

# **New Keywords**

*A Revised Vocabulary of Culture  
and Society*

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But there is more to be observed here than a mere pendulum swing between periods of "normalcy," when skepticism and relativism are affordable luxuries, and "states of emergency," when absolute values are asserted on all sides. There is also a venerable tradition of pondering the question of value in a historical, even an evolutionary sense. Value is seen as a human production that is both the goal and motor of human progress. Plato's conception in the *Republic* of the dialectic, Aristotle's notion of the unfolding of faculties, Rousseau's idea of the perfectibility of man, Nietzsche's (1969a [1887]) prophecy of the **transvaluation of values**, and Agamben's (1993) image of the "coming community" are all variations on a historical concept of value as the object of a quest undertaken by the human species as a whole. Images of utopia, of the classless society, of global villages and heavenly cities capture these ideas of **ultimate value** in vivid narratives. To the extent that these utopian visions of **supreme value** have the power to mobilize social movements, value must be placed right alongside geography, scarcity, technology, and genetic predisposition as a causal force in human history. Insofar as "value" becomes reified and deified as a *summum bonum*, hidden god, buried treasure, or El Dorado, it generates a **surplus value** that plays a key role in the dynamics of social history, whether for idealist crusades to repossess a Promised Land, or terrible atrocities in the name of purity, or (most likely) both.

W. J. T. Mitchell

See: *AESTHETICS, COMMODITY, NORMAL, OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, TASTE, UTOPIA.*

### Virtual

Taken to mean something that exists in effect but not in fact, something perceived as real, the concept of the **virtual** has from the late 1980s largely referred to simulation by technological means. Its most common use is in the term **virtual reality**. "The virtual" has come to denote the perception of the real as created (primarily) by digital, computer-driven means.

Dictionary definitions of "virtual" note it is most frequently used to refer to something that exists in the mind, is imaginary, or is created or simulated by a computer. The OED entry for "virtual" includes among the word's common uses something "That is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned." The OED also offers a definition from computing: "Not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so from the point of view of the program or the user."

In contemporary usage "virtual" is often used as an adjective to denote something nearly true, as in **virtually certain**, meaning "almost certain." In the realm of technological practice there is reference to "the virtual" as a technological construct meant to

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convey via the senses and/or the imagination a sensation of reality. It is often used in connection with computer-generated visual media, as in "virtual reality." In the realm of cultural and critical theory "virtual" has served as a judgment about reality and authenticity of experience, characteristically in dualistic relationship with the real. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, for example, Jean Baudrillard (1994) categorizes the virtual as belonging to the category of simulation, of things not real and not reality, of representations that ultimately replace the real.

In either usage "virtual" is inextricably tied to the discourse of authenticity. It is conceptually connected to modernism and to changes in thinking about the original and the real brought about by the advent of recording technologies (beginning with the introduction of the telephone and the phonograph in the 1870s, or possibly earlier with the invention of the printing press and mass production). One can find its expression in seminal texts like Walter Benjamin's "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in which the claim that the illusionary nature of photography and film is "the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" (1968: 235) resonates with contemporary experiences of digital technologies.

Increasingly through the 1980s one finds "virtual" used as a word modifying important cultural, social, and theoretical concepts. For example, an anthology edited by David Holmes (1997) includes essays on **virtual identity**, **virtual bodies**, **virtual worlds**, **virtual urban futures**, and the collection itself is titled *Virtual politics*. John Tiffin's and Lalita Rajasingham's book *In search of the virtual class* focuses on distance learning from the perspective that the classroom as a physical space may be replaced by "the effect of a class" (1995: 6), derived from students using networked computers to communicate with one another and an instructor. In his book *War in the age of intelligent machines*, Manuel de Landa (1991) coins the term **virtual war** to examine the mediation of the 1990s Operation Desert Storm by CNN. Such usage of the term "virtual" reflects its application as a means of denoting in shorthand the logic of simulation. Tracing a line from Benjamin's efforts to Baudrillard's writing, one can discern the extent to which development of technologies for the manipulation of sound and image blurred lines between reality, artifice, and perceived experience.

Baudrillard's conception of the virtual connected directly to the experience of the real via media technologies, but had little connection at the time to computer technology. And although one can find much earlier, pre-technological discussions of the virtual, such as the discourse about light and shadow, reality and fantasy, in Plato's "simile of the cave," or in the discourse of stereophonic sound in the 1950s and 1960s, its technological manifestations only became realized in the 1980s with rapid advances in computer and video technology. By the late 1980s one finds the conjunction of virtual and reality. Technologist Jaron Lanier is said to have coined the expression "virtual reality" in the late 1980s (Kelly, Heilbrun, and Stacks, 1989). Virtual reality (often abbreviated as "VR") in this sense is most commonly

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considered a visual construct, and its perception is experienced along spatial dimensions of width, height, and depth.

**VR technology** became closely associated with, and popularized by, the writings of cyberpunk authors like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. In the early 1990s one finds a confluence of discourses in computer technology, science fiction, art, and social and cultural theory merging with popular discourses about technology and the future. The clearest manifestation of this merger occurred in films like *Tron* (1982), *Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Virtuosity* (1995), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999). Howard Rheingold's popular book *Virtual reality* (1991) encapsulated the utopian vision of most VR discourse. In it, Rheingold notes the variety of uses to which VR may be put, from art and science to simulating "sex at a distance . . . [and] simulations so powerfully addictive that they replace reality" (1991: 19). He closes the book with his hope that VR "will be a new laboratory of the spirit" (p. 391). Later writers have been more critical of VR, but have still shown a tendency to privilege technology as a means of mediating experience (Biocca and Levy, 1995; M. Shapiro and McDonald, 1992; Steur, 1992).

In the realm of art virtual reality is the site of a shift in perspective, from the artist-centered one developed during the Renaissance to a user-centered one particularly evident in immersive **virtual environments** like the CAVE, a multi-person, room-sized, high-resolution, 3D video and audio environment invented at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1991. As digital technologies have developed one finds the virtual a staple of visual creation. In film-making it has become commonplace since the mid-1990s to find actors inserted into previously filmed footage to provide a historical setting (*Forrest Gump*) or acting with digitally created characters (*Star Wars: Episode I*), and to have actors who died during production digitally added to scenes requiring their character's presence (Oliver Reed in 2000's *Gladiator*). In the military, medicine, and industry virtual reality is regularly employed as a means of providing training and practice. In real estate **virtual walk-throughs** of property are almost as common as "for sale" signs in front of homes.

**Steve Jones**

See: *INFORMATION, MEDIA, REPRESENTATION.*