

THE
PHYSICS
OF
METAPRESENCE:
A
Scouting
Party
Brief
on
Architecture
and
Bodiless
Travel



Disembodiment is the sign, the very sine qua non of the existence of another realm that penetrates and transcends the world of everyday life. Spirits, ghosts, voices and visions are all convincing indirect evidence of a more permanent Reality on which our corpulent corporeal world sits like an oil painting on the watery substrate of a capitalism. Intrepid disembodied travellers daring to boldly go (or, if of the Next Generation, to baldly go) into this other world inevitably return, and, having slipped back into the thickness of the corpus, speak of a realm of the metapresence which they document with copious descriptions and images. In fact nowadays it is not just with our highly developed transportation networks and cheap airline fares that anybody can travel, it is that once again we have found a way for no body to be necessary to travel. If the riders of the bus named Further were able to prove that there was no frontier left to explore (boldly or baldly), it was because they had discovered that on the best trips you never leave the farm. You can follow the television adventures of any number of heroes to the reaches of outer space;¹ you can ingest hallucinogens or narcotics and journey through inner space; or you can use the techniques of the mystics (meditation, prayer, oxygen deprivation, sex) in order to go anywhere your spirit guide (the light) will take you. Technologists have recently created another disembodied trip, namely a journey through the immaterial world of cyberspace. How do architects and architecture confront this intractable phenomenon of bodiless travel?

Well, historically, architecture has always had a body. That corporeality makes it part of our everyday realm of Rabelaisian reality in which things that go in and out of the body (food, faeces, phalluses) are felt and known to be in every way prior to things that go in and out of the mind.² On the other hand, achitecture's body is really only a set of symbols: architectural objects are merely the sensible manifestations of orders both wholly human (sociohistoricoecopolitical systems) and holy superhuman. It is the same old paradox then: an insistence on the reality of the body leads to realms where the body is not easily understood while an insistence on disembodiment only comes back to the evidence of a really-real, reality-bound body. If bodiless travel is a way of moving between the poles of this paradox, can the paradox be resolved by understanding the physics of bodiless travel?

In order to answer this question for yourself, take a look at some of the forms of bodiless travel. As noted some architectural objects have historically had the power to induce mystic states in which one can travel without the body. But although the tremendous beauty of architecture might serve today as a vehicle for certain sensitive individuals, research into the mystical experiences of our populations reveals that post-prandial lethargy and extreme boredom rank above beauty as a common cause of trance states. Moreover, because architecture is no longer an occult practice (or rarely), architectural objects no longer function in the rituals of mystics.

Mystic rituals themselves, however, are very much with use. Philosophers, psychologists, physical scientists, artists, plus an assortment of charlatans, witches, salesmen and spiritualists associated with the New Age Revival are busily engaged in mystic practices. Most of this stuff has little to do with architecture and the bodiless traveller. But note two things. First, many of these disciplines involve bodywork, an effort to open up the possibility of a change in mental state by pushing the body past everyday thresholds of hunger, sensation (hyper-stimulation or sensory deprivation) and pain. There is a scope here for architecture since these practices have already been adapted into two of architecture's old friends, namely art (Hermann Nitch, Fakir Musafar) and fashion (the New Primitives). Second, nowadays one can receive instruction in some mystic techniques of bodiless travel. Eckists, followers of the cult of Eckankar promulgated by the late Paul Twitchell, practice seven different types of soul travel as part of their regular meetings.

Similarly instruction in astral travel is available as an extra at Transcendental Meditation schools. Thus according to these groups, the ability to move one's consciousness without moving one's body is a skill, acquirable by anyone with faith, patience, a guide and money.

A search for a form of mass populist mysticism to that promised by these cult groups led Aldous Huxley to drugs. Huxley believed that at root any change in mental state was the direct result of a biochemical change in the body. According to Huxley fasting, self-flagellation or lying on a bed of nails can induce a mystic trance because these gross physiological activities cause fine physiological changes which in turn trigger precise, discrete biochemical reactions in the brain. Hence Huxley argued that with drugs everyone could enter a mystic state, since drugs trigger the appropriate receptors directly and efficiently.

In practice drugs are not so completely wonderful and in many ways make architecture irrelevant. Huxley and others report that during drug trips space and time become flat and insignificant--not good news for architecture which, of course, exists in space and time. They also report that drug trips (as compared to mystic trips) often leave the traveller depressed and pessimistic, not a useful state from which to contribute to architecture's civic tradition. Finally, although drug-enhanced performance is part of the love of art and literature (Caedmon, Cocteau, Coleridge), drug-enhanced architects are not a visible part of this tradition.³

That leads us to the new technology of cyberspace. Conceptually, cyberspace is itself a metapresence, a mapping of the world of everyday life by a realm exactly parallel to the world but with virtually no three-dimensional effect on it (except for some hardware). If, however, travellers to the world of reality talk about a world more real than everyday life, cyberspace proposes a world less real than everyday life. The realm of metapresence is limitless, whereas the dimensions of cyberspace are known - really twice known: once as a set of coordinates and a second time as a piece of hardware. Cyberspace works as a kind of hyperdrug, as if Huxley's belief in a connection between the coarseness of the whole body and the intricacies of the interior of the body can be made through electronic and mechanical connectors rather than chemical ones. Cyberspace pioneers thus claim to be in control of the ultimate Huxley drug-machine; they understand the physics of metapresence. But in reality what they understand is the same old understanding of reality that, as Huxley knew, only precedes bodiless travel. Cyberspace is only a sterile bodywork without the body, leading to architectural manipulations without architecture.

Consider one last form of bodiless travel, one that is quite well-known in our culture, and one that, albeit meagerly, shows that architecture and bodiless travel have a future: the Transporter from Star Trek. The Transporter is a dream technology whose operation is so murky that it gives the fictional world of Star Trek the logical consistency of lumpy oatmeal. But that murkiness, that lack of governing physical laws allow the Transporter itself to function. That is, it works for James T. Kirk because the continuity of his body is assured by the narrative; it works for William Shatner because the continuity of his body is assured outside of the narrative. It works in fact precisely because the physics that connect it to the Rabelaisian world are unknown. It works in the gap in which architecture has traditionally worked, in the space of mysticism and metapresence colonized by the rag-tag crew of bodiless travellers, poets, mystics, visionaries and drug fiends.

In other words, architecture works now only because we do not know how it works and continues to work because of a desire to *conceptualize* how it might work. Probably the physics of bodiless travel are unknowable; if they become known then presumably architecture will no longer work. As long as there is the possibility of disembodied travel, architecture can maintain its body. Maybe drugs would help.

NOTES

1. This is more properly an issue of representation which will not be dealt with here.
See Derrida, Virillio, Baudrillard, Kittler u.s.w..
2. A very pragmatic vision of architecture derives from the beliefs that architectural objects exist in this Rabelaisian reality. Neo-pragmatists may understand the work of more literary or philosophical architects, yet they still insist that problematic issues of the body, say pain avoidance or the determination of acceptable light levels, are the only issues that architectural design can hope to engage.
3. We have a general cultural fear of drug-enhancement that causes some strange and incoherent events most visible in sports. On the one hand we strip steroid-user Ben Johnson of his world record, and on the other hand steroid-user Arnold Schwarzenegger becomes head of the President's council on Sports and Fitness.

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