

The Cinematic Simulations of the Western Frontier Are Real

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INTRODUCTION

Any current exploration of the physical and metaphysical dimensions of our world needs to account for how each dimension relates to the other. This paper examines the relationship between these two realms to reveal that conventional (or modern) boundaries between reality and fantasy may be shown to be ambiguous and even non-existent from a post-modern view. I will discuss this relationship by first defining our conventional physical and metaphysical dimension, then show how the boundaries of these dimensions are blurred through the ideas of implosion, simulations and hyperreality as addressed in the writings of the post-modern philosopher Jean Baudrillard. This physical-metaphysical ambiguity may be seen in the Western environment portrayed in the recent films *Dances With Wolves*, *City Slickers*, and *Wyatt Earp*. These cinematic productions have become the reality of the West, changing both our understanding and design of this environment. Ultimately, our operations as designers may be seen as post-modern simulations influenced by these cinematic simulations.

CONVENTIONAL PHYSICAL AND METAPHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE WEST

The Western frontier generally and historically describes the land west of the Mississippi river. It is the frontier land defined as the regions that have yet to be divided, developed and settled; we often refer to it as being untamed and unconquered, a hostile environment. Even in the late twentieth century, there is territory enduring relatively unscathed from the progress of the human race. It is a physical reality that has an extreme concreteness: when in the Western frontier, one may never be more aware of the terrain, skies, and temperatures. In *West of Everything*, Jan Tompkins examines the landscape of the West, stating:

It is an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are

also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime. This code of asceticism founds our experience of Western stories. The landscape challenges the body to endure hardship—that is its fundamental message to the physical level. It says: this is a hard place to be; you will have to do without here.¹

Tompkins' description pits the human race against a harsh Western setting: ontologically the individual is understood to stand apart from and against her environment. Such a perspective forwards the conventional subject-object view of the world. The Western context—as object—is comprehended as a demanding physical setting by its traveler or inhabitant—as subject. The landscape of the West is viewed as a thing that humankind struggles against: it is separate from us, an entity in its own right. Our conventional world accepts unquestioned the objective concreteness of the West's mountains, skies and waters. It is an environment we understand as simultaneously harsh and poetic because of its vibrant colors, strong land forms, and extreme climates. We feel overpowered by its presence when we are in the Western setting. When we see Clint Eastwood in *Pale Rider* fighting the snow and the cold, we are sure of the physical hardships of winter.

Continuing this conventional subject-object definition of the world, this objective context of the West is understood to be set against a subject. The Westerner, as this subject, brings particular memories, ideas and dreams to this ontological view of the modern world. Such an abstract dimension involves histories, beliefs and thought systems generated by a rugged and taxing life. Our conventions provide us a view of the Westerner as someone formed by a tough past, a non-conforming set of values and an independent way of thinking. When we see John Wayne leading a group of boys across the West in *The Cowboys*, we arrive at an understanding of a way of life that shapes his character.

This conventional view of the physical object and metaphysical subject compose the two dimensions of the modern, that is, the age enlightened by science and reason, succeed-

ing the age of myth and legends. This framework for our understanding of the world may be seen to be intensified in the Western setting: the metaphysical and the physical become stronger through their opposition. Tompkins discusses the contrast between the subject and her Western landscape, stating:

L'Amour writes in the foreword to *Hondo* that his hero was a man "bleak as the land over which he rode." The cover of *Heller with a Gun* reads: "He was as merciless as the frontier that bred him." The qualities needed to survive on the land are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, mercilessness. And they are regarded not only as necessary to survival but as the acme of human moral perfection. To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving.²

The subject and object influence one another, but the two remain separate entities in the modern (or conventional) understanding of the world.

BAUDRILLARD'S IMPLOSION, SIMULATIONS AND HYPERREALITY

The modern separation of the physical and metaphysical may be seen to be blurred from a post-modern viewpoint. Such a post-modern philosophy replaces the modern thought that failed to discover absolute truth and establish a solid foundation for thought. Successors of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey began to overturn this modern tradition. Derrida argues against modernism's binary system of thinking, Rorty discusses the value of narrative over the fallacy of Truth, and Barthes explores mythologies. Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher and the first post-modernist sensitive to virtual reality and cybernetics, stands among these recent thinkers.

Jean Baudrillard's work in the late 1960s and early 1970s contains many early post-modernist ideas centering on society as a mass consumer and the proliferation of media and its signs. Douglas Kellner states in "Postmodernism as Social Theory" that

Baudrillard's narrative concerns the end of the era of modernity dominated by production and industrial capitalism, and the advent of the era of a postindustrial postmodernity constituted by "simulations," "hyperreality," "implosion" and new forms of technology, culture and society.³

To understand Baudrillard's post-modernism, examinations of the concepts of implosion, simulations and hyperreality are in order.

Baudrillard's implosion is a collapsing of modernism's subject and object: this binary understanding no longer retains its character of two separate entities. Subject and object implode because issues such as consumer demands and technological advances have reached the level of negat-

ing the distinctions between what is real and what is a sign. Kellner describes Baudrillard's shift from modernity to post-modernity, stating:

Whereas modernity was characterized by the explosion of commodification, mechanization, technology, exchange and the market, post-modern society is the site of an *implosion* of all boundaries, regions and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory. For Baudrillard, this signifies the end of all the positivities, grand referents and finalities of previous social theory: the Real, Meaning, History, Power, Revolution, and even the Social itself.⁴

Implosion indicates a dramatic turn of understanding, wiping out not only the conventional thought that there exists a difference between reality and the signs presented in today's media, but, more fundamentally, the conventional separation of subject and object.

Such an implosion brings about Baudrillard's concepts of simulations and hyperreality. Simulations (or 'simulacra' as Baudrillard sometimes refers to them) are reproductions or representations of objects or events. Conventionally thinking, we separate the representation from the object it reproduces or succeeds; however, post-modernism's implosion has collapsed the two and the representation now precedes the object for Baudrillard. We no longer know the world through things, but through simulations. This is recognized in the technological advances (driven by consumer demand) of virtual reality, the information superhighway, and even model home shows or television soap operas and sitcoms. Kellner states:

From this perspective, track suburban houses, interior design manuals, exercise video-cassettes, Dr. Spock's childcare prescriptions, and other simulation models precede "the real" and are endlessly reproduced in a hyperreal society where the distinction between real and unreal is no longer apparent or valid and where simulacra constitute and count as "the real."⁵

These simulations constitute a hyperreality. Baudrillard states: "Simulation is no longer that of . . . a referential being . . . It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."⁶ Hyperreality replaces the modern idea of reality as signs become the real. An origin is no longer necessary. The conventional idea of modernism's absolute real no longer exists, replaced by a reality of reproductions. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard states: "The very definition of real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction . . .* At the limit of this process of reproductibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced.*"⁷ The subject-object, reality-sign implosions have resulted in a hyperreality, that is, an ontological view of reality as composed of simulations.

CINEMATIC SIMULATIONS

Baudrillard's ideas of implosion as a collapse of the conventional subject-object, reality-sign boundaries, simulations as reproductions that constitute reality, and hyperreality as composed of simulations or models without origin provide a post-modern view that blurs modernism's clear divisions of the physical and metaphysical dimensions. Such confusion does not destroy the vitality of these dimensions but rescues them from an unquestioned acceptance of their conventional division. In this way, the ambiguity between the physical and metaphysical provides us with a new understanding of the world in which the cinema has a powerful role. Westerns, therefore, become important pieces for our view of the West. The recently popular films *Dances With Wolves*, *City Slickers*, and *Wyatt Earp*, among others, give insights into a post-modern perspective of the Western frontier.

Dances With Wolves was the first of a recent number of popular movies set in the West. As a critically acclaimed three-hour saga telling a story of the Western frontier in the days of Indians and Army outposts, we are shown the vulgarity and insolence towards the land by hunters and the Army (all portrayed to be of European descent) while the American Indians lived in harmony with their environment. The buffalo scenes were the most telling: hunters new to the West left hundreds of dead buffalo scattered over the prairie, taking only the buffalo hides. The Indians, on the other hand, killed only the buffalo they needed, and used every part of the animal. Through Kevin Costner's character we learn the beauty of the American Indian way of life and how they were pushed out of their Western land. The public reaction to *Dances With Wolves* was one of empathy for the American Indian: American Indian rights were discussed, team mascots were debated, and even Columbus Day was questioned. Such a reaction indicates that this simulation of the historical West was powerful enough to engender feelings and views of our own history. *Dances With Wolves* becomes part of our understanding of the Western past, mixing film and history.

City Slickers takes this post-modern combination of the physical and metaphysical one step further. In *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal and friends leave the big city to become cowboys for their vacation. Each is facing a personal crisis and debate the importance of life along their cattle drive. Although they begin as make-believe cowboys, they eventually have to become real cowboys as they deliver a calf and become responsible for getting the herd to its final destination. The baby-boomer generation instantly relates to this movie as they wrestle with many of these characters' same crises and are intrigued by the real potential of an escape to the life of a Westerner. After the release of *City Slickers*, the Dude Ranch business booms. Our society finds it possible to visit a current Western frontier that is not much different from what we imagine the historical frontier to be. Billy Crystal's simulation has the potential to be our reality, mixing film, imagination, and experience.

Wyatt Earp moves simulation even further into a confusion

of the physical and metaphysical. The production portrayed the life of Wyatt Earp, remaining as close as possible to an accurate historical documentation of his life. This includes portrayal of his three marriages and many activities of Earp's that are superfluous to the film's plot. Amazingly, the film makers did not cut any part of Earp's life because the film aimed toward telling the life of this character. The film becomes this historical person. The physical and metaphysical are hopelessly confused: the simulation is our reality. The production of *Wyatt Earp* shows the extremes of physical-metaphysical confusion as Dennis Quaid lost forty pounds to portray the character Doc Holliday. Certainly the viewers of the film can follow the activities of an actor depicting Doc Holliday, whether he is plus or minus forty pounds. However, the necessity for accuracy seems to say that this film is not simply a story, but a reproduction that is reality. This simulation mixes film, physical and metaphysical accounts of history, and even the lives of the people involved with the simulation's production.

DESIGNING IN A HYPERREALITY

These Western cinematic simulations, understood as the reality of the West, bring about a post-modern view of our role as designer. We can learn from Baudrillard a striking perspective that teaches us a different way of approaching and contemplating the activity of design. Instead of seeing the West as an object, we comprehend it as a reproduction of our histories and imaginations: we become part of it. Instead of understanding ourselves as visitors (or subjects) to this frontier, we are drawn into its physical-metaphysical connection. It is a viewpoint that is a powerful way of thinking for architects, linking us to the context we design.

Specifically, Baudrillard and the recent Western films leave us with a post-modern view that influences design in two ways: first, architecture itself may be understood as reproductions. This had been noted in Kellner's discussion of Baudrillard's view of track suburban homes as models, as

"Model homes," codes of design, decoration and taste, childcare books, sexual manuals, cook books, and magazines, newspapers and broadcast media all provide models that structure various activities within everyday life. Models and codes thus come to structure everyday life . . . urban planners modulate codes of city planning and architecture in creating urban systems . . .⁸

Post-modern designers are creators of simulations, that is, built reproductions that constitute a reality.

Second, because of the simulations designers themselves experience, our own design of simulations is altered. In other words, the simulations designers produce are changed by cinematic simulations. One model influences another model. The design of the Western environment is altered by films set in the West as we understand these simulations as the West itself. Our built reproductions become inspired by the reality

of these Westerns. The cinematic simulations of the Western frontier are not only real but have a significant role in the shaping of the post-modern architectural reproductions in the West.

NOTES

¹ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 71.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³ Douglas Kellner, "Postmodernism as Social Theory: Some Challenges and Problems," *Theory, Culture & Society* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications), Vol. 5 (1988), p. 242.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983), p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ Kellner, "Postmodernism as Social Theory," pp. 244-5.