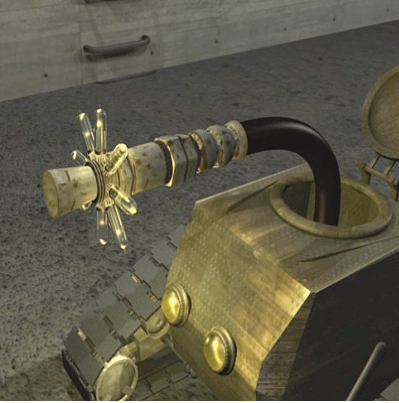
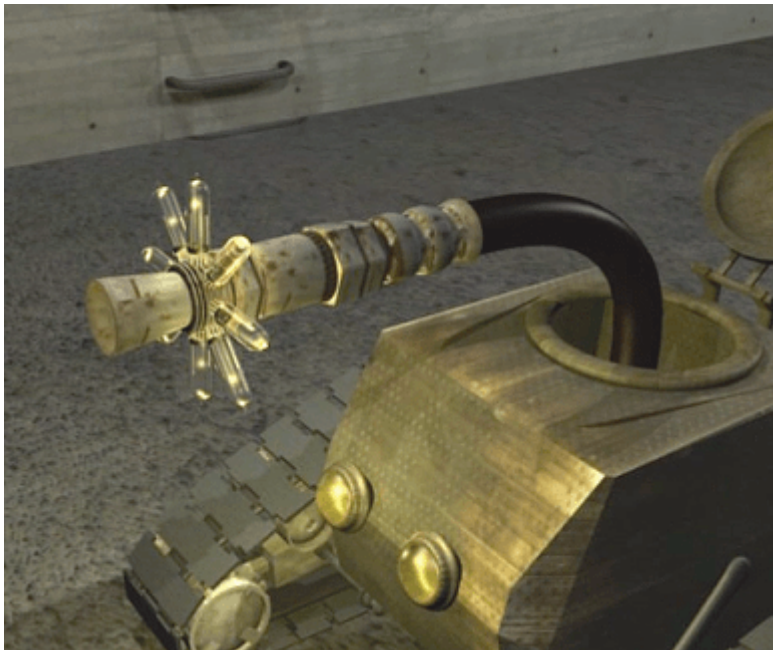




Computer images and realism

Description

Computer graphics and animation are remarkable in their ability to mimic reality, or so it seems. Such technologies are interesting in so far as they purvey unreality, or more precisely, for making presentations to audiences that are *unlike* everyday experiences – features of narrative, drama and film in any case, but exaggerated further in the case of digital effects.



Excerpt from animation sequence by Vasilis Tsirimokos

On the rare occasion that I perceive something on screen as resembling an everyday object or event, it is the unfamiliarity engendered by a new set of relationships, or by the strangeness of the context, that jolts me into a moment of recognition.

Audiences are probably most impressed by how alike things are when seen against a backdrop of unalike-ness. Walking down the street, eating a meal, or buying something in a shop, stand out when we

realise that the walker is about to break into song, the diners hardly touch their food, and the shopper is Harry Potter in Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop.

The cinema audience member is like a tourist. For sociologist John Urry: 'Like the pilgrim the tourist moves from a familiar place to a far place and then returns to the familiar place' (p. 13). Part of this encounter involves the provision of a new backdrop to the ordinary aspects of a person's life, such as physical activity, shopping, eating, and drinking.

Urry thinks of this backdrop as primarily visual, as if a stage setting. The gaze of the tourist 'renders extraordinary, activities that otherwise would be mundane and everyday.' There is pleasure in eating as I usually eat, even from the same menu, but at a café on the beachfront rather than my own dining room or in front of the television; or to walk as I usually walk, but in the mountains or on the streets of Paris.

That one thing may strike us as similar to another, ie that an image on a screen is similar to something we encounter everyday, produces pleasure of a kind, but also invokes a sense of the uncanny. The 'uncanny valley' hypothesis proposes that audiences are less comfortable with humanoid figures on screen that look almost human. The nearly realistic characters in the CGI film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and *Beowulf* look cadaverous, or at least unwell. In the more recent *Avatar*, as well as its greater technical and designerly achievements, the CGI characters are fashioned to be super (or extra) human and so are received differently by audiences.

Computer animations, video games and immersive virtual reality are often applauded because they present experiences similar to what can be accomplished by actors and sets on film. But it is well to reflect on the human capacity to be provoked by differences, as opposed to similarities, in these experiences.

It is not necessary to search far to discover evidence for the primary importance of difference (and not similarity) as a key factor in human thought. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure demonstrated that it is difference that makes language possible. Concepts of categorisation are not possible without difference. The social philosopher Michel Foucault pointed to the triumph of difference over attempts to introduce conformity. The identification of 'the same' only serves to make 'it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities' all the shading of individual difference.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida, Following Martin Heidegger, makes maximum play on the nature of difference, even to the extent of creating a new word (*differance*) that implies (in relation to language) 'that meaning is always deferred.'

To focus on difference is to embark on restless discovery. By contrast, the identification of sameness aims for stasis and seems to close off discussion. If we are intent on finding out what is the same about things, then our search ends at the achievement of the goal, photorealism in computer graphics for example. On the other hand, difference reveals further difference.

Difference also opens up the possibility of dialectic 'the revealing interplay between discussants who never quite agree. The pursuit of difference is an obvious motivator in design and creativity. The supposed realism of computer imagery and screen-based media connect to a wider social concern, and in turn to the character of design and all art.

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Category

1. Techno-utopias

Tags

1. CGI
2. imagery
3. media
4. uncanny valley
5. vision

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