

Thinking an Opposite World Through Facebook's VR Vision

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Companies such as Google and Facebook represent the apex of what we are learning to call surveillance capitalism. My question is: what is the world that these companies are trying to produce, and how do they use virtual reality, or VR, to do so? It will prove useful to approach this question in terms of an opposition between dystopic and utopian visions of the past, the present and the future.

Eric Cazdyn, in his essay on the effects of global capitalism in Japan, writes: “every moment of fascism necessarily presupposes a simultaneous moment of utopian transcendence.”<sup>1</sup> Although Cazdyn anticipates the emergence of a dystopian Bonapartism that will result from a disillusionment with neoliberal policy, the same logic can be applied to the dystopian framework of surveillance capitalism. Shoshana Zuboff identifies eight elements in her definition of surveillance capitalism, but I will focus on two: that it is “a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” and that “the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification.”<sup>2</sup> The first part of Zuboff’s definition resonates with McKenzie Wark’s description of the processes by which the ruling class gives “access to the location of a piece of information” in exchange for “information in the aggregate” (54-55).<sup>3</sup> This is the process of the Google search: Google provides a variety of links by which users can access information, but because they possess so much information about a user’s search habits, they are in a unique position to not only sell those habits to the highest bidder but to, as Zuboff describes in the second part of her definition, alter the information that they provide to manipulate a user’s

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<sup>1</sup> Eric M. Cazdyn, “Representation, Reality Culture, and Global Capitalism in Japan,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2000): 924, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-99-4-903>.

<sup>2</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, First, Book, Whole (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8.

<sup>3</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead* (London;New York: Verso, 2019), 54–55.

consumption habits. Thus, we arrive at my opening question: what roles does VR play in surveillance capitalism today, and how might we imagine it doing so in the future?

Although VR can take multiple forms, the dominant consumer model, and thus the model that seems to be trying the hardest to push itself into eventual mass ubiquity, is that of the head-mounted display, a headset that is worn over the face. With a screen for each eye, the headset produces the sensation that the user is inhabiting a virtual environment, a sensation that can be further augmented through body-tracking technology worn on the arms and legs.

Both Google and Facebook have made significant investments in VR, but Facebook's commitment provides an illustrative example of how a transnational corporation and major player in global capitalism can use VR to work through a world question. Two acquisitions by Facebook are worth noting: that of the VR headset producer Oculus in 2014 and the neural interface startup CTRL-labs in 2019.<sup>4</sup> The Oculus acquisition presaged the development and upcoming release of Facebook Horizon, a VR social platform that perhaps comes closest to enabling us to visualize the world picture Facebook is trying to embrace. As for the rationale for such an embrace, if one believes Facebook researcher Michael Abrash's claim that VR will eventually replace the personal computer, then it makes sense from the standpoint of the profit motive to anticipate that transformation.<sup>5</sup> However, we can also return to Zuboff's focus on human experience as raw material. As previously discussed, Internet usage on platforms owned by companies like Google and Facebook already generate countless data points about each user that can then be monetized.

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<sup>4</sup> "72 Facebook Acquisitions – The Complete List (2020)! [INFOGRAPHIC]," Techwyse, June 17, 2019, <https://www.techwyse.com/blog/infographics/facebook-acquisitions-the-complete-list-infographic/>.

<sup>5</sup> David Heaney, "Facebook's Chief Researcher: 'When The Next Generation of VR Shows Up, It Will Be Because We Did It,'" *UploadVR* (blog), January 3, 2020, <https://uploadvr.com/michael-abrash-the-information-interview-2020/>.

Nevertheless, within the current technologies, there are limits to the extent to which Facebook can acquire and take advantage of data produced by our bodies as we use the platform. Encouraging the use of Horizon is their attempt to remedy this state of affairs. According to a 2018 paper by Jeremy Bailenson, 20 minutes spent in a VR simulation produces approximately 2 million unique recordings of body language.<sup>6</sup> We can infer, then, that Facebook is trying to produce a world that serves as a vector of information between the bodies of the users who reside in it and the corporation collecting it.

The massive amounts of information collected in such a world brings us back to the second part of Zuboff's definition: behavioral modification. Considering that VR is already in use as a means of testing how consumers would behave in physical settings, moving those situations of consumption to VR provides corporations with the opportunity not only to see which physical circumstances are optimal for consumption, but to transform those situations so as to increase the opportunities for consumption to occur.<sup>7</sup> The dystopian example invoked by Susan Persky involves the usage of VR data correlated with certain medical diagnoses by insurance companies to reject people who would, say, attempt to purchase a life insurance policy.<sup>8</sup> Here we have one instance of the kind of world Facebook wants to create: a world in which one can do all of the things one already does through Facebook, such as communicate with other users, assemble in groups, and play games, but now experience them in such an attractively embodied fashion that we would readily relinquish our autonomy over embodied data.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Bailenson, "Protecting Nonverbal Data Tracked in Virtual Reality," *JAMA Pediatrics* 172, no. 10 (2018): 905–6, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.1909>.

<sup>7</sup> M. Alcaniz, E. Bigne, and J. Guixeres, "Virtual Reality in Marketing: A Framework, Review, and Research Agenda," *FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY* 10, no. Journal Article (2019): 1530, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01530>.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Persky, "VR Behavioral Data Tracking: With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility" (IEEE VR, Online, 2020).

Facebook's attempt to extract data from the body also seeks to have significant purchase on the mind. Thus, their purchase of CTRL-labs, a company that is now a part of Facebook's Reality Labs division. CTRL-labs' most notable invention as of this writing is a wristband that can detect neural impulses going through to one's hand, such that without a camera the movements of one's hand can trigger, say, the equivalent movement of a virtual hand. A remark from Mark Zuckerberg himself perhaps suffices to explain Facebook's interest in the company: "In the future, we want to get to an input where we can just think something and it happens."<sup>9</sup> So, one can add to the translation of the human into data not only body language but the electrical impulses sent out through the nervous system, giving Facebook even more information to commodify. Regardless of any predictions as to whether such a world will come to fruition, it seems that Facebook pictures a world in which everyone who currently uses a personal computer or smartphone is living within a sub-world owned by Facebook, a world in which maximal quantities of data from body and brain can be captured and used to facilitate marketing strategies. This is perhaps the dream of surveillance capitalism, that to perform social, economic, or even political functions one must subject the entire body and brain to surveillance by private corporations. Zuckerberg claims that "Facebook can explore examples of how community governance might work at scale."<sup>10</sup> He frames the transformation of self into data as empowerment, implying that one must sacrifice privacy for effective civic engagement.

This appears to be the real question Facebook asks of itself and the world, whether it is capable of producing a sub-world that is essential to participation in the marketplace of global

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<sup>9</sup> *Oculus Connect 6 VR Event in 12 Minutes*, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybhYJ87U2Gs>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, "Building Global Community | Facebook," February 16, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>.

capitalism, a world in which one can perform the self-increase of credit and the search for investors that is so essential to neoliberal existence.

If we recall Cazdyn's claim that dystopia contains within it the essential seeds of utopia, there opens an avenue through which one can use Facebook's world and sub-world of surveillance capitalism to ask a world question that deliberately counter-poses itself to that world. In other words, we might ask what is the utopia of mass usage of VR that positions itself opposite the dystopia of Facebook's world question?

Like every other technology, VR possesses positive as well as negative qualities. VR journalist Kent Bye lists countless examples, such as James Blaha training himself to learn how to see in three dimensions through a VR game, producing experiences of truth and reconciliation to facilitate healing from trauma, or preserving experiential memories to pass on to future generations.<sup>11</sup> However, these experiences do necessarily accumulate into a world, as they are all rather individualized programs to be experienced in relative isolation.

So, what makes a utopic VR world? As mentioned previously, Facebook's world vision insists that users, to participate in the functions of society that they deem essential, must enter the corporate-owned virtual environment. The utopic VR world must then by necessity be a world in which participation is not a pre-requisite for all forms of social, economic, or political engagement. That is, while I refer to Facebook's potential VR world as a sub-world, the reality is that Facebook presents it as a world that will replace the world in which we currently reside, rendering the Earth a mere platform upon which the actual world rests. This world picture is necessarily exclusionary, eliding both the hidden labor required to keep such a world functioning and the inequality endemic to capitalism.

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<sup>11</sup> *Kent Bye (Voices of VR) - The Ultimate Potential of VR / VR NOW Con & Awards 2018*, accessed April 21, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=491&v=ZHdwAwjHYvw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=491&v=ZHdwAwjHYvw&feature=emb_logo).

In contrast, the VR world could be seen as optional, as something that people do not have to access in order to participate in the social, economic, or political life of a society. In this scenario, VR does in fact perform much the same function that personal computers do today. That is, rather than conducting one's entire life through VR, it would be merely a tool for the performance of certain function, not necessarily essential ones. And although one could conduct social, economic, and political tasks through the VR platform, one could also carry those out in the world of flesh.

However, this scenario still leaves open the framework of surveillance capitalism using the data of users in the aggregate to accrue capital. What is necessary, then, is some recognition of the autonomy users should have over their own data. This is the rationale for such legislation as the General Data Protection Regulation and the California Consumer Privacy Act, both of which take steps to allow users to have control over their own data.<sup>1213</sup> Key to such legislation is the notion of informed consent, that users should be alerted whenever their data is being collected, be allowed to consent to that collection taking place, and be able to have that data eventually erased should they desire, a stipulation colloquially known as the "right to be forgotten." Currently data collection mostly takes place through the model of Terms of Service agreements, documents that tend to be both unbearably long and unclear in their explanatory language. Namely, the typical Terms of Service agreement rejects informed consent in favor of creating a situation in which the user is dis-informed and dis-inclined to be informed.

A Facebook-like platform can still persist in this environment. The next step, then, would be to reject the platform entirely, to engage in what Wark might term the hackers taking over the

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<sup>12</sup> "General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Official Legal Text," General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), accessed April 21, 2020, <https://gdpr-info.eu/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Everything You Need to Know About the CCPA | WIRED," accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/ccpa-guide-california-privacy-law-takes-effect/>.

vectors of information controlled by the ruling class. In the case of a VR social world, much like Facebook, the platform itself is the vector of information, so the hackers would indeed have to possess the platform or create their own. Open source software becomes not an optional component but a necessity for the hacker class. The model for such emancipation in general is open-source software, such as something like Mastodon, the social networking service where each user belongs to an independently moderated server and can control the privacy settings of the content they produce. Even so, the hacker class must then take care to prevent the vectors of information that they possess from being subsumed by other vectors, such as that between the personal computer and the National Security Agency.

While rejecting VR as a forcibly ubiquitous technology and the preservation of data autonomy are goals worth striving for, they do not yet rise to the level of utopia. As Frederic Jameson writes, “when popular demands grow louder and more confident, then what also happens is that those grievances and demands grow more precise...the utopian imagination no longer has free play.”<sup>14</sup> Jameson frames utopianism as something impractical because it necessitates a certain distance from our current political institutions to fantasize about restructuring or eliminating them. Further, utopia in some conceptions is merely negative, a kind of not-dystopia that in fact reveals an inability to conceive a reality other than our own. As Jameson observes elsewhere, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”<sup>15</sup> . Utopia can thus be framed in the negative: a world without hunger, racism, unemployment, climate change, and so on, becoming more specific depending on what one deems the root of all evil.

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<sup>14</sup> Frederic Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review*, no. 25 (February 2004): 44.

<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review*, no. 21 (June 2003): 76.

Where does VR fit into this? The answer may very well be that it does not, that to embrace VR as a technology capable of creating a world would be to reject Bruno Latour's directive to "dig deeper into the Earth" when considering a future world.<sup>16</sup> Rather, one can only consider VR in its utopian dimension insofar as it participates in the negation of the qualities of contemporary society that cause harm to its population. The question then becomes what kind of negation the utopian imagination believes VR to be capable of performing. Can VR negate the feeling of dissatisfaction with one's own embodiment and identity by providing the means to embrace a new identity? Can VR negate the feeling of isolation by allowing people to always participate in experiential social environments when they feel the desire for communication? Such questions tease at the edges of, but do not yet approach, societal upheaval.

Perhaps instead one way of conceiving about VR's role in the utopian imagination is that it can provide an experiential way for us to construct and reside in utopia. Thus, VR becomes not an instrument in utopia itself but a technology for asking world questions and for picturing the worlds brought about by those questions. One such endeavor was the project 2167, in which five indigenous artists were commissioned to make projects in VR to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the confederation of Canada.<sup>17</sup> The impetus of the project, as the title indicates, is to get indigenous artists to envision 150 years into the future and use VR to depict their vision. For instance, in the project *The Hunt*, directed by Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet, residents of Mohawk territory in a postwar North America use creative tactics to dispatch a policing and surveillance orb attempting to interfere with their hunt. This is clearly the dystopic scenario, the vision of survival in the wake of catastrophe. However, when one considers the catastrophic

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<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, "On a Possible Triangulation of Some Present Political Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 2 (2018): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1086/695376>.

<sup>17</sup> "2020 Tour Programmes," imagineNATIVE, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://imaginenative.org/2019-tour-programmes>.

consequences of settler colonialism, Goulet's narrative seems less like a warning for the future than a reflection on the present, in which state law enforcement fights an ongoing war of attrition against indigenous populations.

Another vision of futurity through VR emerges in the contribution to 2167 by the group Postcommodity. Rather than positioning themselves 150 years in the future, they leapt forward another 150 years to present their project as if it were a document from 2167 being looked at by someone 300 years older than our present.<sup>18</sup> In this document one witnesses the result of forest fires and the remains of the Los Alamos atomic bomb testing site, both images that evoke catastrophe. This positioning of the future as the past lends new creativity to the possibility of using VR as a method for experiencing an imaginary future. By depicting that future as already past, Postcommodity stages a reversal of the typical dystopian imaginary, something like the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* in which an academic refers to the novel's contents as documents from a distant past.<sup>19</sup> However, due to the experiential quality of VR, the user takes on the academic's position, leading to an odd layering in which the one moves far into the future to experience something halfway along the timeline. The world, then, gets constructed in the form of an archive that does not yet exist, suggesting VR as a technology capable of performing the task of generating a world archive and imagining what such an archive would look like.

However, Postcommodity's approach lays bare a paradox of using VR as a device of imagination, which is its lack of self-reflexive capabilities in conceiving of itself in the future. Because the teleological endpoint of VR would be full immersion, yet the technology is not capable of providing such an experience, it cannot therefore represent that experience in the first

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<sup>18</sup> "2167: Indigenous Storytelling in VR - YouTube," accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7dT1B2ZjbY&t=1377s>.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Book, Whole (New York: Everyman's Library, 2006).

person. As such, it has rested with other media forms such as the cinema to depict a future in which VR maximally expands its immersive capabilities, and in turn, what a world looks like in which such a technology is ubiquitous. Ironically, for VR to engage in that kind of depiction, it would have to employ a kind of distancing that goes against the logic of immersion that has been the dominant marketing tool for companies trying to disseminate the technology. In other words, applying a Brechtian approach that highlights the operation of VR technology as it is being used has the potential to emphasize the political valences of depicting a world in which the logic of VR becomes part of the framework of a global economy and society.

The grim outlook of the dismal world picture painted by global corporations making investments in VR engenders the possibility of immobilizing those who see it as a historical inevitability. However, the goal of this essay is not to expound an overwhelming pessimism but to suggest that the dystopic world picture that so often accompanies imaginings of VR bears within it the potential for a utopic world picture that rejects the principles of surveillance capitalism abetted by the technology. The question then becomes what actions people should take to move in the direction of the utopia that would stand in contradiction to Facebook's social VR world. While there remains a reality outside VR in which action is possible, the potential remains for people to engage in acts, of differing degrees of radicality, that take steps to dismantle the neoliberal world. And, if such a dismantling were to take place, perhaps VR can provide a means of imagining what can be rebuilt in its aftermath.

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