Cyberspace : Portal to Transcendence ?

David Porush
April 1993

There's a new frontier beckoning us, and we're growing it in our own backyards. Today many writers are looking toward cyberspace as eagerly as previous generations anticipated moving westward across the prairie or out into space. The prairies, however, held hardship and war. And the high frontier of space promises vast stretches of cold indifference punctuated by alien landscapes. But cyberspace lets us dream that we can build an inner frontier, a virtual reality, to our specs. So our culture is telling itself sexy, glitzy, wishful stories about discovering alien territories right here on Earth. About releasing ourselves from the burden of body and liberating ourselves from sex and race and class. About acting out our fantasies in an electronic nether world and tripping through that trapdoor in the mind that will let us, like Alice, fall into a dream.

This is a fascinating utopian mythology based on a technology still in its infancy. So I have been trolling for new cyberpunk fiction (like Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*), going native on electronic bulletin boards, and listening closely to the technical researchers, sociologists, philosophers, hackers, and writers who speculate about cyberspace. This is what I am hearing :

In the short run, cyberspace will require an elaborate cyborg armor -- data gloves, goggles, bodysuit, helmets. Many believe, however, that some time in the next century, genetic engineering, biochip design, and nanotechnology will collaborate to product functional wetware -- computer interfaces that will enable us to jack our brains directly into a vast, worldwide, interactive network with its own geography and sensory realism. Eventually, we might achieve the Holy Grail of VR research : the delusion that our bodies are actually there, when, as William Gibson quipped in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, "there is no there there". The result will be a cross between the ultimate interactive computer game and telepathy.

While there may be no there there, many would-be cybernauts imagine there's something else there, waiting for us on the other side of the interface. A recurring theme I hear is the confidence that cyberspace will be a technology not just of the brain and of the mind, but of the soul. There's something quite primitive at work in cyberspace's allure. This yearning for mystical encounters seems unusually superstitious coming from otherwise rational engineers, academics, and writers. But good anthropologists learn not to dismiss all native beliefs as mere superstitions. So let's take them seriously, if only for a moment. How might cyberspace be a portal to transcendence ? Neurophysiologists suspect that lurking somewhere in the brain -- most likely in a formation at the base of the brain stem call the dorsal raphe nucleus -- lies a facility that makes us feel, under the right conditions, like we're in communication with gods or that we have voyaged out to meet some Higher Presence. Certain configurations of data delivered to the brain by electronic stimulation could flood this region of the brain with serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in many functions, including hallucination. In this way, the right software might evoke that oceanic, world-embracing feeling known so well to mystics and psycho-tropical beachcombers.

But let's not stop here with this portrait of cyberspace as some kind of electronic designer drug. It's hard not to wonder why the brain has this weird facility to make us feel like we're talking to God. Is something so irrelevant to survival and yet so distinctively human just a neurochemical accident, an evolutionary byproduct of the sheer complexity of the nervous system ? Or is it, as Immanuel Kant suggested two centuries ago, that the laws of the "in here" are the same as the laws "out there" : our minds are tuned to universal harmonies. Perhaps the brain is

prepped to receive divine telegrams because there is, after all, an Intelligence informing the cosmos toward which universal evolution gropes -- a Cosmic Anthropic Principle. Perhaps VR technology will be one of the ways to open the hailing frequency.

Surely we are no less likely to find transcendence in cyberspace than we are in any other space, whether a Gothic cathedral or a Himalayan monastery or the pages of the Talmud. Cyberspace could be our civilization's burning bush.