

The Subject on the Table: Augmented Reality and the Technical Image

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Abstract: *This paper approaches the dilemma of the technical image as it relates to an understanding of the constructed subject. Proceeding from a condition identified in film and popular culture, the authors construct an investigative, graduate level workshop around a collaborative interface and archive. The project was premised upon the notion that a new ground, based in visualization processes and incorporating existing technologies, must be practically and critically explored to make any sense at all of the subjectivity already coeval with these technologies.*

Palabras clave: technical image; subjectivity; collaborative work; *sensus communis*.

The tangible world vs. the world of images

In the 1991 Wim Wenders film, *Until the End of the World*, a group of scientists hover around a SONY Trinitron TV and watch in fearful expectation as the soul of a clinical subject is summoned to appear through the technical mastery of their science. Their reaction upon seeing the image is neither awestruck amazement or even braggadocio at mastering without understanding. Rather it is sheer inadequacy in the face of something unrecognizable. The scientists save themselves by invoking a recognizable relation of humans to the divine: humans trembling before a God. The transcendent subjectivity of the scientists is preserved by invoking a theological absolute and delimiting the subject caught in the midst of becoming.

One might take this scene as emblematic of the very aporia of the *technical image*. It is not so much the image itself which is disconcerting but that the subject itself might be dissolved by the apparatus producing the image. The image in Wender's film is significant mostly because it reveals the limits of the subject itself in the face of the technical image. After one has been subjected to (made by) the technical image — essentially the condition of the world we ourselves dwell in — one can no longer assume that if the image is removed, what one is left with is the “Real” revealed somehow behind it. Rather, as Slavoj Žižek says, one is left only with a vague abstraction. In actuality, the Real lies in the images themselves not hidden behind them. The technical image is not only the locus of the Real, it is by definition an *augmented real* by virtue of everything it gathers. The virtual realm

of the technical image is now the playground where the old “common sense” of a cultural shared ground is replaced by a vaguely delimited subjectivity. One might describe this as the resultant subjectivity appearing in a predominantly image-based, post-historical and non-transcendent framework; one in which the subject is no longer safely hidden within the body but now dissolves into a barely delimited subjectivity.

Before confronting the project based collaborative workshop where these ideas were tested, it is first useful for our own perspective to consider more closely the subjectivity invoked with either the appeal to a (divine) “in-principle” or an objective—it too removed and “in principle” reality. We can easily make the argument that they are in fact two sides of the same coin and in fact the same thing. As a means of demonstrating this, take the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the quintessential montage with the monolith (itself, a nondescript advanced apparatus), there are four comprising elements of which we need take note: the apes, of which there are two troops, the bones scattered about, the watering hole, and the monolith. To briefly recap the scene, the apes that have long frequented the hole have to this point not moved beyond the barest sentience of their “animated” state. The troops do not fight with each other having yet to progress beyond the most ambivalent growls. The appearance of the monolith, however, changes nothing BUT changes everything. It is the appearance of the monolith *apparently* that transforms the bone from undifferentiated matter into its identity as an object. At that instant the bone is a “bone” because to be

a bone it is equally to be not a bone, meaning if it can be a bone it is so “virtually” because it can also be something else. The key word is “can”: a state of potentiality or what we also call the “virtual”.

The apes demonstrate the possibility of a new world by quickly picking up the bones and smashing each other to death with the newly found *weapons*. Thus, history has begun. Or almost...to have history one would need to further re-present the mediating operation that created the bone and the weapon at the same time—something achieved with traditional images, then text, and ultimately with the conceptual abstraction of technical images. In *2001*, the water is the immediate and apparent object of desire, the bone is the object of agency, and the apes stand as “other” objects to each other — objects that cannot be easily negated by virtue of their ability to negate back - i.e., objects that transcend objectivity in their essence: “subjects”. So what is the monolith? Is the monolith no more than a theistic device, the cosmological *prima mobile*? To be sure, Kubrick’s monolith is unmistakable in its symbolic roles. Beyond the theological, one would also have to recognize the Lacanian empty signifier, now the blank screen of the technical apparatus rotated 90°. Confirming the status of the technical image as an ontological condition that creates the subject, it is the locus of the Real both constructed and represented between the spectator and the filmic universe of “2001”. The subject to gain appearance must experience itself in the world as a non-object—the epitome of the object as a negative—hence as a transcendent object. The in-principle of a non-object, experienced as the ‘other’, is represented in the world as the “Big Other”. This is the monolith in Kubrick. It is no more than “Subjectivity”. Any theism or philosophical system is no more than the ordering of the universe around a transcendent “being in the world.” Its representation however as an object does no more than defer the confrontation with this subjectivity and further legitimates the subject’s appearance. So are we still no further than the explanation to which Wenders fled in his own brush with the technical image? In short we might conclude that any notion of history, of the Real, of subjectivity is itself a precarious but irreversible progression of a relationship: The hand that grasps the world violently rips into being, the non-identity of Being, itself. And out of a non-differentiated continuum succeeds in constituting an object. Its subsequent use must succeed equally in confronting the immediately present non-object (the virtual object), which appears as a future into which the hand acts. This future-oriented

action is subjectivity, itself and stands as the problem of the future over the past concretized “objectively”. Thus, the real conundrum for Wenders’ scientists was not the subject revealed by hard, tangible objects engineered and constructed in real materials, but the subject no-longer secured by images referencing a tangible world. Wenders, we have seen, takes recourse through invoking a transcendent God. And perhaps the definition of a god is the conundrum of a subject that can dwell with non-being. But we are not concerned with the definition of a god. We are instead concerned with the conditions manifest by the technical image.

The subject, the Real and the *Sensus Communis*

It has become somewhat clearer that the importance of the monolith was that it appeared at all: an apparatus rather than an object facilitating the projection of each ape’s own proto-subjectivity, shared and verifiable by all. Imagine if we were all connected by some physical umbilical cord, without which we would cease to exist. This monolith, this connective cord is not that different from something already existent, verifiable and much more close at hand: what we call the *sensus communis*. Rather than anything tangible or graspable as “objectively present”, the *sensus communis*, as described by the 18th C. philosopher, Giambattista Vico, is no more than the shared perspective standing outside and distinct from the individual. What particularly characterizes the *sensus communis*, and distinguishes it from the noumena (i.e. what results from an Archimedean or “objective” viewpoint floating above, beyond, or prior to an individual’s perception) is that it is prior to, but not reflective of, any explicit designation. In this sense, it is common by spontaneously arising and standing ready for each individual. Most important for Vico, then, was that it was inarticulate (not objectified). In other words, by Vico’s understanding, specific to the hand’s grasp as much as the spoken word, is the paradox of a subject *born* of a shared experience but circumscribed by the particularity of that experience. The resolution of this aporia lies in the constant negotiation of the specific and how it is recast in the temporality of memory, how it is articulated. Once it is articulated in memory as a *thing*, it is suitable for the world, a condition that is already shared. The *sensus communis* is precisely the condition of our world.

Vico’s insights describe the world not in terms of a di-

chotomy between the real and the virtual, or noumena and phenomena, but rather purely relative and particular to the condition in which noumena, phenomena, subject and object arise. Making no claim beyond that, it still elucidates the distinction between temporality and conception (that which is outside of time) as the *sensus communis* becomes the locus as well as the means to the world and the “potential” of things in the world (whether they appear as objects or not). In other words, the *sensus communis* is the locus where for example we both arrange the world and appear cohesively and substantively within it. To describe this in Hegelian or Lacanian terms, one does not give primacy to either the appearance or the thing but rather recognize the Real as the resulting construct where the relation takes place. Hence Hegel’s dictum, “What is thought is, and what is exists only insofar as it is thought”. (Hegel, 2008. Preface)

The technical image and the *sensus communis*

Flusser characterizes technical images as those images, which are produced post-historically (Flusser, 2000). A curious turn of phrase given that the technical image is merely those images not produced directly by the hand. This is profoundly insightful. If we take the description of the *sensus communis* literally, i.e. in order to be shared it must be inarticulate, and we combine it with a standing reserve of every image from every perspective (something implicit and in fact concretized by the technical image), then we have a shared ground which is in fact the sum total of particulars. Thus, there is in principle no deferral (no virtual meaning). There is no distinction between the Real and the appearance and regarding the subject/body there is in fact only the condition of the technical image — the disembodied vague subjectivity of the collective dream.

In contrast to Hegel, where history and the subject are necessary corollaries of thought, for Vico, history is merely a symptom of our having failed to remember particularities in favour of choosing to remember generalities: the products of tropes that evolve into concepts and reified subjects. This distinction is paramount when the virtual object becomes the “augmented image” through the introduction of the digital. If we consider the coeval aspects of computation as manipulation and its necessary storing for future retrieval, then we must ask, what happens when history is remembered not as meanings but as the pieces themselves out of which meaning is

made? The *sensus communis* and subjectivity as we understand it crumble beneath the enduring “present” of an ever-retrievable and ever modifiable “past”.

The problem to investigate then is the following: what happens when all possible permutations of action are preserved as standing reserve for future action? The workshop begins with the provision of a variety of seed images that are randomly (but consciously) focused around the narrative theme of space travel (Fig. 1). The theme is chosen so that the students are encouraged to conceive beyond the typical limiting conditions of conventional notions of gravity, space and time. The same narrative is developed simultaneously by teams, each of which constructs scenes out of words, images, video and models (Fig. 2). Students are responsible for conceiving and creating artifacts pertinent to their narrative and presenting the narrative while building a coherent virtual community over the course of the semester. The web-based environment is provided for students both as a repository to store ideas/artifacts and a place where ideas/artifacts are appropriated freely. The generated artifacts are the outcome of their collaborative efforts. (Jung, 2011) Authorship is not singular nor is it a precious commodity in this sense. In addition, team members are free to switch teams at will depending on shared ideas and intentions. All work is archived and accessible and action is documented at the individual level, the team level as well as at the forum level. The implication and role of the archive in this project is represented in the shift from a practice where the architect builds a miniature abstraction of what already exists—or what may be developed—“out there,” to a world where he or she recreates the world out of an assemblage of communal perspectives, the whole human archive of digital images, deriving a possible future from a model fundamentally founded in the idea of the world as image. This change has crucial implications for both architects as makers of concrete objects/ producers of images but more importantly this change elucidates a paradigmatic shift in how we understand the co-constructed nature of our subjectivity and thus how we relate to the world around us. This has been an attempt to open up a space for the indefinite, a possible image and understanding of the world and thus ourselves.

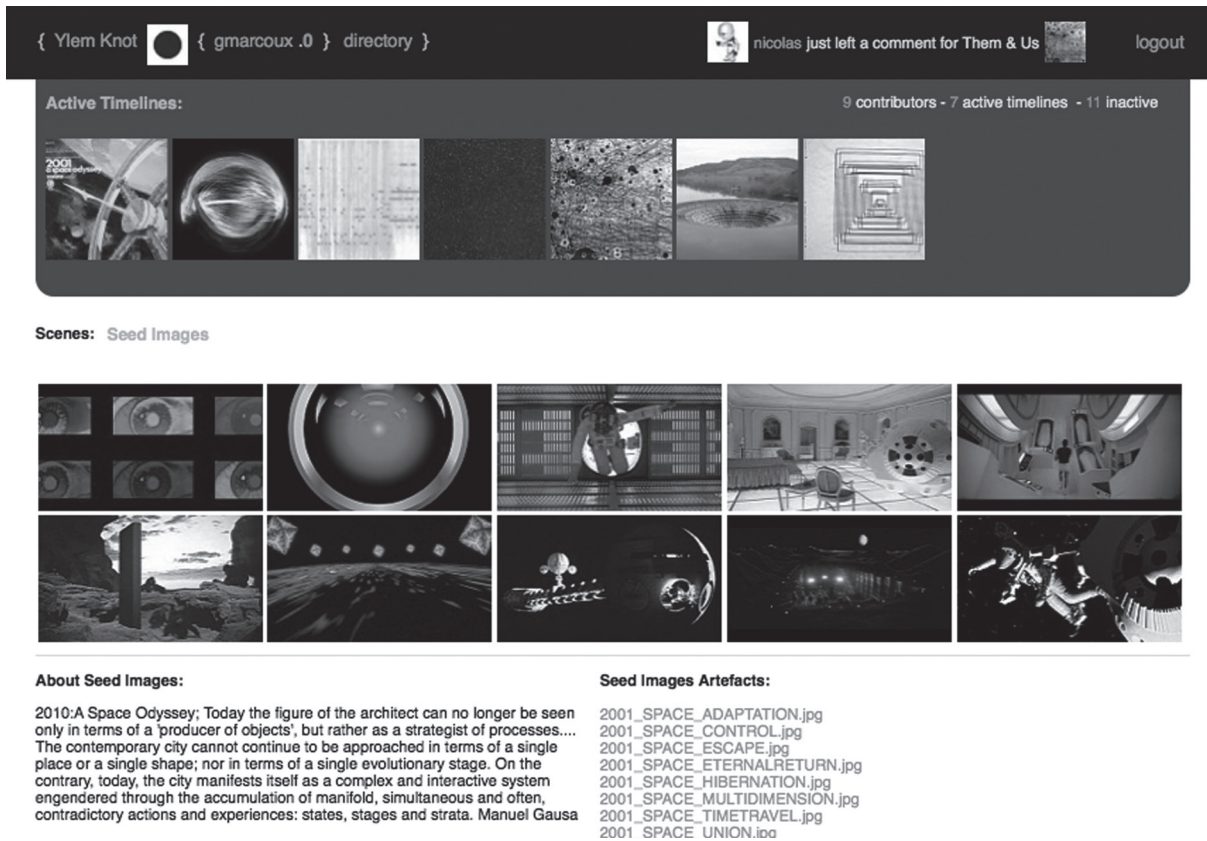


Figure 1. Seed image screen capture.



Figure 2. Video capture of constructed scene

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