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The Virtual
by Rob Shields
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Reviewed by Douglas Kellner and Andrew Thomas

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In *The Virtual*, Rob Shields puts virtuality in with the key categories of contemporary social theory such as subjectivity, agency, structure, and the spaces and temporalities between the modern and the postmodern. Shields has rescued the term and the idea of the virtual from utopian futurists like Howard Rheingold and Nicholas Negroponte who use it to hype emergent technologies and forms of culture as the magical vehicles and entry points to new worlds and identities. The works of these digerati, ideologues for multimedia technology and culture, now appear ideological, outdated, and no more than huckstering of the new when confronted with the current state of affairs in the technoculture and its attendant war- and terrorism-torn world.

Dreams of total sensory immersion and dildonics never materialized, and in fact may be both unlikely and undesirable. Thus the virtual now often appears as a fantasy and ideology but, as Shields argues, may well be a salient category for social theory and contemporary culture.

Shields, along with Pierre Lévy (1998, 2002), avoids and deflates the virtual reality hype and provides a much-needed historical scrutiny, conceptual analysis and empirical exploration of the various domains of the virtual in the worlds of work, play, youth and a multitude of dimensions of everyday life. Yet, although Shields usefully contextualizes the virtual within previous forms of technology and culture, avoids excessive claims for its novelty and provides an often illuminating survey of key domains of virtual culture, he does not really get at the radicality of the virtual, its deep attraction for many in contemporary culture, and its novelties and potentialities in the emergent cyberculture.

We would suggest a link between the virtual and Ernst Bloch's concept of the *novum* to highlight the importance and scope of the virtual. For Bloch (1986), cultural artifacts, movements and practices both express dominant ideologies and contain the seeds of resistance to and transformation of those ideologies. The *novum* permeates cultural forms and is rooted in the past, experienced vitally in the present, and beckons toward the future, in an open temporality and ontology. Likewise, the virtual should be seen as opening the way to an original realm of experience and forms of culture that have exciting potential as well as illusions and dangers. On one hand, the virtual makes possible emergent forms of oppositional politics, alternative culture and types of identity. Yet these potentials can be regressive or progressive. In addition, the advent of virtual culture contains possibilities of novel cultural experience and forms, *and* hazards of losing touch with the human and the body, as many critics of virtual culture assert.

In an opening chapter, Shields focuses on the historical continuity of the virtual, corralling ritual, miracles, Baroque architecture and transubstantiation together to depict an age-old virtualism intertwined with major aspects of human life. But the fact is, no one from Adorno to Weber actually wrote about the virtual systematically (although Proust, Bergson and Deleuze, as Shields notes, anticipate and evoke the concept). Hence, its explication remains a task for contemporary social theory. In our view, the reason the concept of the virtual is interesting and useful to social

theory today is that we are living in an era marked by radical discontinuity and dramatic changes in technology, economics and everyday life. The technology of transforming information from the digital form of ones and zeros into facsimiles of audio recordings, books, movies, letters, stores, and many other things, has made the virtual a constitutive concept for contemporary culture and society.Now that its realm and application is expanding and becoming so compelling, it becomes a challenge for contemporary social theory to explicate the concept and for research to embody it. While Shields's analyses highlight its importance and illuminate its modes of being, his failure to emphasize its radicality could lead to perceiving the virtual through a 'really nothing new' optic. Thus while Shields pursues the virtual with more depth and insight than most scholars before him, he does not pursue a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, nor does he make the virtual a key aspect of the postmodern adventure, global cyberculture or the networked society.

Chapter 2 contains Shields's philosophical explication of the virtual. Since the virtual concerns what exists and what doesn't exist, it becomes a key idea in how we
conceptualize ontology and epistemology in the contemporary era, embedded in a set of categorical distinctions between the virtual and the actual, the abstract and the concrete, and the hyperreal and the real. Here Shields acknowledges that computer and multimedia information technology has forced us to ask questions about being and knowing anew. How do we know something exists if it only emerges in digital code and requires an act of concretizing in order to actualize virtuality? Is the virtual real or just a hyperreal abstraction?

Pierre Lévy opposes the virtual to the actual or concrete, de-privileging the real while rightly claiming that the virtual is also real. Shields accepts this opposition (real vs actual), but complicates it by adding an opposition along another axis: the virtual as real (existing) is opposed to the abstract as possible (non-existing). Things that exist can be virtual, like *déjà vu*, or actual, like ritual. Things that do not exist can be abstract, like symbols, or probable, like prediction. In this case, symbol is more ideal and prediction is more concrete, though slippage, or sign-sliding, occurs.

This slippage between meaning, or along axes, can best be seen in the example of *déjà vu* and ritual. *Déjà vu*, says Shields, is 'the sensation that the present has already been experienced in a dream. The actual-real is lived in a surreal dreamlike state as virtual' (p. 34). Thus, a dream that presumably occurred in the past can prefigure an as-yet-unexperienced future and is felt in the present as a strange sense of repetition. Slippage occurs between a past, future and present, from virtual to actual. Similarly, ritual 'actualizes latent possibilities, conjuring the past with a view to altering the present' (p. 34). Here slippage occurs between present, future and past, from actual to virtual.

What all this sign-sliding means is that the virtual always suggests the act of becoming. Shields is perhaps the first theorist to associate the virtual with Victor Turner's definition of the liminal: the state betwixt and between, the threshold. For Turner, rituals construct a threshold over which people cross in a process of becoming, of transforming themselves from what they were into what was, a moment earlier, only a possibility.

Ritual, Shields points out, is not everyday life. Rather, it represents the extraordinary, the transcendent and a utopian dimension. Slippage between the actual and the virtual, the existing and the non-existing, and the present and the future, however, occur in everyday 'cognition and interaction' (p. 33). Whereas it is rare, Shields argues, to find a pure example of the virtual, we see an 'assemblage of terms' on a daily basis. For example, a statement like: 'Remember to buy Kleenex' contains a reference to an actual, useful, material product (tissues), a projection of probability (runny noses) and virtual brand name ('Kleenex™' is *virtually,* for all intents and purposes, but not *actually*, 'tissues'). This ubiquitous, quotidian aspect of the virtual apparently perplexes Shields, who has difficulty reconciling it with the liminal, transformative aspect of the virtual. Shields wonders if this difference suggests that the virtual, in permeating everyday life, has become banal – even kitsch – and has lost its transformative potential.

The difficulty Shields has reconciling these two aspects of the virtual probably accounts for his neglect of what is truly radical and discontinuous about contemporary virtuality. Here again, Bloch's *novum* and the dialectical approach we advocate reconciles this division and, we believe, provides a more productive optic. In Bloch's view, the transformative exists as a potential – a virtuality – within the mundane. For Bloch, like Shields, the past is both what was and what could still be. The *novum* is timeless novelty and the present moments of everyday life are both concrete and virtual because the present is pregnant with possibility. While Shields may have difficulty reconciling the virtuality he detects as having permeated contemporary life and culture with the virtuality of transcendence and transformation, he nevertheless correctly focuses on operations, techniques and processes of change. Shields points out, for instance, that memory exists, but not in concrete form; it needs to be reconstructed each time it is recalled. It isn't copied, but rather, to paraphrase Deleuze, it is a dramatized simulation of the past. In a similar operation, the digital image is reconstructed each time a user clicks on its virtual representation on the computer screen. The computer *performs an operation* on the data that *transforms* it into an actualized image. In an example from literary theory, metaxis is the 'operation of the imagination which connects the perceptual environment with the virtual and abstract world of meanings which over-code our perceptions' (p. 39).

Technology has both introduced new operations and turned old operations into perpetually repeating acts. In the digital universe, everything has to be constructed anew from a jumble of data, an unformed ideal, through a performance of actualization. One need only remember how, before these new technologies existed, ideas were once committed to paper and stored in a concrete, actual form. Paper, of course, could be lost or destroyed, but it nevertheless represented a completed act. Today, notes, papers, e-mails, calendar events and address-book entries are all entered into digital devices and stored ephemerally as unassembled bytes. The need frequently to re-concretize the products of daily work evokes in many of us a sense of instability and uncertainty that bleeds into all aspects of existence in the current era, lending to life itself an unsettling tenuousness. In fact, these days, more than ever, identity itself must be constructed every morning through a performative act, a dramatization that enacts a simulation of the ideal ego identity as represented to each person by the virtualities (the brands, as well as the hopes, the plans, the memories) in his or her environment.

At the same time that the products of our labor seem ephemeral and require perpetual effort to recreate lest they be lost, forgotten and cease to exist, these products are also visible to unseen and sometimes hostile others who can invade our privacy, use what we've done against us or

aggregate all of our efforts into new apparatuses of marketing, control or threat. Thus, the virtual operations that new technologies make both possible and necessary lead to heightened senses of both instability and alienation, while at the same time making it considerably easier for us to create new things and be more productive in many ways.

Once he categorizes the concept of the virtual and makes the case for seeing the world in terms of transformative operations, Shields pursues the virtual through a variety of domains ranging from virtual Africa and globalization, to virtual work and play. In regard to technology, virtuality can help social scientists understand the telephone and telepresence (virtual presence), as well as newer technologies, such as chat rooms, MUDs and simulations of various kinds. Shields distinguishes between VR (virtual reality) and VE (virtual environments), and investigates cyberpunk fiction as an illumination of cyberspace, the autonomy of virtual spaces, the ways computers filter out concreteness and provide enthralling virtual worlds, and selectively eliminate sensory stimuli that may be a distraction or 'noise'. Thus, the virtual is idealized, filtered, processed and technologically reproduced in many domains of culture and everyday life. To some extent, Shields's survey of digital culture is already out of date, as he does not discuss DVDs, DSLs, the P2P phenomenon in which individuals swap music, movies and other digital material, incurring the wrath of the entertainment industries and prompting litigation on the part of the legal-political system. Additionally, Shields is primarily focused on cyberculture and does not engage with the potential and dangers of biotechnology, a form of the virtual that could lead to the cloning of virtual humans and animals; indeed, this is a process well under way (see Best and Kellner, 2001).

Shields's chapter on youth and cyberspace ('The Joystick Generation') does not add much to existing literature and is largely a screed against youth culture, attacking video and computer games, calling for 'Internet-proofing' of children, and decrying the negative effects of cyberculture on family life. He fails to see the positive effects of youth creating novel cultural spaces and forms, as described by Turkle and others, or the ways that youth are using cyberculture for political organization and discussion. The chapters on virtual work, economic virtualism, and the Internet and risk culture are quite good and provide useful overviews and interpretations of existing literature.

On globalization, the networked society and the digital divide, Manuel Castells is considerably more detailed and comprehensive. Shields's chapter on globalization and 'digital Africa' does not add much to existing discussions, yet his critique of the notion of a 'digital divide' as a marketing gimmick designed for the benefit of technology disseminators, raises some provocative questions, as do questions he asks concerning the ways that technology can promote existing inequality. Shields asserts: 'Internet access adds a new register of inequality in developing world contexts which counters attempts to use the Internet to promote economic development and social justice' (p. 92). By this, Shields means that the Anglophone slant of the Internet is a huge barrier to its being adopted in developing nations by anyone apart from a European-language-speaking elite. Additionally, the lack of infrastructure means the Internet can never play the role in African everyday life and the developing world that it does in the everyday life of people in OECD countries. Elite access to the Internet through wireless connections is narrowed own not just to people who can speak European languages, but also to people who have access to wireless technologies, who are often young men in government or media

industries. Empowering these people can strengthen socio-economic divisions and increase the power of existing elites. Shields notes that entrenched inequalities counterbalance the tendency toward universality of the network (so strongly touted by Lévy) and actually work against social justice in this context.

Yet we believe that the project of overcoming the digital divide is an important one as the Internet and globalization are structuring realities of the contemporary moment. The limitations of Shields's work, for us, lie with his failure to undertake the projects of the reconstruction of contemporary education and politics to make use of the potential of emergent information and communication technologies. As noted, virtual technologies can strengthen existing inequalities, but they can also be used to democratically restructure contemporary society and culture in order to attempt to overcome vectors of inequalities and oppression. This will require more dialectical and theoretical analysis that theorizes the novelties and potentialities of virtual culture for promoting progressive social change, as well as critique of how it reproduces existing inequalities and oppression. The dialectic of the virtual thus throws up important tasks for contemporary social theory and democratic politics. It is the merit of Shields's book to put the virtual squarely on the agenda of current social theory, and it is our challenge to take it further in theoretical conceptualization and practical application.

References

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