

Pixels of Memory on the Hypertextualised 'I'

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Reality: Causal or Hyperlinked?

Tsunami, 9/11, Katrina, 'Dreamed Fear' of WMD, Human Sculptures of Abu Ghraib, Worldwide Democracy Drive, Receding \$, Bullish Sensex Leaping over 9000, Starvation Deaths in the 'Left'-ruled State, New Clan of Suicide Bombers, Expanding Holes in Ozone Layer, Hydrogen Fuel-Driven Automobiles, Exponential Growth of Satellite Channels, Ethnic Cleansing, Ideological Genocides, Irrelevance of 'Cat's Colour', Human Cloning, Imbibing Hormone Codes of 'Other' Gender, Connection of Rivers, Thinning Cap of Polar Ice, Underdevelopment of Third World^a



^aall these overtly known front-page concerns are commonly felt signatures of a time of 'turbulence'. These 'issues' are being mapped by society's rationalist faculty over a scape of 'reason'. The mutual rational interrelationships between these aspects of concern are being studied over and over again. It is a familiar

framework to arrive at reason-driven solutions for a given problem at a given point of time. But those specific solutions for specific problems often seem to act against each other; they create self-feeding interlocking loops and generate newer eddies of turbulence.

Is it possible that the expected rational bonding between these signposts of 'current affairs' is just a perception, and that the relation of those 'affairs' might actually be something different from a chain of causal knots?

May we propose that those relations are something close to the multidirectional nature of 'hyperlinks'? And that, slowly, causal reality is transforming into a hyperlinked reality where, in defiance of Newtonian physics, more than one element can simultaneously inhabit a single point at a single moment, and a single element can reside simultaneously in more than one set of spatio-temporal coordinates?

Sounds like sci-fi logic! But we can always hire a quote to strengthen the situation: as feminist theorist Donna Haraway eloquently suggests, "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion"¹.

Multiple Centres of Consciousness

What would Gregor Samsa have 'metamorphosed'² into, if he were to wake up into a morning of a 'post-apocalyptic' year, say 2005 AD; the time when the words 'city' and 'digit' are verbs rather than nouns? Bruce Sterling's sci-fi novel *Distraction* (1999) might provide an answer, as cultural critic Steven Shaviro³ asserts in his discussion of a context where the protagonist is "infected with a virus that multiplies his awareness. It modifies his brain in such a way that he develops two separate centres of consciousness". This phenomenological disease (or evolutionary mutation), where the 'enhanced ability' of organic multitasking at the level of consciousness is the only symptom, creates a situation that, according to Shaviro, is "like having every television channel on at the same time". The consequent imperative for the human organism is very clear and categorical: to submit to an urge to retain and process more and more information within the organic interior.

This 'urge of the future' is perfectly legible if we consider the entire ideology of information technology for the last half-century. To put it simply: more information is better, mass-produced information is better. This speed of the movement of information, multiplied by its volume, creates an unimaginable momentum of information displacement, and the resultant void has to be filled up by overproduction of information. That phenomenon of 'overproduction' has caused the parallel phenomenon of 'information garbage' to crawl up and gradually take over the human mind. The bombardment of information happens through all the gadgetry possessed by the individual, and which link the individual to the world in audiovisual, verbal, sonic, graphic or textual forms. Eventually, due to this information overload, the mindscape of an individual is compelled to change. Through this intimate technology, s/he wants to cultivate more and more information: just for the sake of it, or perhaps to feel the loneliness of the self as it is swept into the midst of those torrential waves of data.

The Immortal 'Bit'

Today, each phenomenon is intended to be 'quantised'. Literally each speck of information is recorded and the information is stored in a computer, in a ceaseless process of direct quantification. We are also experiencing the tendency to quantify mental phenomena: EQ (emotive quotient), for instance, or pain index (threshold of endurance). Even biodiversity can be manifested through various numericals related to genome structures.

Thus, the sensory domain has been merged with the digital domain. The entire manifold of Cartesian space, the whole visible world is present to be televised, to be reciprocated in 'bits' of digital information. Whenever a digital bit is born, it throws up an instantaneous claim to 'immortality' through its endless potential for cloning. Without any generation loss, the probable, infinite replicas of that single digital bit would be floating virtually along the grid, seamlessly moving from a silicon-based digital network to a carbon-based organic network. Interestingly, the physiological counterpart of the digital bit might be the 'stem cell' (the present fascination of organic research), which by definition is a kind of 'generic' or undifferentiated cell that can make exact copies of itself indefinitely, and can become specialised for various tissues in the body. Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's prophetic phrase with regard to mass media and long-distance communication aptly describes this new organic reality: it is morphed into "its own pure simulacrum"⁴.

The transference and storage of information in pre-industrial societies could hardly have taken place without the active engagement of human consciousness. In pre-industrial modes of mediation, information could be transferred only via an attentive faculty of human perception, such as hearing, writing, copying by hand, memorising, etc. Such specialised focus and skill is becoming unnecessary in today's age of "mechanical reproduction": information can be replicated, literally infinite times, without any decay, through an interlocking autonomy of functions such as PRINT, SAVE, STORE, SCAN, BURN, COPY, PASTE, RETRIEVE FROM TRASH³. Thus, the explosion of information 'bits', and their infinite possible replicas with their inherent wish to be stored for eternity, have a lot to do with the degree of compression that the bit can sustain. The timeline of technology ensures the accommodation of information in smaller and smaller amounts of physical space. All the contents of the ancient library of Alexandria might be stored today in a palmtop system. This compressed information can only be decoded through technology, which has a direct bearing and powerful influence on human processes of perception.

Memory without a Past

To cope with the burden of information, we have already started sharing our sense of possession, retention and anxiety about personal memory (which used to be an integral part of the 'storage space' of the brain) with the 'memory' embedded in various gadgets or storage devices. "That's my home", we could rightfully say, wherever we lay our cell phones. It might shed some light on a recent incident when a girl in Delhi attempted suicide because she had lost her mobile. This may be seen as evidence that memory, one of the essential pivots of our existence, has become the most significant zone of bondage between the organic and digital systems.

A recent term for the new phenomenon of this memory sharing is 'life caching', the practice of using personal digital devices to document 'bits' of daily life. Today, virtually every activity, every communication, every moment of an individual's life can be recorded and stored. This digitised memory doesn't diminish with time; rather, with increasingly advanced technology, those digitised bits of memory might look or sound better through enhanced clarity and various kinds of manipulation. The ghostly presence of this enormous collection of imperishable 'objectified memory' saturates human consciousness with the overwhelming sense of a transient 'present', where the 'past' is nothing more than the memorised 'present', and the future is understood as a replicated 'present'.

The human condition dominated by the sense of a transient present was skilfully explored in the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Director Stanley Kubrick and scriptwriter Arthur C. Clarke visualised a state called 'hibernation', in which 'minimum life-supporting functions' (such as breathing once a minute) are monitored and regulated by a computer named HAL 9000. On the other hand, that computer was programmed to have a consciousness, could show emotive responses while communicating with humans, could even persuade them to not deactivate it. Is it just coincidence that we too put our computers into 'hibernation' when required?!

Non-Optic Cyberspace

According to cultural theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, cyberspace is of a "haptic" nature (as opposed to the optic), governed by "pure connection", accessible only in "close range vision", to be navigated "step by step", through an endless combination of hyperlinks.⁵ Due to the infinite possibilities of hyperlinked orientation, each visit to the same URL, when one sees the same webpage with the same web address, would also theoretically be a new space impregnated with newer possibilities. We start with a concrete search word, but often encounter the unexpected, and end up getting impressions about that word from different perspectives. While one set of data floats on the screen, the elision of data flowing from various hyperlinks creates an opacity behind those assorted fragments of frontal information. Thus, each bit of information may detach from its originary perspective, and possibly also from the ideological structures of human consciousness which have produced it. While navigating this "haptic" space, various cognitive skills are called upon to be used at various speeds (very fast reading and typing during a chat, or a long wait of dead moments while struggling with poor connectivity); thus, we operate within an ambiguous envelope of dispersed, pulsating spatio-temporality. At any given instant of our navigation in cyberspace, a layered sense of temporality flows at various speeds around our consciousness.

The televisual world, though principally engaging the organs related to visual and aural sensibilities, is best received from mid-range proximity. The influx of audio-visual information called 'televised reality', repeated in a loop 24 hours a day, serves beyond just the scope of providing information. It runs again and again; gradually the information element recedes for the faithful viewer, the constant onlooker. Rather, the scene becomes a hypnotising

spectacle: a huge repetitive cycle where 'reality' has been exploded into countless moving images of changing pixel patterns. In that televisual transaction, the 'real phenomenon' tends to become just a single chance among many other chances. 'Reality' is no more 'real' than an image with correct pixel information. Any change in the information would turn the 'real' visual with the mark of photographic reality into the 'unreal' realm of graphics. Today, in the visual world of TV or the internet, or in the spacelessness of a multiplex or mall where aspects of the architecture, texture and lighting often combine to induce a sense of disorienting homogeneity, we can observe our 'selves', our own images amalgamated with graphics and virtual images. The lines of separation and differentiation are merely a few numbers, some quantised information delivered via pixels.

In the mayhem of the contemporary affiliation with the visual, the 'real' can no longer keep up with the speed of the production and dissemination of images. 'Reality' collapses, fragments, and tends to recede into the form of a 'vanishing real', while we retain the temporal feelings of various kinds associated with it. These temporalities converge into the 'dead' moments of a slow computer, feeble connectivity, commercial breaks on TV; and we extend that phenomenological relation to our optic space as well. We shrug at the 'dead' moments of a journey from place to place; we arrange the dark glass of the window and pull the curtain to isolate us from the sight of moving and blurred space-scapes, thus infusing haptic characteristics into existent optic space. Like the 'dead' times in our navigation of cyberspace, we would also like to avoid the dead spaces in our journey from place to place. If only we could have been hyperlinked from one physical space to the other through the click of the mouse, or through pressing a button on the remote control⁵ If we could only skip off for a few moments from our corporeal existence! This fetish for tele-transportation might well be nurtured in a possible sci-fi scenario where humanoid characters would wear video-ed skins glowing with pulsating signals of electron beams, video tattoos; in place of nail polish there would be LCD display panels as 'nail-mirrors' (in Sanskrit, *nakha darpan*; these feature in some Indian folk tales as instruments of divination).

Post-Human Consciousness

The digital interface between 'reality' and the 'perception of reality' is on the threshold of new philosophical queries. The whole debate and dialogue between materialism and idealism in classical Western philosophy has entered a new era. The old couple of 'matter/form' is now substituted by 'digital/form', or from another perspective, 'electromagnetic medium/digital forms'. The famous hypothesis of 18th-century British empiricist philosopher George Berkeley; *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), that the 'reality' we experience is a product of the brain's perceptual apparatus; is facing new possibilities of interpretation in the digital era. Today the brain is seen as an information-processing device, and 'real' things are programmes, which are able to create a perception in the device. Taking a cue from architect and virtual reality researcher Michael Benedikt,⁶ information science theorist Rafael Capurro remarks with conviction that "it is not the mind or brain that is being in-formed or im-pressed by external things, as the empiricists or

idealists postulated, but it is just the other way round"⁷.

The avatars of IT and cybernetics propose that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates, carbon-made proteins (organic bodies) as well as silicon-made computer chips. All these developments point to a new age, namely the 'post-human'. The post-human view privileges informational patterns over the material. As a corollary, the embodiment of 'consciousness' in a biological substrate is seen as an accident, rather than an inevitability of nature. Therefore, there should be no essential difference between bodily existence and computer simulation. The network proposes and 'induces mass replication'. The inner organic 'network' of the human body, which supposedly is the cauldron for 'consciousness' and selfhood', is not something inner, integral and personal; it is kind of transitory information pattern containing all the possible data probabilities that are to be found on the networked grid. Such a mode of 'consciousness' would then be static and rigid only if it broke away from the larger information-communication network and made an autonomous loop in its stand-alone organic unit.

In the post-human schema, the organic human body is the basic material to manipulate, to replace with machines, and to which technological extensions are added. Advanced computer hackers are working on body-net projects: they wear digital gear as part of the body apparatus, experimenting with wearable computers, feeling a twin-ness with the machine: an overriding urge not to be a machine, but to be coupled with one, to replace the consciousness of 'I' (the individual human being) with that of 'We' (human individual + machinic add-ons). Those immersed in such projects cherish the vision of thinking/feeling 'machines' enabling a silent revolution, transforming human society into a cyborg society. In the contemporary world of technological mediation, where the machine and human beings spontaneously interact on the phenomenological level, almost all human beings are "gadget lovers"⁸, a bit cyborg.

Sculpting 'I'-Ness

While these 'otherworldly' perceptions are floating well within our vicinity in the realm of the real, let's look at the mirror for a moment. While performing this act as a conscious engagement, I was quite startled to find that I was making some strange observations about myself. When I say 'I', I still assert a unique individual 'I'-ness, and the sense of this instant is connected to my older versions of 'I'-ness by a distinct profile of memory, possibly created out of an older phenomenological practice.

Interestingly, over the last few months my sleep cycle has completed a full rotation over the 24 hours of the day. I felt dead sleepy at 6 am, 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, 6 pm, 9 pm, and so on. This unusual movement of my biological clock might hint at the consequences of being immersed in data from various media sources, each emanating its own temporal pulsations, over a considerable period of time.

In 2002, there was an explosion in the premises of a temple that is five minutes' walk from my residence in Hyderabad. I was not bothered much at that time, as I was not affected, and there were no casualties. But several weeks ago, while watching the news of

the 'terrorist' attack on the campus of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore (one killed, four injured), I suddenly felt a bit concerned about my possible vulnerability in the face of such an assault. Anyway, I carried on with what I was doing, a cooking experiment with a dish of chicken; meanwhile my memory suddenly connected the latest attack with the fact that the 'terrorist' group responsible for an earlier blast in Hyderabad was also being associated with the current shootout at Bangalore. The name of the group, mediated in a big way over the years, triggered a different relationship of the 'I' cooking chicken to the 'I' recalling the blast of three years ago.

Thus two very basic biological sensations, sleep and fear, are for me linked to the fragmented 'I'-ness experienced at different points of time due to differential engagements with the digital domain of media. It is worth asking whether one can assume so deterministically that all the moments of 'I'-ness are an integral part of one's cumulative feeling about oneself, or whether those experiences of self and its related emotions are contingent, transient, relative, born from a specific negotiation of one's organic entity with the digital universe, a negotiation that may not recur.

These non-deterministic clusters of human feelings might point to the fading of a discrete 'I', propelled by perspectives like ideology, morality, ego, unidirectional memory, a grand vision of the world, glittering metallic staircases ahead and upwards,⁹ receding at vanishing points to a utopia. Those fragments of splintered 'I'-ness may cluster and be regrouped, retribalised into a transient and volatile sense of 'We' (as happens in places of chance gathering, night clubs, discotheques). In a night-long high-energy session there is the psychological equivalent of buying a trip to amnesia, to clear the organic disc-space, to make way for one's future memory, with the permanent provision to store the essential organic memory systematically in the impartial space of digital memory units.

'Distraction' as Identity

If all the earlier paragraphs hint at a genuine possibility of multiple selfhoods existent within the individual, then it is also to be noted that the common relationship within those multiple nodes of consciousness is 'distraction'. The mental focus on one TV channel gets 'distracted' to the other channels by the push of a remote-control button; the curiosity of a cybernavigator gets 'distracted' from one hyperlink to other hyperlinks. Thus the 'distracted' mental process gathers information piecemeal, and over a period of time the personalised course of 'distraction' becomes synonymous with a person's unique trail of mental existence in space and time.

The deconstruction of an overwhelming and historic 'I' into multiple 'i's' would be a crucial contemporary phenomenon worth observing. Mirroring the perceptual relationships of the digital domain, the multiple identities/plurality of 'I'-ness might well incorporate the sense of 'otherness' in a different way. This felt 'otherness' does not necessarily reside outside the personal organic system; rather, the assumed wholeness of 'I' gets hypertextualised, with the mutual bonding of 'otherness' working in between those fragmented selves, even as all those different 'others' are contoured by the fragile, conventional structure of the intrinsic 'I'. In this

thin air of dissolved 'I'-ness and transient lump of 'we'-ness, only giant corporate houses of information production would stand tall, trying new networks of information for increased control within competitive information circuits.

Towards a Newer Haiku

The paragraphs above are loaded with repeated keywords: memory, consciousness, technology, digital reality. If the entire text were to become redundant for some reason, the images below might suffice to indicate the complex relationship between these signifiers.

Consider the still below (1) from *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918), one of many spectacular silent films made by the pioneering director D.G. Phalke. This image portrays the tyrant king Kamsa's head severed from the body, suspended in a limbo but with all functions of the brain intact. In terms of narrative, the scene depicts Kamsa's fear of a violent death at the hands of his nephew Krishna. Bringing this down from its mythological coordinates to the parameters of the present discussion, we would be able to locate two senses of time operating together within a single, almost two-dimensional, frontal space. The event of the 'future' is merged with the 'present' and the filmmaker's innovative visualisation symbolically represents the character's 'disembodied' consciousness, a signature of the collision of the mythical mindscape with the blinding glare of technology and modernity. The result is the unique phenomenon of the *deus ex machina* (Latin, lit. 'god from the machines').



1. 'Disembodied consciousness' in *Shri Krishna Janma*

In the pivotal junction of colonialism and modernity, the intuition of a spirited artist of the then-'new' age could easily imagine a split between 'consciousness' and 'body'. Technology is not objective: it produces subjective associations based on its interaction with various cultural positionings. The colonial premise and policy of using 'higher technology' for the 'development' of the natives often showed radically different and unexpected results in terms of usage. Phalke's era was the time of what I call the 'mythical appropriation' of technology. Indian myths abound in references to the state of disembodied consciousness. Earlier, however, this was a subject for intuitive understanding, not a literal condition to be gazed upon. Technology offered Phalke the opportunity to render this visible, thus shifting myths from the level of contemplation to the visceral, tactile domain. Earlier a site to be mapped by myths, the body now steadily became a site to be manipulated by technology. This visual manifestation/manipulation might be termed the 'cyborgification' of myth. Technology functioned as a translucent divide between colonisers and natives, both sides attempting to signify it according to their needs.

I am convinced that a profound 'split' has been achieved. We do not possess our bodies in the same way that our ancestors did centuries ago. The contemporary demand is to seek out new ways of 'merging', of melding consciousness with technology.

I will focus on a specific image by Phalke to highlight the phenomenon of dissociation. But prior to this, consider the following image (2) from a perfectly crafted film of 2000, the millennium year: *Memento*, directed by Christopher Nolan. The protagonist uses his body to remember things through the device of tattooing important information upon his skin; he photographs each encounter with other characters, as he is affected by 'short-term memory loss'. Human memory, an aspect of the self that is negotiated only along the axis of time in pre-industrial societies, in this case occupies a quantifiable amount of body-surface, a kind of definite Cartesian space, similar to the 'virtual memory' of a computer as it occupies a physical disc-space. In this film, organic memory has been externalised and dissociated from consciousness; the temporal perspective has been detached from selfhood, and as a result, memory adheres only to the skin. Deprived of the anchor of interiorised memory, the I is really a form of existence of diverse mindscapes floating without gravity within the organic system of the protagonist.



2. 'Memory' tattooed on skin in *Memento*

In 2005, the Tamil blockbuster *Ghajini* (3, 4) hit the Indian filmscape, with dubbed versions in other south Indian languages. The film draws heavily on *Memento*; the protagonist here is a person with no memory and similar disturbing mnemonic indicators tattooed on his body. Though the "montage of attraction¹⁰" has been curved in *Ghajini* quite minutely following *Memento*, it is still a strikingly different film from the latter. The principal difference lies in the fact that *Memento* explores the 'mutation'¹¹ of the inner universe of the protagonist, while its Indian counterpart keeps the protagonist, with his strikingly special ability/quality, a social outsider till the point he becomes 'normal', while the story revolves round a familiar mythical plot of violence and vengeance.

These cross-cultural instances suggest a special interest, even in the public domain, about the changing coordinates of memory; of transformations in selfhood when the vast, conscious sense of 'I' erodes; much as mountains crumble into dust in the intestines of insects¹²; in this age of synchronicity/simultaneity and similitude/simulacrum; an age where, as Baudrillard puts it so evocatively, the "real" has a "hallucinatory resemblance to itself", and "all the referentials intermingle their discourses in a circular, Moebian compulsion"¹³.



4. The protagonist having a crisis of 'memory' and 'consciousness' is an 'outsider' to society in *Ghajini*



3. Body as container of 'memory space' in *Ghajini*

Before finishing, a haiku gathered from cyberspace may be floated to signify the virtual character of inexorably technologised 'l'-ness at this instant...

**FACELESS JUST NUMBERED
LONE PIXEL IN THE BITMAP
I ANONYMOUS**

NOTES

1. Donna Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991, New York), p. 149. Haraway calls the late 20th century a "mythic" time, when we are all "cyborgs", theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. This cyborg is our ontological ground; it gives us our politics; it is a condensed image of imagination and reality both, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. The cyborg has no link with seductions to organic wholeness through an appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity; instead, the cyborg is irreverent, oppositional, ironic, impartial and completely without innocence. Haraway concludes that "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves are frighteningly inert".
2. Franz Kafka. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Transl. Stanley Appelbaum (Dover Publications, 1996).
3. Steven Shaviro. *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003, Minneapolis).
4. Jean Baudrillard. "Simulacra and Simulations". In (ed.) Mark Poster, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford University Press, 1988, Stanford).
5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987, Minneapolis).
6. See (ed.) Michael Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First Steps* (MIT Press, 1991, Cambridge).
7. Rafael Capurro. "Beyond the Digital". For online essay transcript, see <http://www.capurro.de/viper.htm>
8. A term used in the video *Razor's Edge* (2001), dir. Vipin Vijay.
9. Recalling an expression of the great Bengali 20th-century poet Jibanananda Das.
10. As termed by film scholar Tom Gunning, who proposes that during the early years of silent cinema in particular, films were acutely conscious of the gaze of the viewer, and hence were more a series of acts of display. Rather than develop a flowing narrative, these films capitalised on the array of attractions exhibited on the screen.
11. The experience of 'short-term memory loss' in *Memento* can be interpreted as more than a critical symptom indicating that something needs to be cured. It signifies a post-existential state, and the physiological/organic character is generated as though a mutation of this pervasive reality, somewhat reminiscent of the way disease manifests in David Cronenberg's horror film *Rabid* (1977).
12. Recalling an expression of the Bengali 20th-century novelist Devarshi Saha.
13. Jean Baudrillard, op.cit.