

Incorrect Distance.

The 'Western Tradition' of art and culture has inscribed within it, on both a representational and philosophical level, a notion of "correct distance" . On the representational level this is manifested most clearly in the development of perspective during the Renaissance, through to issues of focal length and depth of field in lens based media used today. On a philosophical level this concerns ideas about 'objectivity' in observation and the inscribing of disciplinary boundaries - the 'purity of the field' - elaborated during the Enlightenment. In our own times this concept has also come to embrace the negotiation of distance between the fledgling ego and its image, between infant and mother, during the "mirror stage" in psychological discourse and, in anthropological study, between the 'home culture' and the "culture of study". In other words "correct distance" is a concept applied to the space between our feelings, drives etc and our "self-representation" in the development of consciousness, and the distance between *us* - of the cultural West - and *them* - the cultural other of 'primitive' or non Western cultures in the development of 'Civilization'. In this view, the further one travels from the centre (of empire or 'consciousness') the more 'backward' or 'primitive' are the technologies and peoples or, in psychological terms, the drives and impulses. Space - distance from the centre - is equated with time - evolutionary development.¹

This colonial time-space continuum and the conflation of technological with psychological "intelligence" is the basis of much racism, both conscious and unconscious.

The old colonialisms maintained their control through communications networks; first roads and seaways then, following the industrial revolution, through railways, air-routes, telegraph and telephone. As these changes took place so did the representations of peoples 'on the edges of the known world'. Ancient cartographers depicted strange monsters and 'savages'; modern depictions acknowledge humanity but as degraded victims of famine or 'underdevelopment'. Now that we have moved into the era of *Digital Highways*,² and virtually instantaneous communications networks, does this affect the old colonial time-space continuum? In one sense it must, but it takes time for mass

cultural consciousness to assimilate such major changes and we are only on the threshold, with a small minority directly experiencing these changes. Which raises the very old and crucial question - that of access. And it is here that the old colonial structures still apply; not only is it a matter of economic power, it is also a question of geography and 'time zones'. The new technologies rely upon the old infrastructures to support them. So while the Digital Highways may crisscross the globe - albeit with 'relay stations' in far-flung areas of the world - it is still the old colonial power structures which determine where these will be and who has access.

Some of these questions were raised in the "New Imaging/New Technologies" conference in Inverness, as part of *Fotofeis: the Scottish International Festival of Photography* this June. There was also an event which in a sense epitomises much of the contradictions of these so-called "new technologies" approaches.

In a converted barn nestling on the banks of the Mory Firth, an array of fax machines disgorged whole rain-forests of paper containing various streams of consciousness from six continents. A presenter whipped up excitement in the style of a TV games show host as he called people in such far-flung places as Antarctica. But as the wall filled up with inconsequential images, fax-graffiti and pathetic self advertising (including C.V.s !), boredom set in and most people moved outside to look at the beautiful highland scenery in the luminous half-light of the equinox evening.

The initial buzz came from what the technology was capable of, with little or no concern for what was being communicated (the *quality* of communication is not simply a technological matter), its meaning or context³. I have heard people talk about such events as a new "interactive, collective and democratic art-form". Its is interactive only in a very crude and limited sense, a collection of individuals does not make it collective, and as for democratic - what I said above, I think answers that. What it amounts to is that any Dork, or Fascist for that matter, with

access to a fax machine can put out their digital garbage and call it art. Nothing new in that either, people do that all the time in other media.

I know I'm moving into the dangerous ground of what is or isn't art; what is good or bad art. But that's fine, we shouldn't suspend the debate or criticism just because it's new technology. Nor does it necessarily mean we have to fall back upon the old "correct distance" models of taste or aesthetics. While Modernism in its various manifestations borrowed heavily from the "aesthetic" forms from the cultural other, its critical emphasis on Formalism maintained a "correct distance" from from the social or political aspirations of that other; politics could not be allowed to contaminate the purity of the (artistic) field.

What I propose, however, is a project of *Incorrect Distance*. An exploration of the other; of the 'enemy' within and its representations without; of projections and introjections. As artists and people, we all have those 'other' places at our creative centre that we may have felt a need to suppress on the road to becoming 'acceptable' as artists or art students. This is especially likely if one is from a working class background, a woman, a person of colour, gay, differently abled. But even a middle class white heterosexual male experiences processes of denial and suppression on the road to becoming encultured in our present society. A word of caution. My aim is not to encourage a self-indulgent celebration of angst (a traditional Western genre). But a critical examination of difference.

I am not advocating a blurring or denial of "correct distance", but a re-negotiation of it. Not to throw out aesthetics but to (re)contextualise it with politics. To (re)value our "local narratives" - those qualities that formalist critics tell us are marginal - while engaging the "master narrative" of the mainstream. To find a language that speaks of our particular experience in the here and now, while drawing upon the conventions and forms that make it intelligible beyond the here and now. Finally, not to delude ourselves with the arrogance of an

art which seeks to be universal, that transcends history and culture - a revamped high-tech version of the colonial 'global image' - but one which engages our history, our culture, and indeed our future.

New imaging and communication technologies do offer new opportunities and open up new spaces to achieve this, but it is important that we recognise the infrastructures they are founded upon, and what their limitations are as tools - cameras and brushes with bells and whistles - and not get drawn in by a kind of techno-evangelism. The windows which are open now are due to a techno surge that has temporarily outstripped the mechanisms of control, so it is important that those who do have access and are concerned about maintaining and extending it do what they can to open new windows before the current ones are closed. But we cannot achieve this by suspending our critical faculties - we do not control the technology or the economic power, all we have is our creative and critical skills; the power of communication. And the technology is the means, not the end.

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Notes:

¹ The inspiration for this way of examining the concept of "Correct Distance" came from Hal Foster's article "Postmodernism in Parallax" (*October 63*, Winter 1993 MIT press USA.) but he cannot be held responsible for the interpretation expressed here. He in turn borrowed the term in its psychological manifestation from Catherine Clement: *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia University Press NY 1983).

² For further information on the concept of "Digital Highways" see *Digital Highways, Local Narratives*, Peter Dunn (AND magazine No 27 1992 London). It also represents the title of an installation produced by Peter Dunn & Loraine Leeson in collaboration with Carole Conde and Karl Beverage in Kingston Ont. Canada, in May '91: see Ten 8 Vol 2 No 2 Digital Dialogues.

³ This is not to denigrate *Fotofeis* itself which was, in my experience of it, an inspired and well organised initiative, it is aimed more at the uncritical *NewTecEvent* genre which has grown up in recent years and seems to have become the norm at Conferences and events concerning "new technologies".