

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Phone Bells at Easter

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“By the turn of the century,” proclaims the paragraph at the start of Brett Leonard’s film *The Lawnmower Man*, “a technology known as Virtual Reality will be in widespread use. It will allow you to enter computer-generated artificial worlds as unlimited as the imagination itself. Its creators foresee millions of possible uses, while others fear it as a new form of mind control....” *The Lawnmower Man* is a fantasy about that technology and the possible impact that it may have on the future of human society.

The film, which was a commercial success in 1992, may attract a few awards for its remarkable special effects, which include the first Virtual Reality (VR) sex scene, and a “cyberspace” crucifixion. But *The Lawnmower Man* is not one of the greatest movies ever made. Nevertheless it is an important film for it identifies and explores an aspect of contemporary culture that many of us find simultaneously fascinating, hopeful, and profoundly disturbing, namely our increasing interaction with, and dependence upon, computers.

In many ways *The Lawnmower Man* is an updated version of *Frankenstein*, a morality tale about the dangers of unlimited scientific experimentation. It tells the story of Larry Angelo, a brilliant young scientist breaking new ground in the field of human-computer interaction, who tests his theories about the mind-expanding benefits of VR on a simpleton - Job, his lawnmower man.

VR enables Job to interact with vast amounts of data at a multiple sensory level - sight, sound, and touch. By donning a helmet with built-in stereoscopic screens and earphones, and a “datasuit” which passes sensory information to all parts of his body, he is able to enter “cyberspace,” the world of the computer: he sees this world in 3-D; he touches and manipulates the objects that appear before him; he walks or flies around, experiencing this “reality” with an extraordinary physical and spiritual intensity.

Job makes rapid progress through VR, and soon he is more knowledgeable about computer science and world history than Dr. Angelo. But now the experiment goes out of control, and the onetime simpleton becomes a super-intelligent monster who threatens to dominate every area of human life.

“VR isn’t just a stimulation,” the lawnmower man tells his erstwhile master, “it’s a whole new world, a utopia that men have dreamed of for a thousand years, and I’m going to be the conduit.” Job comes to see himself as “the Cyber Christ,” whose mission is to enter every computer network to cleanse and control it. In a bizarre twist on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, he plans to leave his bodily existence behind and become totally immersed in the world of VR. “My birth sound,” he promises, “will be the ringing of every phone on the planet.” At the end of the film as the scientist succeeds in escaping death at the hands of his demonic creation, the phones duly ring across the face of the globe, paving the way for a lucrative sequel.

As befits a phenomenon with such an ambiguous name, it’s hard to separate fantasy from substance with respect to VR. One assumes that, as the product of Hollywood, *The Lawnmower Man* belongs more to the former than to the latter

category. But it has to be said that, as a piece of science fiction, the film is postulated on the basis of extraordinary technological developments that have already overtaken us, developments whose implications we can only guess at.

Close to the beginning of the film we see Larry Angelo watching coverage of the Gulf War on TV. This is important, for it alerts us to the fact that VR is already much more than science fiction: it is intimately related to the same information technology that was employed with such devastating effect by the Allied forces in the Iraqi conflict. Indeed, it wouldn't be stretching things too far to describe the war with Saddam Hussein as the first VR war: before the Allied pilots fired a shot in anger in the Gulf War, they had flown scores of missions over "virtual" Iraq, an Iraq that had been photographed, converted into a mass of data, fed into advanced computers and reproduced in the form necessary for flight simulation; cruise missiles, launched from ships hundreds of miles away, found their way to the right target on the right block in the right city by "reading" the landscape and following the maps that were programmed into them.

One of the most remarkable images of that war--indeed, one of the most remarkable images ever constructed--was that of a real bomb homing in on a government building in Baghdad. Such was the level of accuracy involved that the bombers were able to ensure the maximum amount of destruction by guiding the bomb into the building through an air shaft. Nothing did so much as that one image to seduce tv viewers across the world into thinking that this was a clean and clinical war (it wasn't, of course, but that's another matter); nothing did so much to make the public aware of the amazing developments that are taking place in computer science.

VR is essentially about creating an illusion--a complex and convincing one, perhaps, but an illusion nevertheless. It's a step on from the simulators used by the military and the aviation industry to train their personnel. In such simulations computer graphics and effects are used to immerse tank commanders or airline pilots in situations that closely replicate the real thing. And, despite the cartoon-like quality of the visual worlds currently portrayed, they work: subjects sweat and suffer stress in the simulators, and some pilots are known to have needed counselling after a simulated crash.

What the inventors of VR have done is to build on this illusion, to make it more "real" and all-embracing through the addition of the 3-D effects and the datasuit. By all accounts VR is extremely convincing already and will become more so as computers continue to grow in capacity and power. It fools people into thinking that they are truly within this world created by information technology, a world where flight is possible, where the ordinary limitations of human life do not apply, where the illusion has become truth.

As *The Lawnmower Man* suggests, the military is extremely interested in VR and is spending hundreds of millions of dollars annually on its development. But other areas of the economy are taking it seriously, too. According to *Business Week*, industrial giants including Boeing, AT&T, and IBM are also investing huge amounts; "we are past the hype," says one researcher, "and pursuing real applications" (*BW* 5 Oct. 1992). Autodesk, a California-based company, has developed a program that allows architects to walk their clients through new buildings before they are built; physicians are practising medical procedures on various parts of the human anatomy without ever touching flesh and blood (*Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, 29 Sept. 1992). Shoppers will be able to pick articles from supermarket shelves without the hassle of leaving their homes.

But predictably enough, it's clear that some of the most sensational, popular, and lucrative applications will be in the entertainment industry. Hundreds of thousands of people have flocked to a VR game center in Chicago since it opened last summer, and some of the computer games companies are already selling basic home VR units (*Business Week*).

In fulfilment of Aldous Huxley's dystopian vision, articulated back in 1932 in his famous novel *Brave New World*, we are on the threshold of the complete sensory entertainment system--the "feelies" have arrived! As well as even greater immersion in the already familiar battle games, we can look forward to virtual space travel, virtual climbs in the Himalayas, and virtual sex. No doubt the hotels are even now being planned wherein travelling sales reps will be able to writhe about in computer-induced ecstasy with the virtual person of their choice. O, Brave New World, that hath such amusements in it!

"The instinct to escape is always essentially correct," says the aged hippy, Arlo Guthrie, of his past experimentation with drugs, and it has to be said that escapism has much to do with the appeal of VR. Some of its greatest fans are, in fact, former enthusiasts for the benefits of hallucinogenic drugs. Sixties guru Timothy Leary explained in a BBC interview that he finds VR enticing because "you're able to move your brain around without lugging your body along"; John Barlow, lyricist of The Grateful Dead rock band, thinks that VR is just another expression of an ancient human urge - "the desire to have visions. Maybe we want to get high" (*Horizon*, BBC2 1991).

The makers of *The Lawnmower Man* certainly understand the spiritual appeal of VR, and they portray it as offering new psychic and occult possibilities. After a bad "trip" in VR, Job explains with a mixture of terror, shock, and exultancy that "I saw God - I got God." Thereafter he finds he can move things by autokinesis, and is able to read people's minds. Mind over matter is not a miracle, he tells Dr. Angelo, but a possibility for all human beings when they activate areas of the brain that have long lain dormant: "I realize that nothing in what we've been doing is new. We've not been tapping into new areas of the brain - we've just been awakening the most ancient. This technology is simply a route to powers that magicians and alchemists used centuries ago."

Here, perhaps, in this potent mixture of old magic and new science, is the key to our culture's present fascination with VR. In the ancient and medieval world the magus was the person who stood alone because of his knowledge of the universe, the one who was capable of channeling the powers of nature for the desired results. VR presents the individual as the magus *par excellence*, the manipulator of a fabricated world. It's as though, confronted with the tragic problems of the world we inhabit, we have suddenly been given the chance to enter another one, a virgin world, still in the morning of creation, unspoiled, and unproblematical, waiting there to be explored and enjoyed by us. And in this world there is no pain or sorrow because, in truth, there is no one else. There are virtual bodies to play with, fight against, lust after, but no persons to encounter. There is no "Thou," only "me." God has been excluded from this world, and so, too, has my neighbor, anyone who makes personal demands on me. It is a world in which I may be completely absorbed, and totally in command.

The truly worrying thing about VR is not what it portends for the future, but what its development and appeal already tell us about the kind of people that we are, and the kind of culture we inhabit. VR is not qualitatively different to any of the other technologies that have come to dominate our lives in Western society; it's rather the

intensification of those technologies, the clearest manifestation of their inner logic. Over the last fifty years, much of the work of the French sociologist and theologian, Jacques Ellul, has been to warn us of the temptations and demonic potential inherent in our highly valued techniques:

What we are now experiencing is inaugurating the long crisis of insertion into a new human environment and its organization--the technological environment. For the last two centuries industrialization has been preparing the way for it, but it is only in the last thirty years that technology has begun to impose itself everywhere, to change everything, to take over all social activities and forms, and to become a true environment (*What I Believe*, 1989, p.133).

For Ellul, the technological environment is, in a sense, already “virtual reality”: it is a thoroughly artificial world in which we live and move and have our being. But while this environment gives all the appearance of being the servant of humanity, and creates the illusion of human power, it is, in fact, destructive and dehumanizing. We are nowhere more enslaved than at the point of our greatest assertions of human potency and autonomy.

VR may have the aura of a new world, but it is, in reality, the unmasking of this present order. Genesis 1-11 shows us that the human story is, at the same time, one of turning away from God and from our fellow human beings: they are both banished by our preoccupation with self. Martin Luther saw this “curving in upon oneself” as of the essence of sin. We destroy what we were meant to be even as we redefine for ourselves what we shall be. What better illustration of the truth of the ancient Word can there be than this latest creation of the modern world? Virtual reality creates virtual humanity - godless, neighborless, and utterly alone.

At Easter, deep within our own customized versions of Virtual Reality, the words of Jesus Christ challenge and perplex us afresh: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). What did he--what does he--mean? Somewhere in the distance a church bell joyfully suggests an answer. But, here in my office, the phone is ringing.