

You say you want a revolution? Hypertext and
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The original Xanadu (Coleridge's) came billed as "a Vision in a Dream,"

designated doubly unreal and thus easily aligned with our era of “operational simulation” where, strawberry fields, nothing is “real” in the first place since no place is really “first” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 10). But all great dreams invite revisions, and these days we find ourselves perpetually on the re-make. So here is the new Xanadu(TM), the universal hypertext system proposed by Theodor Holm Nelson—a vision which, unlike its legendary precursor, cannot be integrated into the dream park of the hyperreal. Hyperreality, we are told, is a site of collapse or implosion where referential or “grounded” utterance becomes indistinguishable from the self-referential and the imaginary. We construct our representational systems not in serial relation to indisputably “real” phenomena, but rather in recursive and multiple parallel, “mapping on to different co-ordinate systems” (Pynchon 159). Maps derive not from territories but from other map-making enterprises: all the world’s a simulation.

This reality implosion brings serious ideological consequences, for some would say it invalidates the informing “master narratives” of modernity, leaving us with a proliferation of incompatible discourses and methods (Lyotard 26). Such unchecked variation, it has been objected, deprives social critique of a clear agenda (Eagleton 63). Hyperreality privileges no discourse as absolute or definitive; critique becomes just another form of paralogy, a countermove in the language game that is techno-social construction of reality. The game is all-encompassing, and therein lies a problem. As Linda Hutcheon observes, “the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional” (120).

This problem of complicity grows especially acute where media and technologies are concerned. Hyperreality is as much a matter of writing practice as it is of textual theory: as Michael Heim points out, “[i]n magnetic code there are no originals” (162). Electronic information may be rapidly duplicated, transmitted, and assembled into new knowledge structures. From word processing to interactive multimedia,

postmodern communication systems accentuate what Ihab Hassan calls “immanence” or “the intertextuality of all life. A patina of thought, of signifiers, of ‘connections,’ now lies on everything the mind touches in its gnostic (noo)sphere. . . .” (172). Faced with this infinitely convoluted system of discourse, we risk falling into technological abjection, a sense of being hopelessly abandoned to simulation, lost in “the technico-luminous cinematic space of total spatio-dynamic theatre” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 139). If all the world’s a simulation, then we are but simulacral subjects cycling through our various iterations, incapable of any “radical” or “oppositional” action that would transform the techno-social matrix.

Of course, this pessimistic or defeatist attitude is hardly universal. We are far more likely to hear technology described as an instrumentality of change or a tool for liberation. Bolter (1991), Drexler (1987), McCorduck (1985), and Zuboff (1988) all contend that postmodern modes of communication (electronic writing, computer networks, text-linking systems) can destabilize social hierarchies and promote broader definitions of authority in the informational workplace. Heim points out that under the influence of these technologies “psychic life will be redefined” (164). But if Hutcheon is correct in her observation that postmodernism is non-oppositional, then how will such a reconstruction of order and authority take place? How and by whom is psychic life—and more important, political life—going to be redefined?

These questions must ultimately be addressed not in theory but in practice—which is where the significance of Nelson’s second Xanadu lies. With Xanadu, Nelson invalidates technological abjection, advancing an unabashedly millenarian vision of technological renaissance in which the system shall set us free. In its extensive ambitions Xanadu transcends the hyperreal. It is not an opium vision but something stranger still, a business plan for the development of what Barthes called “the *social* space of writing” (81), a practical attempt to reconfigure literate culture. Xanadu is the most ambitious project ever proposed for hypertext or “non-sequential writing” (*Dream Machines* 29; *Literary Machines* 5/2). Hypertext systems exploit the interactive...



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