

DIGITAL IMAGING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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The 'Architecture' of the Web: Digital Utopias and Dystopias

"It's a strange day
No colours or shapes
No sound in my head
I forget who I am
When I'm with you
There's no reason
There's no sense
I'm not supposed to feel
I forget who I am
I forget
Fascist baby
Utopia, utopia
My dog needs new ears
Make his eyes see forever
Make him live like me
Again and again
I'm wired to the world
That's how I know everything
I'm super brain
That's how they made me"

Utopia by Goldfrapp.

Ideas pertaining to the 'modern movement' in architecture can be used to inform many of the debates and ideas that now surround the World Wide Web, Web 2.0 and indeed Media Studies 2.0.

"1984" Apple Macintosh Advertisement directed by Ridley Scott

There is a sense of post-modern euphoria that we have broken free from the past and that old modernist theories are as redundant as their hierarchies of class, culture and taste, to name but three; we have reached some kind of e-topia. These utopian concepts partly came out of the sixties counter culture that reacted against modernism's perceived authoritarianism- one thinks of Apple, a product of Californian sunshine and LSD, offering us an alternative world, a technological vision with a Byrdsian soundtrack, an alternative to the grey corporatism of the monolithic and historically

dubious IBM. In eschewing modernist theories along with all the modernist inequities, are we in danger of throwing the theoretical baby out with the modernist bathwater?

In fact, the optimism surrounding the Internet and the World Wide Web as a communications tool has modernist utopian overtones, because modernism itself was, to many modernists, also a utopia. The web can be seen as a social condenser. The social condenser is a Soviet Constructivist theory about architectural space and how it has the ability to influence behaviour. Does not the 'architecture' of the WWW, a public space, break down perceived hierarchies and create an environment that allows and encourages communities to interact? Looked at this way, the computer becomes the liberation machine in a similar vein to modernism's architectural 'machines for living' that were meant to somehow improve us.

There are also ideas pertaining to the pre-psychedelia, 1950s modernism of the International Typographical Style and its demand for clarity in design that are useful to us when trying to articulate the utopian nature of the Web. In web design Usability Heuristics demands similar things from its designers. The doctrine of usability suggests that with usability comes sociability.

With post-modern utopian notions of connectivity and the transcendence of national, institutional and political boundaries, are we being starry eyed in our optimism, or should we be harking back to the days of clean lines and Soviet-style functionality? The belief that new media benefit society through their attack on perceived hierarchies, and that the web is a great leveller, can be countered by the equally valid argument that the Web is undermining intellectual authority, generating failed spaces that are hostile, that threaten individual and collective security and help to circulate false information and dangerous ideas.

Is the computer best understood, then, with reference to modernist or post-modernist ideas of utopia's and dystopia's?

POSTED BY JOHN HUDSON AT 11:13 

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