

striking home

THE TELEMATIC ASSAULT

ON IDENTITY

1 A version of this paper was given in November 1994 at the 'Doors of Perception: @ Home' conference, Amsterdam, organised by the Netherlands Design Institute and *Mediamatic* magazine.

2 Bernard de Mandeville, quoted in S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London, Fontana, 1988, p. 297, and in N. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London, Reaktion, 1990, p. 103, in his discussion, to which I am indebted, of Dutch art and 'oversupply'.

3 C. Trevarthen, 'Infancy, Mind in', in Richard L. Gregory (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 363: 'Recent research with infants [suggests that they] do not, at any stage, confuse themselves with objects "outside" nor do they fail to recognise that other persons are separate sources of motives and emotions.'

Certain ideas seem to crystallise with particular and lasting intensity in certain countries.¹ As far as the idea of home is concerned, the home of the home is the Netherlands. This idea's crystallisation might be dated to the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch Netherlands amassed an unprecedented and unrivalled accumulation of capital, and emptied their purses into domestic space. Simon Schama, whose thesis on the psychology of the Dutch Golden Age I borrow to introduce this chapter, quotes a contemporary: 'in Amsterdam, and in some of the great cities of that small province . . . the generality of those that build there, lay out a greater proportion of their estates on the houses they dwell in than any people upon the earth'.²

HOME

A common post-Freudian speculation is that the infant is born unable to distinguish between itself and the world at large, and that its mental life is therefore non-spatial and decentred. But there comes a time, the so-called 'mirror stage', when the child develops the view that fundamentally the world is divided into two categories: he or she is Number One, the world out there is Number Two. Subject is distinguished from object, the self from the 'other'. Significantly, this self/other dualism is experienced as spatial – indeed, as the simplest geometric relationship, enclosure.

Recent research casts doubt on the theory that a newborn infant cannot distinguish between itself and the outside world, or that its inner life is non-spatial. After all, it has just had the greatest topological shock it will ever suffer, having burst from the fetal sac into the glare of exteriority. But, whether the self/other distinction happens before or after birth, the idea remains that the personal world has a basic spatiality, centred on the self, and that it comprises (a) an interior, where the self resides, and (b) an exterior.³

Separating the inside from the outside is a conceptual boundary, a picture-frame, an envelope, a skin. The primary metaphor is that the self's interior is the human body. This conceptual membrane is elastic. It can expand to enclose within the metaphorical interior: clothing, a car, a room of one's own, a house, a country, or perhaps some non-physical zone of personal operation. A house identified as the self is called 'home', a country identified as the self is called 'homeland'. Home is a surrogate for, and extension of, the self and the body. A sense of home, however you define it, is as important to self-identity as the persistence of personal memory.

The idea of the building as a body has recurred in architectural theory since Roman times. Burglary of a home often causes more distress than the objective loss deserves,

because it is experienced metaphorically as an assault on, a penetration of, the owner's body. A child draws his home: its windows are eyes, its door a mouth.

Unlike the house, in short, home is a subjective construct, a metaphor of the self and body. But its conceptual envelope is expandable to include any appropriated zone, geographical or mental. In the rest of this chapter the word 'home' always has this generic psychological meaning, although it may sometimes simultaneously refer also to the physical house or dwelling.

INTERIORS AND STILL-LIFES

The economic explanation for the seventeenth-century domestic spending spree is that the Netherlands had no collective economic sink, such as a royal court or princely church, to absorb their inflow of capital: faced with this 'embarrassment of riches', the Dutch poured their gold into their houses. But a familiar explanation in terms of national psychology also merits attention: the Netherlands, much of which lies below sea-level, have a perilously elastic envelope separating the homeland from sea, a condition which has impressed into the individual Dutch soul a paranoiac anxiety to defend an inhabited interior (the self) from a menacing exterior. If this conjecture has any truth, the literal house, as an emblem of inner personal tranquillity and security, would be well worth throwing money at.

This paranoia, if such it was, was distilled into cultural form by the stupendous pictures of domestic interiors of the time: one thinks especially of Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer. It is certainly astonishing how *interior* these interiors are. Much, perhaps most, previous painting had placed the action comfortably in the frame, leaving the viewer some distance outside the picture space, looking in. But these Dutch interiors extend to the frame like a photograph, drawing us into their intimacy and security.⁴

The generous windows depicted in these interiors, while admitting a light as clear and clean as the domestic space they wash, offer us oddly little glimpse, if any, of the world outside – almost as if the paintings on the wall had supplanted windows in their role as eyes looking out into the external world. These paintings on the walls might be interior scenes themselves, homely conversational groups, or still-lives of earthenware pots and pewter platters. But some were very strange indeed: I refer to those extravagantly labour-intensive still-lives by such as Pieter Claesz or Willem Kalf. These might show a vase of riotous flora, say, or the remnants of a feast – jugs, goblets half-full with wine, a creased tablecloth, a china plate of uneaten food, a spiral of lemon peel.⁵

4 M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, Univ. of California Press, 1994, pp. 60–2, discusses Svetlana Alpers' (*The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983) contrast between the interiority of Dutch painting and the perspectival 'distance' of 'southern' art; and notes (p. 132) the link made by Anne Hollander ('Moving pictures' in *Raritan*, 5: 3, Winter 1986, p. 100) between the increased interest in photography in the 1860s and the simultaneous revival of interest in Vermeer and his contemporaries.

5 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, pp. 108–9, discusses the contemporary cost of making and buying Dutch flower paintings, and (pp. 127–8) the disturbingly 'proximal', price-laden and exotic nature of the 'banquet-pieces'. R. Barthes, 'The world as object', in N. Bryson (ed.), *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 107–8, suggests that the 'sheen' of the still-lives is 'to lubricate man's gaze amid his domain, to facilitate his daily business among objects whose riddle is dissolved'.



Figure 12.1 Johannes Vermeer,
Officer and Laughing Girl.
Copyright, The Frick Collection,
New York.

These give me the creeps. They have the gloss, the high production values, and the lascivious exposure of studio pornography. Their close-up gaze, their in-your-face intimacy, insists that we stroke the silk, taste the meat, smell the flowers – enjoy them bodily as possessions. They resemble television in their close-up intrusiveness, internal luminosity and shallow spatial depth. They also have an immersive vividness which electronic virtual reality only aspires to.

This simile is not too far-fetched. The still-life was then a new medium. It hung on the domestic wall like a screen and, as a phenomenon, related to previous, that is scenic, painting as television does to film. The type of glossy still-life I refer to was indeed literally *tele*-vision in that it depicted not home products but porcelain, glassware, fabrics and exotic botanical species newly imported from afar – from the Levant, say, the East Indies or China. Such still-lives were also a sort of shopping channel, in that the cost of the things depicted, their exchange value, was an important part of the picture's message: the painting transformed objects into commodities.

INVASIONS

No actual home has all the attributes which define the ideal, the Platonic, Home. But home as an idea is the place of being, not doing – of ends, not the means to ends. It is a place of familial and moral value – not of monetary value. It is no place for the instrumental mentality, commerce or business (that is, masculine work). It is, moreover, a place of unmediated authenticity ('home truths' are truths bluntly and directly told) and therefore perhaps a country uncolonised by the 'empire of signs'. At home we can be true to ourselves: there is no need for show.⁶

So those glossy still-lives represent a forced opening of a window, a puncturing of the skin protecting home from the outside world, an infection, a pollution of purity by danger, and an assault on homeliness by worldliness. Like the naval maps which also figure in the painted interiors, they represent an invasive penetration of a protected, largely feminine, domain by the external world of men and adventure. And, by representing monetary value and, by extension, the instrumental mentality, they symbolise the piping into the Faraday cage of home an untamed and threatening foreign energy. They are symptoms, in short, of the volatile imbalance, chronicled by Schama, in what he calls the seventeenth-century 'moral geography of the Dutch mind': a psychic unease, a blurring of self-identity, caused by a rocketing increase in available information and power.⁷

The parallel between the seventeenth-century experience and our own is obvious. The second half of our century has seen, in the advanced economies, a huge and quite

⁶ R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1982, p. 107, claims that in Japan 'everything is habitat'. I (ab)use his title to describe the opposite condition.

⁷ Though not in these terms, Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, p. 389, discusses the Dutch tension between home and global commerce, and the allegorical virtues of housewifery. The phrase 'moral geography . . .' is on p. 609.



Figure 12.2 Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, 1956. Copyright Richard Hamilton 1998. All rights reserved DACS.

sudden enlargement of personal access to information and power. Starting with the phone, electronic media have cracked the dykes of home and admitted into it all that was traditionally excluded: impurity, worldiness, business, disrespect and instrumentality. Joshua Meyrowitz, for instance, has recorded in detail how the media, especially television, has changed American home life by breaching former barriers between community and privacy, subservience and authority, male and female, childhood and adulthood, leisure and work, and so on.⁸

Meyrowitz's study concentrated on the social effects. But quite as significant are the subjective inner responses, perhaps unconscious, to electronic media. Jean Baudrillard sees the media as an invasive virus, robbing life and meaning from the mental home constructed by humanity. '[T]his electronic encephalization,' he asserts,

'this miniaturization of circuits and of energy, this transistorization of the environment condemn to futility, to obsolescence and almost to obscenity, all that once constituted the stage of our lives. . . . [T]he presence of television', he continues, 'transforms our habitat into a kind of archaic, closed-off cell, into a vestige of human relations whose survival is highly questionable.'⁹

At the common sense level this apocalyptic rhetoric seems unjustified and hysterical: we should be able to take a few electronic gizmos into our homes without blubbing about it. Yet today, as in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, an informational wave beats against the hull and causes the cargo to shift uneasily below decks.

UNEASY DREAD

Although published in 1919, a much-studied essay by Freud throws light on our current situation. Its title, translated into English, is *The Uncanny: the uneasy dread evoked by undefined and unlocated menace*. In the original German it is *Das Unheimliche*, literally 'the unhomely'. One example of the uncanny/unhomely which Freud cites are 'doubts whether an apparently animate object is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object [like an automaton] might not be in fact animate'.¹⁰

Machines threaten the home because, as I have suggested, the home is about ends themselves, not means to ends – whereas technology is by definition instrumental. In our electronic era, moreover, it is clear that the machines with which we crowd today's habitat are indeed lifeless but, growing ever more responsive and interactive, increasingly resemble pets – beasts which are domesticated (significant verb) into a category half-human, half-object.¹¹ And just as mechanical devices increasingly seem to be extensions of our body, so our mental attention seems increasingly monopolised and penetrated by media, particularly interactive media. Our collective imagination is haunted or exhilarated by the notion that in our home we copulate with machines, are becoming cyborgs, half-meat, half-metal: *Blade Runner*, *The Terminator*, *Robocop*.¹²

Freud also instances as typically uncanny the feeling that your self is divided, when you meet your double say – or, conversely, when two selves appear oddly unified, as in cases of apparent telepathy. The uncanny emerges, too, when statistical probability is violated, when for example everything repeatedly goes right for you so that the causal barrier, which normally divides the external world from inner thoughts and desires, threatens to disappear.¹³ In our electronic era, again, those who spend a large proportion of their conscious life on the Net or navigating informatic space may be

9 J. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Brooklyn NY, Autonomedia Semiotext(e), 1988, pp. 17–18.

10 S. Freud, 'The uncanny', in J. Strachey and A. Dickson (eds), *The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 14: Art and Literature*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, pp. 336–76; esp. p. 347 on automata. A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1992, exposes the philosophically uncanny aspects of Modern and subsequent architecture and urbanism.

11 J. Baudrillard, *The Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968–1983*, London and Concord Mass., Pluto, 1990, p. 46: 'Pets are a species intermediary between beings and objects.'

12 Films referred to in this chapter: Ridley Scott dir., *Blade Runner*, Warner, Ladd, *Blade Runner: Partnership*, 1982; James Cameron dir., *The Terminator*, Orion, Hemdale, Western Pacific, 1984; Paul Verhoeven dir., *Robocop*, Rank, Orion, 1987; Steven Lisberger dir., *TRON*, Walt Disney, Lisberger-Kushner, 1982; Steven Spielberg dir., *Polltergeist*, MGM, SLM, 1982.

13 References in this and the next

paragraph are to Freud, 'The uncanny', pp. 356, 358–60, 362.

prey, if only fleetingly and unconsciously, to feelings that barriers of identity are dissolving between selfhood and otherhood; that the mechanisms of resistance and causality, which had assured us we were separate from the outside world, no longer operate; that we float in a space outside the self.

According to Freud, then, some experiences (in our case, electronically-induced) evoke feelings of omniscience, omnipotence, disembodiment and decentredness which, at their most extreme, indicate clinical madness. Involuntarily and unconsciously they revive that infantile mental state before the inner and external worlds could be distinguished. What was long suppressed knocks like a risen corpse at the door of adult consciousness; the uncanny, the *Unheimliche*, erupts into our mental home and our self is sucked out through the breach to dissolve itself into the outside world.

Even if we discount the general Freudian thesis that the child is father to the man, and that suppression breeds disease, we can still recognise in this essay the syndrome of what might be called the 'telematic uncanny'. Electronic media have partly eroded not only social boundaries which previously divided individuals and families from society as a whole, but also some boundaries of the self which previously defined individual identity. Films are a good guide to collective angst, and several, *TRON* and *Poltergeist* for instance, depict people being sucked through a monitor or TV screen into a world in where they are no longer 'at home'.

COLLABORATION, RESISTANCE OR ENTENTE

How, then, do we respond to the telematic invasion of our literal or inner homes? Three possible strategies apply to all forms of invasion or attempted seduction. The first strategy is to lie back and enjoy it. The popular arts of recent times envision an entropic dystopia, an American homeland fouled by technological detritus, haunted by robots and cyborgs. Every interior is exposed to the exterior world, its commerce and its sign-system: spotlights from an airship advertising emigration to the Off-World pierce through the skylight of the Bradbury Building. There is no safe home: a replicant may suddenly smash his head through the wall at you: 'Time to die'.¹⁴ That techno-despair and alienation exert such glamorous attraction confirms the view that the purpose of art is to reconcile us to the inevitable by accustoming us to the intolerable.

The second strategy against the home's invasion is to strengthen the walls, reinforce the dyke, and lock up your daughters; market researchers call it 'cocooning'. An extreme instance would be the Amish, the Pennsylvanian Anabaptists, who in 1909 banned the phone from the home – as they have since banned radio and TV, as well as

¹⁴ All references to Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*.

new technology like electricity and the internal combustion engine: this protects the home from external spiritual pollutants and reinforces the sacred separate identity of the community.¹⁵ More usual, however, is to admit technology into the home but in familiar disguise: the electric lamp beneath its silken shade, for instance, or the dishwasher behind its oaken front panel. Software designers use similarly homely disguises (they prefer to call them 'metaphors'): the Magic-Cap (like the former eWorld) online system uses as its operating metaphor the geography of Hometown USA, for example, and the Hypercard manual reassures us that 'no matter what other cards and stacks you have, you always have home'.¹⁶

The problem with using a familiar metaphor to represent unfamiliar situations, as the Modern Movement designers and their nineteenth-century precursors realised, is that it is at least partly a lie. And the practical (rather than moral) defect of a lie is that, when situations change, new lies must be added to sustain the illusion. But the greater the number of lies, the more difficult it is to make them cohere. In a rapidly changing environment, then, the disguise or metaphor eventually collapses through incoherence.¹⁷

This justifies the third and strategic response to the invasion of the home: to let the walls fall, but build new ones further out, and learn to feel 'at home' in a broader world. Like Mother, early architectural Modernism argued that in the long run it is wiser to tell the truth. It believed that the twentieth-century home and city, the technology which builds them, and the lifestyles they accommodate, change constantly and irresistibly. So it is better to dump the old classical language of structural form, based on stone construction, as well as the hierarchical patterns of bourgeois living, and to devise a totally new and flexible language whose form neither conceals nor arbitrarily represents each new condition, but inherently reflects it.

A central element of this Modernist project seemed to be war against the home: Le Corbusier famously defined the house as a 'machine for living in'. The home was to be destroyed because collective lifestyles, being tested in revolutionary Russia, and the new technologies of electricity and glass, would together soon evict man from it. But home was not to be abolished, only replaced by a new 'home of Man' which would welcome the machine. Plate-glass architecture would not dissolve the dualisms which formerly separated private from public, inside from out, selfhood from otherhood. But it would redraw them more lightly, and further out. Humanity would inhabit a wider, windswept, more transparent home.¹⁸

This is echoed in the current dream of the universal networked community. The rhetoric of electronic utopianism is arcadian, and derives from Shakespeare filtered through Jefferson, Thoreau and Twain. It uses terms which glorify rootlessness: 'the informatic badlands', 'cybercowboys', 'telematic nomads' and so on. But settlement is

¹⁵ D. Zimmerman Umble, 'The Amish and the telephone: Resistance and reconstruction', in R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (eds), *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, London, New York, Routledge, 1994, pp. 193–4.

¹⁶ Online data services: Magic-Cap, General Magic Inc., Mountainview Calif., 1994; eWorld, Apple Computer Inc., Bridgeton MO, 1994. Apple Computer Inc., *Macintosh Hypercard User's Guide*, Cupertino CA, 1987, p. 48.

¹⁷ I caricature here the historical arguments for structural, constructional and functional 'honesty' in architecture. Fuller but ideologically contrasting accounts are: P. Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750–1950*, London, Faber, 1965, esp. chs 18–19; D. Watkin, *Morality in Architecture: The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1977.

¹⁸ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, London, Rodker, 1927, p. 10. Le Corbusier and F. Pierrefeu, *The Home of Man*, London, Architectural Press, 1940.

never far behind: Howard Rheingold's book, *The Virtual Community*, is subtitled *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*.¹⁹

REVELATIONS

What shall we see when we look through the open windows of our electronic homestead? Most predictions are that we shall see luminous representations of data – however sophisticated and complex. This view even informs imaginative fiction: William Gibson's *Neuromancer* famously defines cyberspace as 'a consensual hallucination. . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system' [my italics].²⁰ This definition reflects a widespread view that mental activity is primarily about the reception, decoding, evaluation, transformation and output of information, and that the main purpose of new electronic technologies is to make information-handling more powerful, efficient, vivid, sexy, and so on.

An episode of architectural history may indicate why this view is mistaken. The architecture critic Martin Pawley recently described the Gothic cathedral as an archetype of 'information architecture'. Its structural system relieves the building's external skin of load-bearing duties, which allows the walls to take on an informational function: most of the cathedral's skin can comprise vast (and vastly expensive) backlit glass screens. The screens – mosaics of coloured glass pixels – display images, icons and alphabetic strings, which together the user 'reads' to learn the complex codes and narratives of Christian cosmology. Pawley calls Gothic cathedrals the 'predecessors of the paperless office and the electronic dealing room', implying that the windows communicate data – albeit of an elevated, spiritual kind. His thesis is thus an update of the traditional view that the Gothic cathedral is 'the poor man's bible'.²¹

This ingenious thesis, though true, tells the least important part of the story. For we know from contemporary writings that Gothic ecclesiastical architecture was explicitly invented and designed to carry into built form the vigorous blend of theology and philosophy, Scholasticism, particularly associated with St Bonaventure and St Thomas Aquinas. Scholastic metaphysics classified light as a substance, an 'embodied spirit', which distributes divinity to all God's creation. God is present in all things, argued Bonaventure, because light emanates from even the humblest material: glass is made from sand and ashes, fire comes from coal, you rub a stone and it shines. Scholasticism was far from philistine or iconoclastic, but it had a strong subjective aspect which valued communion more highly than the reading of words and images: revelation more highly than information. And light was the main vehicle of revelation: St

Bernard of Clairvaux described union with God as 'immersion in the infinite ocean of eternal light and luminous eternity'.²²

Such luminous revelation was no vague psychedelic dazzle. For medieval thinkers agreed with modern psychologists that the senses are not just passive receptors of stimuli but have an active and immediate rationality of their own. Light could communicate directly to the intellect. The sanctuary door at the abbey of St Denis, for example, shone in gilded bronze, and its inscription urged the pilgrim 'to let its luminous brightness illuminate the mind so that it might ascend "to the true light to which Christ is the door"'. So the Gothic cathedral was designed to be literally divine, as immaterial and as luminous as possible. Architecture was to be as ethereal as electronic phenomena. Through the stained-glass windows Divinity radiated more through light as essence than through the images depicted on the windows. Light's primary role was performative. The medium was the message.²³

Marshall McLuhan claimed of course that electronic media are returning us to a medieval, pre-Gutenberg mentality. Much recent art, design, movies and fiction, certainly, has the poetic and abstract qualities associated with medieval culture: sublimeness, grotesqueness, and artificiality. Like the medieval mind we are fascinated by fragmentation, complexity, translucency, layering – and things which, jewel-like, glitter and glow. We are all Gothic now.²⁴

WINDOWS

Every home needs windows, perhaps electronic windows, into the world. But we look through those windows or screens neither just to take in or give out information, nor just for instrumental motives. Everybody needs to keep an eye, a window, on the world to reassure the self that it differs from the world and thus to reinforce the self's identity. Prisoners or patients permanently confined indoors want to know what the weather's doing, though this knowledge is of no practical use at all. Similarly, the amount of hard data broadcast by TV news programmes is remarkably small, and what little there is seldom affects our actions, but we seem to need at least twice-daily fixes of it.

Modern culture has for a long time believed that information is best communicated through words and numerals. Lately have we accepted, rather grudgingly, that visual images might transmit data equally powerfully. But if a large part of what is transmitted and absorbed is not information at all, but light as an essence, triggering some mental alteration, those working in computer media may need to downgrade the importance they have only recently conferred on images and icons. Perhaps, for example, the search for virtual reality overemphasises the need for figurativeness, indeed for reality

²² My quick sketch, in this and the next two paragraphs, of the varied, complex philosophical foundations of the Gothic style derives from: O. von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 51–2, 114, 123; and E. Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, Latrobe PA, Archabbey, 1951, pp. 12–15, 37–8. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. 105–7, quotes Panofsky and Von Simson to assert the non-textual, revelatory aspects of pre-typographic 'light through, not light on'.

²³ The title of ch. 1 of M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, New American Library, pp. 23–35.

²⁴ A minor but striking example is the pictorial similarity between the medieval illuminated manuscript – combining text and jewel-like, many-scaled images and icons – and the multi-media screen.

¹⁹ L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, traces the arcadian theme through American literary history. S. Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham NC and London, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 145, briefly reports its link with 'hyper-technologized space'. H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1993.

²⁰ W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, London, Grafton, 1986, p. 67.

²¹ M. Pawley, *Theory and Design in the Second Machine Age*, Oxford and Cambridge Mass., Blackwell, 1990, pp. 114–15.

at all. To become so fixated on image-borne data as a vehicle for purposive communication might lead us to forget the potential of the computing media for direct revelation through abstract light, colour and sensory immersion generally.

This abstractly immersive mode can be traced back in painting at least to J. M. W. Turner or, say, Frederick Church, the American Luminist. They responded differently to emergent technology: Turner enshrouded steam engines and smokestacks in hazy glory, while the Luminists radiantly memorialised a virgin nature threatened by industrialisation and modern transportation. But all invited their viewers, through the blessing of light, to transcend their fragmented modernity and thus regain a unified, panoramic and sublime world-view. Continuing this transcendentalist tradition, Mark Rothko's paintings, ambiguously defined blocks of colour which appear to glow and shimmer, allude explicitly to the meditative potential of abstract luminosity. So does an artist much influenced by Rothko, James Turrell, who describes his work thus: 'It's not about light or a record of it, but it is light. Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself the revelation.'²⁵

25 J. Turrell, *Mapping Spaces*, New York, Peter Blum Editions, 1987.

Significantly, to achieve their transcendentalist aims, the work of both Rothko and Turrell tends towards the condition of the electronic screen and of architecture. Both deal in fictions, indeed illusions: Rothko aims to make immobile paint seem to shimmer, Turrell to make light appear as solid plane or volume. And both enclose the spectators' bodies to control the limits of their vision: Rothko by arranging sets of paintings around them, Turrell by constructing darkened interiors or artificial horizons to the sky.

This suggests an alternative response to the electronic invasion of domestic space: to welcome it in but radically change its character. In their current 'informational' role, the telematic media are sleepless, fidgety, and demanding. They are, in a precise sense, 'uncanny' in that they threaten the frontiers of selfhood. And they discourage that mental state of still coherence – achieved when we stare into a flame, gaze idly from a window, or watch shadows lengthen – which rebuilds the self.

Here, then, is a role for the architects of space and of software. To make that mental state easier to achieve, architecture (too long obsessed with its iconography) could borrow the luminous, vaporous splendour of the electronic screen. The electronic screen, in exchange, could borrow from architectural space its revelatory abstraction, its ability to register the flow of daily and seasonal time, and its capacity to cup light, like liquid, in its hand. Then, when the screen pours light over us like the pearly glow of Vermeer's interiors or the jewelled radiance of the Gothic cathedrals, we would not be reading but communing with it. We would be looking without needing to see.