

# Site Unseen

## Seeing, Mapping, Communicating

[David Cox](#)

### Demographs

**Property has eyes.** As John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* argued to see is to own, and conversely to own is to be able to see. Underscoring the particular privilege of the Renaissance man was always to be afforded the right to lay a claim to his own individual, private and unique point of view; to have a constant personal vanishing point. This Enlightenment legacy is still essentially the guiding principle behind economic rationalism, the idea that society is not the basis for human shared experience. Rather people are imagined and encouraged to view themselves as sovereign, discreet economic units. Advertising, urban planning and the nexus between the mainstream media and everyday life underscores the perpetually reinforced notion that the basic defining aspect of people is their personal purchasing power; consumption.

**The notion that** society can be broken down into socio-economic "demographics" literally 'people-pictures' reflects the idea that audiences are not pre-existent, but rather like maps, made. Popularized in the late 1960s, the process of making TV shows for assumed demographic sectors of society marked the rise in the importance of the advertisers in the development of popular culture. Executives were concerned to map and chart and infer the overall nature of their audiences as part of market research for advertisers.

### Try To See It My Way Subliminals

**Pierro De La Francesca**, the famed Renaissance painter and architect built arcane secrets into his pictures. Trained in the then very new technique of perspective painting, Pierro integrated systems of Euclidean geometry into the formal composition of his paintings. He even included 'secret' messages into the subject matter, such as five sided pentangles and so on which to those in the know at the time related to the presumed relationship between man, God and the universe. In some pictures, only recently developed techniques have enabled scholars to unlock some of the secret messages embedded in his paintings. The pictures were ciphers cryptograms which referred back to the social conditions under which they were made in order to flatter

those who could identify those codes. These conventions were considered part of what it meant to be an educated Renaissance artisan.

**The cryptographic geometric** and perspectival cosmologies integrated into his work and that of others around the same time Leonardo Da Vinci, and Giotto were those of high levels of mathematical abstraction, themselves at the time 'redeemed' from Greek antiquity. Using a system which would today be called 'ray tracing' and which would be done using 3D graphics software, Piero was able to calculate the appearance of objects in 3D space by numerically transposing positions of say parts of a human head tilted at an angle. The extraordinary feat was to be able to mathematically conceptualize the body as a fluid dynamic system whose spatial and positional appearance on the canvas could be represented by numbers. The numbers then could be used, quite separate from their real life referent to calculate the appearance of the same subject from any angle.

**Just as computers** now are used as much as cameras to deliver moving pictures to our screens, the common conceptual link between the two technologies is that of the abstract 'plane' upon which the perspectival image is imagined to fall upon. One of Piero's most famous images is that of a tilted head; a detail from his painting *The Flagellation*. The position of the head was one of many he could have settled on when he painted the picture, the subject of the picture was not present when it was painted. Rather the image of the subject had been abstractly transposed numerically by Piero first into his memory, then onto paper and from paper onto canvas. A computer graphics artist can choose to show a 3D model of a dinosaur or space ship from any angle and because the computer 3D graphics rely on the centrality of the perspectival view of the universe, any graphic can be made to co-habit the perspectival domain of photography.

**What seldom gets** examined or analyzed as much as it could in contemporary popular culture is the legitimacy of that perspectival interpretation of reality. The Enlightenment and its giddy claims to the sole 'take' on the human condition are reinforced with every computer generated urban planning layout, every blockbuster movie particularly those with elaborate computer graphics and most other representations which seek to privilege the individual as a sovereign, isolated subject.

## **Encasement Wish**

**The myth of** the encased fighter pilot, the completely technologically mediated man was the famous subject of the Roland Barthes "Mythologies" essay "The Jet Man". Barthes could easily have been writing about the hardcore aircraft fighter simulator freak, or the racing car simulation videogame enthusiast. The often physically

restrained VR encumbered shackled to his scuba like equipment resembles closely the look and feel of many S&M gear on sale in leather sex fetish shops the world over. The very British sexual thrill known as "encasement wish" finds expression in much of the language and apparel of virtual reality, and immersion fantasies of all kinds. A bit of BBC folklore has it that the men whose job it was to operate the Dalek robot machines in the "Dr Who" show were often reluctant to get out of their dalek outfits, so closely had they identified with the role...!

## **If Looks Could Kill**

**This insistence upon** the film plane as evidence of events passed, found chilling expression in the 1990 Gulf War the 'Nintendo War" where 'the eye of the bomb' televised its trajectory to the world. The crossing line here showed that for US foreign policy as well as domestic that the gamble of the Gulf War paid off. As the bomb took the viewer with it into the side of the bunker, the fact of the bomb's technological/political trajectory was also carried across into political certainty on TV at home. No one could refute the meaning of that image, even if they had lost on its outcome. It spelled its message out loud and clear. The United States had the technological might and means to dominate world economics. Things had not always had been so deliberately unequivocal.

**In the 1972** film *Letter to Jane* by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin the soundtrack's narrator deconstructs an image of Jane Fonda on a trip to North Vietnam cavorting with an 'enemy' artillery piece. During the Vietnam War images and sounds circulated freely from the war zone to the United States. The more images flowed the less meaning they seemed to convey.

**In *Letter to Jane*** another image shows Fonda being talked to by a North Vietnamese official. Fonda's expression is serious, concerned. As the film's soundtrack's deadpan narrator explains, the movie star (Fonda) is in focus, but the Vietnamese army troops behind her in the picture are distant and blurry. The film goes on to explain that in reality the purpose and role of the United States in Vietnam is, like the image of the Vietnamese troops, blurred. In reality however the aims and objectives of the Vietnamese themselves the narration continues is quite clear, and so the way a picture appears serves to convey the opposite of its literal appearance.

## **Sharp Cuts**

**Film montage emerged** from a certain vantage point, a peculiarly 20th Century vantage point. The idea of disjointed clashing meanings was in common circulation in Europe in the early 20th Century. The political payload which accompanied the

aesthetics of montage was powerful indeed. The photomontage images of John Heartfield in Germany in the 1920s were culture jams in the extreme. The proliferation of photographs in print publishing enabled political satire to find expression through the surgical cuts of scalpel on the photograph and to cut and paste and rework still images had its parallel in the development of film editing in Russia. The Eisenstienian technique was to make images clash up against each other and in colliding, give rise to combatant new images. This art of montage was the aesthetics of context migration. With film editing new meanings could be divined from the intersection where images collided in time. With photomontage the spatial field of the photograph itself rather was the terrain of a clash of opposites, where powerful hybrids of image with image could occur.

## Planes Of Thought

**Linking these technologies** was the idea that spaces could be traversed without effort, or that technology could mediate space. Photography and cinema have the aim of placing the viewer somewhere other than where they actually are transporting them in fact. Cinema and photography both employ spatial fields of view; the Euclidean geometric breakdown of space into geometric forms. Inside a camera, light falls on the film plane, is recorded photochemically, by means of a mechanical shutter. The technology of limits capture. Adjustments of physical limits to effect chemical processes

**Aircraft are similarly** about the manipulation of forces, which in turn are therefore relatively simple to translate into code for the purposes of making a simulation. Variables like thrust, pitch, yaw, elevation, speed, flow represent the chaos of the movement of air over the wings, of the propeller through the air. Affording a view of the surroundings cartography mapping Empireâs make maps before invading. The British Empire's first step prior to setting up India as a giant cheap manufacturing and supply colony was to divide the country up into triangle shaped segments, the better to map it. Conceptual ownership longitude.

## Getting High: Space Race And LSD

**The Space Race** and the Cold War represented the fusing of political and technological imperatives toward a unified Imperial assertion of Superpower supremacy. The quest for space took on a religious overtone in both the USA and the USSR; both elevated space exploration as the pinnacle expression of modernist progress; to boldly go and get "launch fever". It is no accident that Tom Wolfe should valorize the extremes of 1960s expansionism on both the left and right. *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* is essentially the same quest as that pursued by those with *The*

*Right Stuff*, Americans going the furthest, one way or the other. Trajectories of superpower aerospace were largely ground oriented; the relationship of earth based bureaucracy running smoothly contrasted with counter-cultural claims to anti-bureaucracy. In actuality the counter-culture was often highly organized and operated under the auspices of a similar technology worship drugs "better living through chemistry" and later of course the personal computer revolution.

**The central view** predominated in the 1960s much as it had done since the Renaissance. The privileged point of view of the Medici-funded artist was paralleled 400 years later by the NASA or USSR backed astronaut. The prize brought back to civilization from the Space Race was that of the unique view the space photograph of the earth, the moon panorama taken from space suit or Lunar Module cockpit. Neil Armstrong as Michealangelo's David. Officialdom needs time and space measured, divided, controlled.

## **Light Hackers**

**Photography Joseph** Nicephore Niepce (creator of the first fixed photo) was something of a photochemistry hacker as an experimenter using cameras, chemicals and surfaces. Exposure to light and the chemical fixing of the camera obscura's image was the aim of the first photographers. The very first 'fixed' photo was of his own courtyard. Niepce needed to leave the camera somewhere where it could be left.

**Babbage's Difference Engine** (though it did not work) had already been built when the first fixed photo was made. Computers have long been closely linked to the conceptualisation of space Charles Babbage's famous unfinished prototype for a computer, the analytical engine developed in the 1830s was developed in response to a request from the British Government to generate better navigational charts for mercantile shipping. The Colossus computer developed in the UK to crack Nazi radio codes, found itself mainly decoding co-ordinate information of Atlantic submarine positions, and the like.

**The miniaturization of** electronic components which resulted in the development by counterculture hippies in the mid 1970s of the personal computer, was itself the result of the need by the military industrial complex for small parts for use in missile navigation and space travel. Mapping, architecture and urban planning also play a large role in the development of video games, whose elaborate labyrinths of play and dynamics in turn find eerie expression in the layout and appearance of the contemporary themed shopping precincts of our major cities.

## **Game Plans For Utopia**

**Strategy and games** both require abstractions of space, and the dynamics, which take place within them. The Situationist International's project was that of reclaiming a rapidly modernizing Paris after its liberation in 1945 from the clutches of commercialization. Against sterile rationalist planning of inner city housing and retail areas they proposed radical alternative uses for cities, which emphasized a sense of free play, and which advocated a system of activities in art and architecture, film and writing which would ultimately render work and all forms of social control obsolete.

**The mediascape** as we may call it now dominates the public imagination. The mediascape or spectacle is that set of vectors defined by mainstream broadcast television, electronic systems of retail and police enforcement, expansionist freeway construction regimes, centrally owned commercial print publishing advertising, and public relations organisations.

**In addition, to** the S.I. a sister idea to the derive was the notion of *detournement* literally detourning signs, images, sounds, video, film. More contemporarily known as *sampling* and *culture jamming* detournement has enjoyed a solid place within contemporary art practice throughout the 20th Century.

**It is the** dream of many to live in a world where work itself has been abolished. This simple desire flies in the face of a world where public space is replaced by the leased holding. Where our "future dreaming is a shopping scheme" to quote Johnny Rotten.

## **Saucy Sorcery!**

**Early parlour toys** dallied with sex and the licentious zoetropes and praxinoscopes and other visual tricks often were delivery mechanisms for lurid porn fantasies and devil images, rather like the proliferation of video recorders in the early 1980s. The boom in initial VCR sales stemmed largely from the newly created *home porn* video market. The industrial revolution was starting to result in identifiable domestic scientific entertainment forms the home microscope (a latter day home computer) offered *views* into other worlds the microscopic and the microphotographic. Microphotographs were tiny photos to be viewed through microscopes.

**These images are** ghostly, even phantasmagoric. At the Sony Center in San Francisco recently, my wife and I were able to have a hologram made of us kissing. The image of us turning and kissing moves as one angles the card on which it is mounted from side to side under a light. To take the hologram, a video camera on a kind of four foot long conveyor belt scanned our faces over a period of five seconds as we kissed. The resultant frames were then processed in an adjacent lab, which converted the digital frames into the reflective white light hologram moving image the size of a large

postage stamp. In a sense the technology of the space/time based arts like cinema and the space recording arts like photography have converged to enable moving holograms which record events, albeit short span ones, and to present those events in movie like images which can be seen in ordinary white light.

### **C3 Command Control, Communication**

**Communications, military strategy**, and the control of land and sky have always been intertwined. To this end the themes of secrecy and encryption have found expression in works whose message was often as hidden as explicit since the Renaissance. Then as now military power is synonymous with Imperial, national economic power. A recent TV documentary shown in Australia included an aboriginal woman's description of the Pine Gab base in northern Australia "It's the eyes of America" she said.

**Alan Turing and** his team of encryption experts helped build the "Collossus" device in England during World War II as well as other computers to decrypt enigma encrypted nazi radio signals. These encrypted morse code messages usually were coordinates on maps of locations and maneuvers of such things as Luftwaffe bombing targets and directions for fleets of U-boats to torpedo merchant shipping.

**The Situationists often** made use of guerrilla iconography in their artwork, the most famous of which is the "Naked City" image from the collage book by Asger Jorn and Guy Debord. In this image, curved arrows link cut up maps of Paris to indicate those regions considered the most amenable to play and liberty. These were described as 'ambient unities'. The convention of the arrow on a map is, of course, strategic in origin. It shows the movement of artillery, personnel and so on the opening sequence of the early 1970s show set during WWII, "Dad's Army", parodied the direction of the arrows on a map of Europe.

**Guy Debord's work** included, toward the end of his life in 1994, a board game whose surface was a grid, and the pieces of which, were markers. The aim of the game was to roll a dice and to occupy space. The iconography of the symbolic re-taking of cultural space was thus 'detourned' from its origins in Imperialist wargame culture.

**War games play** a main role in the mindset of those whose job it is to conceptualize a videogame's possible set of outcomes. RPGers or Role Playing Game writers are usually deeply conversant in the syntax and conventions of military strategy. The premise for them is often 'we are always at war', a state of affairs no doubt shared by many who view themselves in opposition to mainstream life in general.

**The 1990 Gulf** war began not long after the finalization of the virtual mapping of the Persian Gulf region for use in the onboard memories of cruise missiles, pilotless, *smart* weapons which can find their targets within 5 meters over thousands of kilometers.

**The abstraction of** space and land and the making of maps seem inseparable from attendant notions of ownership and domination. The twin gestures of both looking and seeing are about controlling the cartographically consolidated, abstracted space.

**The fact that** the Internet was designed as the last lines of communication for besieged post-nuke war military brass is widely known. The network was a way of decentralizing control. The centralized nature of modern urbanism meant that if the Soviet Union were to nuke American cities, power would have to reside outside centralized locales of political and administrative institutions. Decentralization as a survival strategy found its way into the development of such innovations as Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome. Embraced in the 1960s by both the counter-culture and the military, the famous geodesic dome was emblematic of, on the one hand the rationalist notion of maximizing efficiency with minimum resources, and, on the other "communal" self support, the efficiency of which was no less appealing.

**Designed to withstand** the devastating effects of nuclear war, the truism goes that the Internet "interprets censorship as *damage* and re-routes around it". Imperviousness to commercial co-optation may prove somewhat more difficult. In the relatively early days of the Internet, the early 1990s, to get on-line required something of a knowledge of the Unix operating system. True to the tenets of Unix, if you were unable or unwilling to teach yourself the language, it was assumed you had little interest in learning about the systems upon which it was based.

## **Gameplay The Abstraction Of Engagement**

**The various genres** of games 'shoot-em-ups' which reward fast finger action, *simulators* which privilege the level of representational similarity to the real world system being simulated and role playing games all create for the player self contained cosmologies. The level of resemblance to the 'real' world matters less than the level of engagement for the player. This level of engagement is known in the trade as gameplay, and is so abstract a concept that defining it is less understood as felt. The prime test of a game's gameplay is of course the popularity of the game in the marketplace as an addictive experience.

**The first web** site I saw in 1992 was based at the same department and showed a 'virtual tour' of the corridors of that department. In those days most people understood

the net as a primarily and uniquely public entity. Anything commercial at all was frowned upon as contrary to netiquette. To sell your CDs via email was considered inappropriate and to multiple send anonymous ads was considered so deeply offensive, that the sender was likely to have his or her 'Spam' returned in spades, the attempt to crash the server of the spammer.

**If an imagined** war-hungry Soviet Union were supposed to have been unable to overthrow the Internet's original purpose as a military communications channel, then supposedly years later the big corporations were expected not to have face the same type of restriction.

**There are those** who entertain a rather cryptic notion that the Internet has grown to such a size that it is conceivable that it may have developed characteristics of a sentient entity. Indeed for even those who know little about the Internet, using it successfully for the first time must echo the feelings of those who picked up the phone receiver when that invention was new. This eerie sense of telepresence being somewhere without going there continues to define the themes of the techno underground movement. Dance clubs and dance tracks often refer to contact with outer space, with other dimensions.

**I met Erik** Davis in San Francisco in 1999. He had just finished writing an article about pinball machines for *Wired* magazine. We talked about the philosophy underpinning many of the developments in electromagnetic technologies over the past century. He appears in Craig Baldwin's latest film *Spectres of the Spectrum* which in science fantasy form, dramatizes the overlap between the battle for control of the electromagnetic spectrum by corporate and government interest versus ordinary 'hacker' individuals. Nicola Tesla, the eccentric and superstitious inventor of radio control and alternating current power, and Philo T Farnsworth, the inventor of television, both met with an ill fate at the hands of the large organizations which essentially stole their ideas and left them with nothing.

**Davis' book *Techgnosis*** examines the inter-related themes of spiritualism and technology particularly that of electronics. The invisible energy source whose origins like in the magnetic nature of bodies in the universe resembles for many who have learned to benefit from it aspects of an imagined parallel dimension. In all of these types of inquiries, certain elements remain consistent. The seen and the unseen dance a complex waltz around those spaces where the body and the machine exchange faculties. The highly organised global systems of official entertainment has now joined that other age old official project, the command and control of earthly and outer space. With war as its natural fuel and starting point, the demands of commerce continue to shape what is seen, and what is left unseen. Our technological imperatives now stem directly from a kind of official curiosity whose manifestations can only

increase in complexity, even if those same imperatives stem from the basest of human instincts to dominate, to subjugate and to control.

David Cox is a film maker and writer based in Brisbane, Australia. He currently lectures in digital screen production at Griffith University.