured and idealised worlds. This cannot just be characterised as a system of cause and effect based on the power of representational forms to author new desires for a constantly expanding commodity saturated universe.

Rather, what arrives televisually combines an increased level of dissatisfaction with the lifeworld one occupies together with an ever-developing language of dreams. The horrific and the wonderful both fold into a utopia that expels the material limitations, mundane labours, repetitions and responsibilities of the everyday. Danger and excitement, bravery and heroism, the exotic and the erotic, youth and romance, wit and vitality, fame and fortune, as well as an endless procession of commodities one just does not have, all accelerate the speed that 'here' becomes discarded for 'there'.

Encompassed in this regime of dissatisfaction, at one extreme are repressed yearnings that most of us live with and which only occasionally overwhelm us. At the other extreme are world-shaping forces. For instance, it can be argued that it was imaginaries unleashed by the televisual rather than democracy as a political ideology, that ruptured the hegemony of Eastern European communism. The desired freedom of 'the masses' centred on the freedom to consume, and democracy was merely viewed as a means toward this end.

What is projected by the televisual is not what appears on the screen or from reflections upon composite images remembered from its viewing. Rather it is the transposition of one's own seeing, even one's own being, into or upon selectively appropriated or modified elements of the seen as it becomes 'scene' – it is how one sees what one sees through the televisually ontologically designed eye of the mind. Effectively, the televisual destroys the last vestiges of the innocent eye by making everything that is seen a consequence of its designing.

In sum – televisual designing in significant part transforms both us and the globalising culture and economy that defutures our world and the worlds of others.

Although much of the televisual's content (directly promoted and indirectly encountered as backdrop) appears and is embraced as utopian it de facto negates futures. It does this by feeding the imagination with visions that direct consumption to forms of unsustainability that negate futures. The accumulation of this process constantly adds to anthropogenic environmental impacts like global warming, natural resource wastage, fresh water overuse and contamination.

But more than this, the futures dominantly offered by the televisual take futures away, they defuture, by spiritually and culturally devaluing the local, tradition and beliefs as they do, or could, sustain. Increasingly, this happens in poor or newly industrialising nations in the name of 'education' for participation in the global community. Satellite dishes, TV sets, computers and the internet often arrive before the basic infrastructure of an adequate everyday life (sewerage systems, running water, basic housing).

Here, rather than 'educating', a way of life gets displaced. Dissatisfactions blossom, most commonly among the young who feel inextricably drawn to the attractions of the economically and culturally globalised city. They abandon the rural and the local and render it valueless to themselves – in no way can it realise their dreams. Their rural subsistence living is exchanged for the urban, but frequently this is a dysfunctional urban of unemployment, homelessness and crime. This has two negative consequences: a younger generation becomes disabled by the extent of damage to their spirit and lives; and, their withdrawal from local productive activities results in neglect, and then degradation, of the rural environment as the workforce ages.

So easily and so often the world of televisual dreams turns into nightmares – leaving dreamer stranded between a culture s/he is unable to enter or return to (even if they go home). In such a context defuturing fuses ecocide with ethnocide. The lives of millions and millions of people in Asia, Polynesia, Africa and Latin America have been touched by variations of such a scenario.

Whatever design exposes, it also conceals. For instance, architecture, product and industrial design aesthetically hide the

nature, quality and assembly of structural components and operative functions, this most overtly via styling brought to facades, casing, cladding, mouldings, etc. Packaging also acts as more than just a protective wrapping that conceals what it contains – its design often obscures the difference between the projected image of the object packaged and the experience of the object itself. Graphic design likewise both exposes and masks what is seen, fashion perhaps even more so.

While photography shares some of the more literal designed and designing concealing features of television/the televisual, the latter conceals more. In both cases there is always what the lens overtly turns away from, or more discriminately excludes, and so places outside the frame. Equally for both there is what editing excludes. Digital image manipulation has, and increasing will, change 'the picture' – it shifts a concern with concealment from exclusion and covering over to fabrication, breaking the illusion of the truth claim of representational photo-televisual forms. Moving to a more complex level, we need to acknowledge the concealing force of ideological discourses as they set-out to over-determine a specific bias enacted through perception. The televisual totally outstrips photography in this mode of concealment. Although ideological discourses are brought to the televisual more significantly they have become elemental to the construction of almost all of its content, be it DVDs, TV programs, software.

TV news is obviously an overt example as it combines exclusions and bias inherent in the political agendas of a TV station and nation. So while world news is the product of a global news gathering infrastructure what goes to screen is filtered through the political ideological values and ethnocentric concerns of a nationally positioned broadcaster. Thus, and for many decades, media research has shown that the same event reported by multiple stations (nationally and globally) is never reported uniformly – it's always a perspectival construct. Truth, reality, balance, objectivity are all values employed to conceal this construction. Moreover, the 'global picture' is never global – the (now lightweight digital) camera is both absent, or excluded, from so many places. It follows that there are multitudes of significant events that never get reported and so never get into the 'world political picture'. Additionally, news is edited to fixed programming structures and is presented according to assumptions about an audience's ability to deal with complexity. In this way TV news, as an ideological discourse, is always subject to heavily interventionalist construction and continual fragmentation, this so that it may be rendered into small audience-digestible (meaning dumbed-down) units.

The reduction of complexity to the simplistic (a negative to the positive of the simple) is a constantly growing problem of the televisual: it fuels ignorance, breeds passivity and supports a degeneration of the political sphere. Again the observation is just

as relevant to computing (especially in interface design) as it is to televisual. A good example here is the way television treats all problems in the biophysical environment, like salinity, desertification, global warming, biodiversity reduction, fresh water shortage, polluted air and waste as if they were singular and self-contained.

Yet such problems are causally interconnected – air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions overlap; deforestation contributes to CO_2 emissions by 'unlocking' carbon sequestered in trees and also by reducing the number of trees able to perform this function. Less trees mean higher water tables, which in turn often means increasing soil and water salinity. Less trees and more salinity means reduced habitat and more soil erosion, which in turn means less biodiversity. Simplistic reporting conceals such complex interconnections and the anthropogenic causes of what are in fact symptomatic problems. Unsustainability is not a product of environmental dysfunction but initially the myopia of anthropocentric being and latterly a negation of human responsibility for the blindness of technology (its causal locus). One of the reasons that the unsustainable is not seen as a condition of emergency is because it is has been rendered invisible by an ecology of televisually simplistic images.

There is one more crucial point to note about the televisual (including television's presentation on news and environmental problems), which is that it increasingly refracts everything that appears in its frame as entertainment – the computer is continually being turned into a fun machine, 'reality' TV turns humiliation into viewer pleasure and the most horrific of events on our screens arrive via the visual tropes and presentational conventions of entertainment industry competition. As a consumption-profiled reader of an electronic newspaper (a lower impact alternative than the half-hour drive to my nearest newsagent) who buys nothing, I am now finding certain kinds of news reports accompanied by slide shows and soundtracks I can listen to. The serious consequence of this drift, combined with the dominance of the simplistic, is an increasing intolerance towards the serious in both the private and public sphere. The decline of the public intellectual, political culture and the critical edge of the humanities in the academy are all linked to this intolerance which has been more than a century in the making.[3]

The presented here is offered as a negative position to constructively embrace. Its nihilism, its bleakness, does not announce an admission of hopelessness; it is not intended to disable action. The reverse, it is based on the proposition that unless one fully confronts a problem, no matter how unpleasant, one is not in a position to strive to solve it. Therefore, to honestly confront the extent of the televisual's ability to defuture is a precondition for acting positively against this situation.

The critique of the televisual put forward, and the identification of the televisual as a designing force, aims to undermine the notion

of it as merely a tool of public education, pleasure, information or communication supposedly subject to human direction. Moreover, the critique recognises that we, no matter who or where we are, cannot occupy a location external to the televisual environment. Like the biophysical environment ('nature'), its being is indivisible from our being. Neither direct resistance nor a liberatory overcoming is possible. For instance, all that the Taliban's physical destruction of televisual technology and the hanging of TV sets and video tape from lamp posts in the streets of Kabul and other Afghan cities, achieved was to fuel the desire for the unseen. As a form of resistance it was futile, likewise so is the 'kill television' website.

So what can be done in the face of the force of the televisual?

Certainly it is not possible to migrate to an alternative and culturally redemptive practice. 'Art' is no option, as it no longer can be viewed outside the televisual aura. For the vast majority of people the electronically packaged simulacrum of what art is (in any medium) and the role of the artist, arrive in the home, or at school, to mediate encounters with tangible art forms. Dominantly, art is either positioned by popularism as cultural entertainment; or, as a product of avant-gardism (and so unintelligible and of no interest to most people). Likewise, the binary art/televisual breaks down, not least because the televisual is deemed to be a site of art-making, with tools widely embraced as art-making instruments. Historically, in fact, avant-gardist televisual art acted as an experimental project in the expansion of the space of televisual technology. For the last forty years or so foremost among the practitioners of this art-making has been the Korean electronic artist Nam June Paik. Yet, notwithstanding a lifetime of aesthetic and technological effort, his televisual object and image remained boxed as a thing. The very elevation of the televisual (as image, process and stylised technological object) to a figure of focal attention that idealises it as means to humanise technology, both obscured its rhizomatic character and exposed the artist's works to wholesale appropriation by industry.[4]

A humanist reform of the televisual, by the creation of more critical content, likewise does not offer a viable option to a residually romantic view of art.[5] The policing of programming, the marginalisation of critical voices and the dead hand of pluralism are able to deal, either individually or collectively, with critique/criticism. Even so, it is still certainly worth developing a very strong analytical and critical voice. Importantly this voice could considerably add to a body of knowledge on the topic, although this knowledge is likely to inform only the few. More realistically, and partly with this knowledge, a vocal medium of internal contestation could be designed, built and embraced.

The intent of such a very ambitious construction would be the creation of a voice with sufficient presence and agency to express counter desires and demands for a 'being-in-being' that

could sustain futural ways of life, based upon a 'quality economy' centring on modes of exchange, goods and services with the ability to sustain made or managed environments. What would become thereafter would be a post-humanity forged in the space of a de-humanising shift from anthropocentrism to a human subordination of defuturing technocentrism.

All that is named here is an exploratory starting point.

The making of a new critical culture out of, and with, the ruins of the old that is implied in project of remaking, clearly is not something for which a simple program can be laid out. Rather it is a work that requires a discursive site, intellectual tools, labour and a space of confrontation. Here is a project that can be imagined into the real.

Currently the economy that dominates, the economy that the televisual serves, is predicated on endless growth (and thus upon the extension of the unsustainable). As we know, all 'revolutionary' attempts to overthrow this economy have turned to ashes. Likewise, calls for restraint have equally failed.[6] What can be contemplated however is the reinvention of the idea of quality and, thereafter, the making of a quality economy able to sustain the production of other environmental, economic and cultural futures. The intellectual tools needed obviously first have to be able to be used to pin down what quality is currently taken to be as an etymologically relative cultural term and as a reductive economic one. Then they have to be able to establish a new or recovered meaning able to command broad interest and support. The task of rethinking quality is but a part of the required labour. More challenging is turning the still fragile idea into a demonstrable object of encounter with designing power. Quality remade has to be able to be experienced as a desired sustainment, and for this to happen it has to be put into a space of confrontation.

Notes

1. Currently this fusion is epitomised by software like Microsoft Windows XP that has been created as a node in which marketing, work, pleasure and software all meet.

2. The complexity and expansion of the sphere of the televisual and all that it contains, constantly increases, most recently by digitisation (and an associated breakdown of the popular claim of the visual to represent reality). There is little evidence that there has been any advance of note in recognising the televisual as something that begs serious and substantial critical engagement since Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras* Power Publications: Sydney, 1996 or Tony Fry (ed) *R/U/A/TV? Heidegger and the Televisual* Power Publications/Indiana University Press: Sydney/Bloomington, 1993.

3. A clear example of criticism of entertainment was voiced in the 1920s and 30s by the extreme critic of liberalism, Carl Schmitt – see Heinrich Meier (trans J. Harvey Lomax) *Carl Schmitt and*

Leo Strauss the hidden dialogue Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 111–12.

4. See the images and essays in Toni Stoos and Thomas Kellein *Nam June Paik: Video Time – Video Space* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.

5. The appeal to art by theorists is common. Frequently the authority of eminent philosophical figures is cited in support – for example, Martin Heidegger's writing on art in the mid 20th century in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans Albert Hofstadter): New York: Harper and Row, 1971. However, what these appeals precisely overlook is the absolute colonisation of the 'world-picture' by the televisual over the last fifty years. To fail to read the insights of past thinkers on art via the cultural technology of the age of electronic (re)production is not only to create contemporary illusions, but to do a disservice to the critical value of their work. To exclude the historical conjuncture of now from the act of interpretation often produces a misleading abstraction.

6. See, for example Donella Meadows et al *Limits to Growth* London: Pan Books, 1972.