

Review: Pre2K Post2K

Reviewed Work(s): Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture by Margaret Morse; Digital Delirium by Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker; Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology and Post-Human Pragmatism by Joan Broadhurst Dixon and Eric Cassidy

Review by: Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Nov., 2000), pp. 485-493

Published by: SF-TH Inc

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240925>

Accessed: 14-06-2017 00:31 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



SF-TH Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science Fiction Studies*

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

Pre2K Post2K

Margaret Morse. *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*. Indiana UP, 1998. xii + 266 pp. \$39.95 hc; \$19.95 pbk.

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds. *Digital Delirium*. St Martin's, 1997. xviii + 318 pp. \$16.95 pbk.

Joan Broadhurst Dixon and Eric Cassidy, eds. *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology and Post-Human Pragmatism*. Routledge, 1998. xii + 125 pp. \$24.99 pbk.

It did *too* happen! So what if the only computer to go down was the Pentagon's surveillance satellite system, leaving us vulnerable for twenty minutes to North Korea's land-based roman candles. So what if I didn't get to use that new generator. It'll keep till the Apocalypse.

Y2K really did bring the old world down. The technopowers' attention was focused on the great cyber-network of satellites, power grids, inventories, dashboards and hard-drives, as on the facets of a hypnotist's pendulum. When it was over, and nothing had happened, everything had happened. On January 1, the world calmly went about its business in the matrix. The trance was effective: everyone takes the grid for granted. It passed its great quality-control test with flying colors. Pre-2K was a time for gearing up, spaces were left open for the doubters and casual luddites in the Temporary Autonomous Zone of Hard Core Reality. Y2K—the shields went down, the fine alien nano-dust filtered into the consciousness-net. New Year's Day: reality surrendered without firing a shot. Didn't you notice? Post2K—*virtualitas victor!*

The books under discussion here are all pre-2K. Morse's book is the sanest and most useful of the three. It's also the most archaic: the chapters were written in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Morse is a scholar of video, and she enters the problematics of virtuality mainly by way of the phenomenology of television. It's evident that Morse developed most of her ideas without thinking too much about cyberspace and the Net. For Morse virtualization is still a process that can be viewed from outside, with a slow and innocent analytical mind.

A sure sign that she developed her ideas before the Y2K Project is that it is only in her introduction (doubtless written last in the book) that Morse proposes that television is an "interim phase" in the process of delegating more and more "discursive maintenance and transmission of culture" to machines (4). Until the PC and the Net, television had been the main mechanism for cultural integration through its "circulation of objects, bodies, money, and other symbols via images." Morse sees the contesting ideas of Raymond Williams and John Fiske about the basic form of television—*flow* or *segmentation*—as complementary,

and develops a theory of television virtuality that is in some ways (though Morse does not use this vocabulary) indistinguishable from the practice of hypnotic induction. Television works its cultural enchantment by establishing the illusion of a world of images parallel to the viewer's; in order to vivify it, more and more techniques of virtual, fictional interaction and personal expression are elaborated. Virtuality is then a specific psychological relationship: the human viewer grants the machine a virtual subjectivity, linked to artificial gestures of intimacy and physical nearness. With the development of demographic pinpointing, the machines' programs have an increasingly precise knowledge of where the receiver is, and tailor themselves with specific gestures of intimate interaction. An increase in surveillance thus leads to an increase in "personal connection." Before the virtual relationship can be established, real relations—to people, space, time, objects—must be distanced and emptied. Then they are reprogrammed through various discursive techniques to act as enclosed surrogates of that experience. (Therefore this virtualization follows the standard capitalist practice of breaking apart non-market bonds between people and the world, and then selling back simulations of them, in ever finer and more minute units, to fill the gaps—all the while pretending this is a new "service" created by the entrepreneurial spirit to enrich life.) Morse provides an informative discussion of the way these hypnotic connections are made in the psychology and technology of flying logos, proxemics of news anchors, and the kinetic methods of linking different levels of presentation.

Morse's most useful chapter, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television," argues that the basic conditions for further virtualization of life in America have been established by the mutually reinforcing virtual habitats listed in the chapter title. These are less loci than practices, for they engender in the willing subject a state of distraction, drawing him or her out of the here-and-now into a contained set of simulated relationships with space, objects, and people, where the real is reprogrammed and reintroduced, now disavowed. For Morse these practices establish and take place in *nonspace*—the state of dreamlike distraction, "spacing out," where private subjectivity, unanchored from public constraints, is completely mobile, a "bubble of subjective here-and-now strolling or speeding about in the midst of elsewhere" (112). Drawing on Benjamin's Arcades project, Morse sees the main task and power of this freeway-mall-tv troika as the control over the mobile subjectivity's passage through different systems. The television screen, above all, presents a constantly moving transaction among different perspectives and cultural systems, effectively creating the image of a world in which the system of exchange applies not only to commodities, but to realities. The home (as shelter for the tv), the automobile, and the mall become the images and privileged locations of national social life. They offer private mobility in virtualized spaces liberated from the contingency of the real and yet in determinate relationships with the real.

The rest of *Virtualities* is devoted to video installations as forms of commentary and criticism of the virtual system. Aside from some perfunctory and self-indulgent references to cyborgs and *Neuromancer*, there is little of

interest in the rest of the book for the student of sf. Morse seems singularly unaware of sf and sf-theory, and even of cyber-cultural theory, and she makes only a minimal effort to connect with the wired hipster elite destined to triumph in Y2K. But, judging from the writings in the other two volumes, that's not a bad thing. Morse's book brings lucid and common-sensical analysis to a subject too often characterized by eccentricity and pretentiousness.

Did somebody mention Arthur and Marilouise Kroker? Baudrillard's and Virilio's most energetic epigones in North America, the Krokers edit *CTheory*, an online zine that sets the international standard for intellectual hipitude. The Krokers have also written a good deal of the most ambitious and caustic criticism of the digitized world. *CTheory* seems to be open to every sort of commentary—from dry intellectual history to word-salads—as long as it claims to illuminate the implications of cyber-culture. It boasts a stellar editorial board including Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, Bruce Sterling, Stelarc, Siegfried Zielinski, Richard Kadrey, and the late, much missed Kathy Acker. *Digital Delirium* is a collection of 47 (!) writings from *CTheory*. What the inspiration of this particular collection was is not clear—the Krokers rarely indulge in straightforward prose, and the introduction is no exception; but here's a hint: "The web is the digital mirror that reflects back to our nomadic bodies its fate as it is externalized in a world of artificial intelligence, recombinant genes, and spliced data streams" (xiv). In this book, the Krokers tell us, there will be a great "rubbing of theory against digital culture," theorizing "in, of, for, and sometimes against the Web," intensifying "cyber-reality by allowing electronic writing to break the surface of print" (xvii). From the distance of three years, *Digital Delirium* has value as a document of what the boho cyber-intelligentsia were trying to do before Y2K hit the fan, and we had to give up pretending to meet at the edge.

The closing essay of the volume, "The Technology of Uselessness" by the Critical Art Ensemble, is unusual, because in this crowd, where Bataille and Deleuze-Guattari are revered, "usefulness" and "uselessness" seem like nonsensical categories. But I, too, like to think in those terms. So I will try to order my comments on *DD*'s contributions with the simple binary: what's useful and what's not. Let's start at the top:

The Krokers, "30 Cyber Days in San Francisco": a little pomo travelogue-journal, replete with occasions for noticing the weird wired edge dwellers and for metaphorical flights of end-days theory; a minor-league tribute to Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986). Vision of the future: nasty convergences, "or maybe it's the opposite" (10). Useless.

R.U. Sirius, "Out There Havin' Fun in the Warm California Sun": The founder of *Mondo 2000* and "the most anti-purist motherfucker around" (20) praises Californian hedonist edge consciousness. Vision of the future: "*Wired* versus *Mondo 2000*—for all eternity!" (12). Useless.

Pat Munday, "The View from Butte, Montana": A guy living in Montana disses Californicator drop-ins. Vision of the future: "Maybe the Unabomber was right" (14). Useless.

Jon Lebkowski, "It's Better to Be Inspired than Wired": An Interview with

R.U. Sirius:" R.U. Sirius plays a deft game of ambivalence, accusing himself and the *Mondo*-style techno-bohos of preparing the ground for *Wired*'s moneyed geeks—and still manages to sound hip in his ambivalence. Vision: "I want to be bigger than Satan" (24). Useless.

Bruce Sterling, "Unstable Networks": When this was written in 1996—i.e., before the publication of *Holy Fire* (1996) and *Distraction* (1998)—Sterling was (and may still be) the only c-culture ethnographer who knew what he was talking about, wrote entertaining copy, and had a sophisticated understanding of history. This piece is a characteristic Sterling romp about being realistic regarding the promises of the Net. It's also worth a read as a premonition of the novels and the Viridian Manifesto to follow. Vision: "The future is unwritten" (37). Useful and entertaining.

Jean Baudrillard, "Global Debt and Parallel Universe": Three pages of not quite classic Baudrillardian Escher-logic: global debt, satellites, and nuclear deterrence all work on the same principle, uniting humanity in the prospect of never-ending proliferation. Vision: "The debt will never be paid" (38). As useful as *déjà vu*.

Louise Wilson, "Cyberwar, God and Television: An Interview with Paul Virilio": The eight hundred and twenty thousandth interview with Virilio. The line of aspiring interviewers must go around the block. Virilio again prefers virtual reality to simulation. What's new? "The accident of the real is no accident." The world is being absorbed by the Pentagon. Vision of the future: military technologies today sketch the future of the civilian world. (Did I say this was new? Sorry.) Useless, Virilio being Le Virilio.

Caroline Bayard and Graham Knight, "Visisecting the 90s: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard": Didn't I tell you? The collected interviews of Virilio and Baudrillard will require their own libraries, or a CD-box set at the very least. What's new here? Baudrillard retreats from his statements about Bosnia as simulation war, and lets us know he's not a bad guy, just sort of ... tired. Vision: "For the moment, things are still OK" (63). Useless (unless you're a Baudrillard completist).

Geert Lovink, "Civil Society, Fanaticism, and Digital Reality: An Interview with Slavoj Zizek": Jeez! These fellows don't even get paid for these interviews, so they must really love the subject. Zizek is at least in an interesting moment in his career. He is actively involved in the Slovenian government, and enthusiastically takes the governing party's side, thereby raising the ire of his former free-floating intellectual brothers-in-arms. Zizek shows he's a conservative leftist, who prefers polite behavior to the alternative. Vision: virtual seduction will defeat virtual consummation. Useless—but more useful than the previous two interviews. At least Zizek is a lusty fellow.

Yikes! I'm running out of bandwidth and I've got 31 print units to go. Let's cut to the chase, and forget all the useless breaking of the surface of print. What's useful and interesting?

Sf theory folks might check out Alan Shapiro's "Captain Kirk Was Never the Original." Shapiro makes a case that *Star Trek* has had a much more complex ambivalence toward virtual reality than its reputation for straight-arrow

humanism would lead one to think. I'm not usually fond of broad arguments made out of *Star Trek*'s cartoon liberalism, but this is one is intriguing. Even better is Ken Hollings's "Tokyo Must Be Destroyed," which traces the tendency of Japanese sf, from Godzilla to contemporary *anime*, to destroy its cities. Hollings provides a history of the theme's manifestations, and so can actually be used by other scholars. Useful for making arguments against the Information Highway is Robert Adrian X's "Infobahn Blues," a cogent argument that unpacks the metaphors latent in converting the World Wide Web into the Information Superhighway.

The Arts Section of *DD* features writings that, with their heavy emphasis on the viral-memetic model, are an acquired taste that I have not acquired. But it does include Kathy Acker's "Requiem" from an unfinished opera, one of the last pieces Acker published. It has little to do with c-theory or virtuality, and in fact restores some sense of the real mortal body and real spirituality that most of the volume desperately lacks.

Paolo Atzori's and Kirk Woolford's "Extended-Body: An Interview with Stelarc" (Stelarc is right behind Virilio and Baudrillard in this category) is interesting, if only because Stelarc is an important conceptual artist of our time. For the most part, he is an inspired naif, who justifies his disturbing experiments with the body—like his autonomous third arm, more about which later—with the argument that by changing the body one can change one's view of the universe. Yes, probably; and so will a car crash.

The most worthwhile essays in *Digital Delirium* are Siegfried Zielinski's "Media Archeology," Marcos Novak's "Transmitting Architecture: The Transphysical City," and Kroker's own "Digital Humanism: The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan." Zielinski's piece is a plea for an alternate cinema/photography that does not refer back to the real, justified by an eccentric genealogy of optical machines and their inventors in seventeenth-century Europe. Novak meditates on an "alternative architectural poetics" to be developed under the "liquid" conditions of Virtual Reality. By far the most useful piece in the book, however, is Kroker's straightforward, soberly academic overview of McLuhan's life and work. This may be the best introduction to McLuhan available. Kroker not only traces the evolution of McLuhan's ideas and places them in the context of contemporary philosophy and communications theory, he also views from a *national* perspective, as a Canadian commentator viewing a Canadian intellectual. I suspect, based on the references and the measured academic style, that this piece is an anachronism, written long ago, before Kroker's mind and language were scrambled in the Digital Divide. I'm not sure what it is doing in this book, since it is about neither cyber-culture nor delirium; it may simply be a tribute to the "father" of the theory of communications as culture. I doubt whether Kroker would take a national position any more, in the age of transnational flows. Whatever the reason for the essay's inclusion, and whenever its provenance, Kroker's introduction to McLuhan is an elegant work of scholarship.

At first glance, *Virtual Futures* is indistinguishable from *DD*. The selected papers from the Second Virtual Futures conference at the University of

Warwick, held in 1995, include several by members of the Krokors's *CTheory* stable (Hakim Bey, Stephen Pfohl, Stelarc), and there's the same feeling of a collection of highly diverse responses to a very vague shared stimulus that makes these volumes a form of television for nosebleed theory. Yet there is a fundamental difference, at least in conception. *DD* begins from essentially Baudrillardian premises, and most of its writers treat virtuality creep as a sociological phenomenon, a transformation of a culture of practices—a transformation, moreover, that has a historical logic. For the *DD* stable, paradigms change, metaphors become current, signifiers slide because practices do—so the use of metaphor-models like the viral and the memetic are functional operators, to be used with a certain irony, as ways to manage the disorientations caused by the increase of virtuality in social life. The *DD* folk are hip witnesses, implicated and able to prove their familiarity with, and even able to take their place in, the new culture; but they also harbor a deep suspicion and old-fashioned critical ways of thinking—lapsed Jesuits in Clubland. The very title, *Digital Delirium*, is openly oxymoronic, and the Krokors's own tone is ambivalent, oscillating between repelled critique and ecstasy. They chatter in the middle of a bungee-jump.

The premises of the *VF* conference, by contrast, appear to be primarily Deleuzo-Guattarian, and the technological transformations are viewed as changes in the structural conditions for thought itself—i.e., practices will change because the material structure of things will change; cherished ideas of the body, the world, and desire will change because the old ways will simply not be able to be thought under the new conditions of pervasive machine-mediated virtuality. The *VF*'s folks appear to welcome the metaphysical revolution, feeling the radical's delight at seeing the old as decrepit, corrupt, misthought, untrustworthy. They especially welcome the cyberotic New Thing that promotes liberation by abolishing the scarcity of communication and ushers in something so difficult for the old to understand, that they, the new radicals, can claim some territory for themselves. So their language and ideas are barely comprehensible except by the very few. Whether they are right or wrong is literally unimportant; they are “producing”—recasting communication in a putatively new theoretical discourse that is, supposedly, friendly with the machines that are dissolving the disciplinary restraints of scarcity-obsessed bodies. There's an ecstatic fervor in this language—a form of lyricism with abstruse concepts at the limit of abstraction—that I have seen before only in Heideggerians; this is a language of an in-the-know philosophical elite challenging everybody in the clueless world to understand them, and a theory of communication that restricts communication unmercifully. The irony, if such a word still has meaning here, is that each member of the elite seems to speak his or her own abysmal dialect.

In his Introduction, Eric J. Cassidy positions the *VF* discourse outside the “left/right” division of standard responses to cyberculture: the “leftist” defense of humanism and luddite antagonism to machines, and the “rightist” extropian idealization of the post-human, technologically enhanced body and cyberspace as God's own free-trade zone. For Cassidy, the alternative is the “cyberotic,” which he describes as a theoretical elaboration of Gibson's conception of the

body in *Neuromancer*, where “the body functions as space, a site where organic matter mixes with an erotic element of synthetic fatality; a posthuman apocalyptic fusion of cyberspace and eroticism” (x). Cyberotics explores “the future of the body as humans mutate in cyberspace.” The focus is on the transformation of the conception of the body through a fusion of models taken from cybernetics (mechanism), economics (production), and “the technological unconscious” (desire).

In fact, only about half of *VF*'s contributors try to work on this fusion, and they are without a doubt the most esoteric and inhospitable essays in the book. Stephen Pfohl's “Theses on the Cyberotics of HIStory: Venus in Microsoft, Remix,” Nick Land's “Cybergothic,” Matteo Mandarini's “From Epidermal History to Speed Politics,” and Iain Hamilton Grant's “Black Ice” are almost incomprehensible to me, each one combining (“fusion” is the operative term, I suppose) abstractions from privileged thinkers—Baudrillard, Deleuze-Guattari, Lyotard—in what soon seems to be a word-salad to the uninitiated. (Word-salad should be an acceptable genre for admirers of *Anti-Oedipus*.) Sadie Plant's “Coming Across the Future” I think I almost understand. In the only discourse that really seems to be about the cyberotic, Plant goes on an exuberant rant in praise of a sexuality liberated from the fetishes of identity, reflection, and the body isolated in space, by the cybernetic/machinic dispersion of self throughout the whole cybernetic system.

Hakim Bey, as always, is not a member of the party. In “The Information War” he reminds his audience that contemporary thinking about information is dominated by a Manichean dualism that comes in two mutually inverting forms: a gnostic/extropian denial of the body, and a situationist denial of mediation. Unlike his cyberotic hosts, however, Hakim Bey's third way is not esoteric criticism, but the mystical, holistic refusal to have all discourse formed by the terms of information.

The closing essay is, appropriately, Stelarc's uncompromising posthumanist manifesto, “From Psycho-Body to Cyber-Systems: Images as Post-Human Entities.” It is impossible to say whether Stelarc (who is one of the most genial of men in carbon-based reality) intends his vatic utterances to be taken wholly seriously, or whether he is engaging in a form of techno-Dada. My feeling is that it is more serious than not, and if so, the manifesto would be genuinely shocking if it did not contradict itself into unimaginability. It proposes to greet with delight the annihilation of individual will, at the same time that it calls for a technology that will give individuals the right to alter their own DNA. It calls for the complication of the body through prosthetics, and justifies this because the body has too many redundant systems. Stelarc calls for a conception of the body that will permit it to be used (involuntarily) by other minds, and to be subjected to surveillance at the cellular level. (Indeed, he discusses in the *DD* interview a sculpture that is installed in his stomach; the object has no significance except as something to be scoped with fine surveillance devices.) Most chilling is the prospect that this prophecy, which has little to do with virtuality and much to do with robotics, may yet come true, contradictions and all. Stelarc is our own contemporary Gastev, Zamyatin's great antagonist, who

envisioned the transcendence of individual workers in the factory's machinic mind.

VF contains only one truly inspiring piece, David Porush's "Telepathy: Alphabetic Consciousness and the Age of Cyborg Illiteracy." Porush claims that the transformation of communication brought by virtual reality will issue in an access of telepathy analogous to the transformation of consciousness created by the alphabet. Not just any alphabet, but the ancient Hebrew system from which, Porush says, all phonetic systems derive. Unlike just about anyone in *DD* and *VF*, Porush not only displays a sophisticated interest in the history of consciousness, and in history, period; he succeeds in imagining a myth of the evolution of mind in conjunction with its technologies of representing the imagination. Porush has as grandiose expectations for VR as Jaron Lanier once did; and indeed, the same reservations apply to his ideas as to Lanier's dreams of direct communication bypassing language. Why, we might ask, would not the process of communicating in the mask-world of VR not create a language with the same problems of mediation, interpretation, and misprision as every other form of language? But that would be missing the point—Porush's essay has an elegance and grandeur, a vision of language, consciousness, and technology as actors in a cosmic history, maybe even a material explanation on such a grand scale that it is indistinguishable from spiritual history. If that were not enough, Porush's prose is so clear and inspired that it feels as if he alone in the whole *VF* group really knows what he's talking about.

I should say, as a form of disclaimer, that I attended the *VF* conference in question. It was a festival of red hair and black leather (my favorite color scheme), discreet piercings, and middle-aged jeans. Though the sober and smug lectures transcribed in *VF* did occur, there was also a complementary festive chaos—more like Lem's Futurological Congress than a Virtual Futures conference. I don't know about the raves, the X, the night-crawling—so don't ask me. But there was a film-showing of Orlan's plastic surgery, with Orlan herself, the Diva of Dermoplasty, in attendance, looking very much like an alien from *Star Trek*. Stelarc jerked his third arm around involuntarily and unpredictably, demonstrating its future usefulness. A bona fide young jungle-DJ lectured us about mixing styles and the street's uses for Adorno, and met with some hostility from the assembled Deleuzoguattarians. Spirits were high, leather was slapped, pints were imbibed. Let it be noted then that schizo-philosophy is alive and thriving, and that the same pretentious, self-isolating theorists are also the most convivial company.

I was also somewhere else, but more recently, post2K. In June of this year I visited Mostar, the star-crossed city in Bosnia, surrounded by the high promontories favored by artillery. The famous bridge, which was once the scene of international poetry contests, was being dredged up from the river with dreamlike slowness, great white stones were being sorted on the riverbank like the remains of an ancient city. The UNESCO sign on the Muslim-bank bridgehead declares that the bridge will be rebuilt at the end of June 2000. Perhaps in another universe. There is no sign of any construction. The most commonly heard rumor was that a British film company wants to make a film

in the town and is willing to rebuild the bridge to use in its sets. This is a virtuality we actually live with. A film company will construct the real bridge as a prop to appear in a film, in which it will take life as an imaginary bridge. The people of Mostar will have the bridge, they'll be lucky to have it (since it's much easier to build one on a sound-stage), and they'll probably be grateful. But like DeLillo's most photographed barn, the span over the Neretva will not be the same bridge, nor will anything around it be the same. Reasons for its existence will have filtered in from virtuality. Where, pre2K, it connected two banks of the Neretva, and two communes, the bridge-as-set will connect ontologies, and become the postcard of itself. Perhaps, post2K, that is the only way it will stay. So we had better take responsibility for those fantasies; they are as good as real, the only credit we get when our reality has gone bust.