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Is our understanding of reality inherently subjective? Discuss two variations on the notion of reality and artifice in your world, referencing artists and thinkers discussed over the lecture series.

Reality versus Artifice

Philosophy seeks answers to questions of all aspects of human behaviour to determine the nature of being (the study of which is known as ontology) and a true sense of reality. But what is reality? Is it what we perceive? Or does it exist without conscious awareness of it? One definition is known as subjective reality and the second is objective reality. The distinction between the two is fundamentally simple - a reality that is not defined or influenced by anyone that sees it, is **objective**. It exists independently of any conscious awareness of the object, whereas **subjective** reality suggests that the 'subject' is observed, perceived and uniquely interpreted by the human mind. No two humans will perceive the 'subject' in the same way because knowledge and experience will influence the interpretation of that reality. In the words of Rene Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." [Discourse of Method, 1637] suggests that knowledge cannot be doubted and will influence perception, that we do exist.

When questioning whether reality is inherently subjective, it is important to understand that reality can be altered by artifice, whereby creativity and inventiveness can sometimes result in an underlying falseness designed to trick the minds of others. I will now consider two examples that highlight the dilemma or contradiction between reality and artifice: the first being wave pools or natural waves in the oceans, and the second considering how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is mimicking art.

Wave pools versus the natural wave

One of my passions is surfing and I have had first-hand experience in both the sea and in a man-made wave pool at 'The Wave, Bristol'. One is natural and the other is artificial, but which one gives a more realistic experience? By considering each experience, I will endeavour to show that the space or setting/location or specificity is vitally important in revealing the truth of reality, whether it is influenced by the artifice or is "seen with the soul of the eye."

In Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' [1994 translation], he reasons that space can be poetic, in that it fuels the imagination, of which there are two forms: Formal and Material. Formal imagination is the appreciation of the beauty of things whilst material imagination evokes images of elemental matter - of the sea, land, earth and air. He believes that a poetic image is momentary and sudden and is when the psyche becomes still and silent. It instils harmony and tone of being which excites both the consciousness and the unconsciousness of the mind and soul. Since poetic imagery is variational and evokes different reactions in different people, the space become transsubjective on the individual consciousness. So, what is one person's reality will be another person's artifice.

Bachelard (1958, p.132 & p.151) also encourages us to 'embrace the concept of miniature which allows us to consider the immensity of the world around us' by imagining living in a seashell. There is an analogy with this, being a speck in the vast ocean when surfing, of being miniature within the natural space of the sea.

The idea of a wave pool dates back to mid-1800's when King Ludwig II of Bavaria created waves by electrifying his private lakes – he was dubbed 'The Mad King' even though it was his creative thinking that inspired this invention (Wavepool Magazine, 2019). Since that first wave machine, technologies have become quite sophisticated at mimicking an ocean wave, namely, by using agitators, hydrofoils, mechanised paddles, air chambers and air pressure, enormous plungers and hydraulics. The wave pools can be used for general fun and recreation but there are now 10 wave pools worldwide that are dedicated to surfing and more are being built, in land-locked areas that are far from the sea, to 'compliment' other tourist activity sports such as skiing, for a fuller adrenaline experience. The proliferation of wave pools throughout the world is quite astonishing, as can be seen from the map below:



Fig.1: Wave pools around the World

These pools are designed to give users a thrill, be exciting and safe (no shark attacks, freak waves, no rips or water pollution). The fact that they are man-made or artificial does not seem to deter the investors nor the public. The largest wave pool in the world was opened on Turtle Island near Seoul, South Korea, in October this year, as phase one of a \$2 billion real-estate project that included the wave park, residential areas, hotels, retail outlets, marinas and museums, covering an area of land 167,000 square meters. The wave pool alone covers about 26,000 m² and uses 12 million gallons of water which is treated and filtered using the latest technology, keeping the water not only hygienically clean but crystal clear. The wave technology generates over 20 different wave types and sizes at the press of a button, generating between 300 and 1,000 waves per hour depending on the setting (Surfer Today, 2020).



Fig.2: Concourse at world's largest wave pool.

The artifice of Turtle Island is not just the wave pool. The island itself is man-made, purpose built on a waterfront. But the reality is that the island and the water park are a novelty and curiosity for the majority of people there even though welcomed by the surfing fraternity in South Korea as giving the perfect wave time after time, without waiting for nature to generate it.

The Wave at Bristol is nowhere near as big as the one in South Korea – the pool only covers an area of 4.5 acres in a site of 67 acres. Their remit was to build a sustainable facility that was eco-conscious and available for the people who lived in cities, to get them active and raise awareness of the environment. The wave pool at Bristol cost significantly less to build (£26m) but the wave technology installed can create up to 1000 waves per hour using 100% renewable energy. The cost of a one-hour surf lesson is about £40.00 which is not entirely accessible to everyone (Hydrock.com).

My one and only experience at The Wave was, admittedly, very exciting and somewhat surreal. Riding the waves was challenging even though they were perfect. As it was a competition, there was a set number of waves that each competitor could catch but each wave that came was perfect, yet identical to the previous one which was a little unreal. The thrill and fear were the same as one would get in the sea, but the sensation was different – I was very conscious of the concrete surroundings and fearful of wiping out into the wall. The water was colder than the sea at that time of year and buoyancy was less because it wasn't salty. The technology allowed them to set the wave height at maximum of 2 metres but the design of the pool meant that I had to catch the wave at the apex of the mechanism (top of a triangle), surrounded by concrete which was intimidating, unnatural and frightening. Overall, it was a fun experience but nothing like surfing in the natural world.



Fig.3: Primary Resource at The Wave Bristol

However, many individuals do connect with this 'hyperreal' wave pool world instead of being in tune with the physical reality of the natural world, a philosophy expressed by Jean Baudrillard in his *The Precession of Simulacra*. For me, the artifice of the wave pool mimicked a perfect wave but didn't capture the essence of the oceans and was disconnected from nature.

In comparison, surfing in the sea is a much more emotional experience, mystical, energising and exhilarating. The powerful natural forces that cause the ebb and flow and swell of the oceans teach you respect of the natural world with all its perfections and imperfections. It also raises awareness of the environmental issues of plastic pollution that is evident everywhere in the sea – a big problem that needs to be tackled.



Fig.4: Primary resource, Caswell Bay

As someone who lives by the sea as well as being a surfer, one quickly learns respect for the ocean, something that is fundamentally more powerful than you, and of the dangers that it can pose. The dangers of surfing in the sea are sometimes used as a promotional tool suggesting that the artificial wave pools are very safe. This is not always the case. The technology used to generate the waves can malfunction or be misused with serious consequences. An example of this, is the incident of a tsunami-like wave at the Yulong Shuiyun Water Park in China which swept hundreds of unsuspecting people in their inflatable rings crashing into other people and hurling many onto the concourse that surrounded the pool, injuring 44 people [youtube, 1 Aug 2019]. Wave pools are not without risk. Over-crowding can also cause further problems...



Fig.5: Tsunami at Wave pool



Fig.6: Overcrowded wave pool, Asia

In my experience, the sea never gets as over-crowded as that image above and, is such a crowded wave pool really enjoyable? I think not! Whilst in the sea, waiting patiently for a good wave to surf, the vastness and silence of the space around you provides the poetic image that has a dynamism of its own which is communicated through the consciousness and unconsciousness of the mind. It seeps into the heart and soul and allows one to understand its specific reality. We are 'all as much continuous with the physical universe as a wave is continuous with the ocean'. The delicate biorhythms that affect the body, mind and emotions are essentially invisible waves of energy that are constantly in flux and unique to each individual (www.gaia.com). A more consistent energy flow is achieved when the biorhythms are in harmony with the external world. The dynamism of the sea and its unpredictability creates a juxtaposition of the space (ocean) that awakens an emotional connection and inspires the imagination of the surfer. It creates a sensation of something vast, deep, boundless and beautiful.

On reflection, which experience is more realistic? My perception and interpretation of my experiences is that even though the wave pool is exciting, it is an artifice, it is artificial. Being able to create what one person has determined as being the perfect type of wave, repeatedly, will ultimately become less challenging, less inspirational and boring. This can never be said of the sea. Not only is it free to surf, the oceans create its own unique set of waves which no man can ever really predict, replicate or mimic. The oceans are governed not by man but by the pull of the moon and the universe, a truly poetic space. This is my perception of reality - inherently subjective.



Fig.7: Primary resource, Caswell Bay, dusk

Visible and Invisible Objects

The idea is that you can find peace and solitude whilst waiting for a wave, but are you really alone? The reality is that everyone, no matter where they are in the world, is subject to covert surveillance by the plethora of satellites that orbit the Earth and the data used and/or stored by governments and other agencies. Until I discovered the work of artist Trevor Paglen on "Secret Sites & Satellites" (The Guardian, 2017), I had never given this any thought. He painstakingly researches how to make the invisible visible using sophisticated cameras, creating photographs that look like impressionist paintings. Paglen reflects that images of

outer space are beautiful, but they hide the hardware of secret governmental & military satellites that spy on us, as well as the discarded space junk that they leave behind.

Through the photographs that emerge, he challenges everyone to learn how to see the invisible, to see abstract things that pervade our lives, with a sense of discovery. There is always an intersection or boundary where the invisible becomes visible which we must explore. He challenges his audience to see beyond their subjective reality, to consider the objective reality of life.

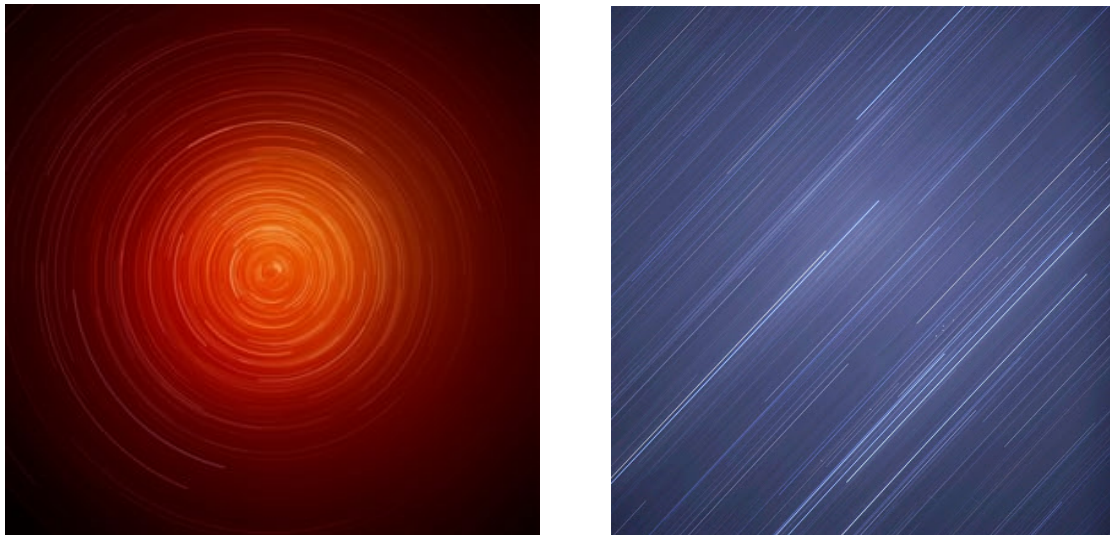


Fig.8 &9: Sites Unseen Trevor Paglen, 2018

In the era of the internet, technology records everything we do or say or buy or browse - our lives are being passively tracked and tapped. The internet is effectively a vehicle for mass surveillance and the idea of storing data in the 'cloud' creates a naturalistic image of the sky, but the 'objective reality' is very different and hidden. Almost all of the world's data travels through fibre optic cables, the 'information super-highway', that are hidden below the oceans and, at certain strategic 'choke' points, governments, military agencies, etc, can tap into that data – everything recorded is relevant.

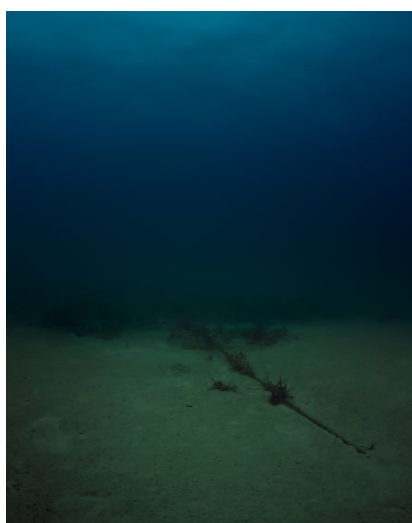


Fig.10: Undersea internet cable, Trevor Paglen, 2015

Paglen believes that the 'historical moment we live in is both beautiful and creepy.' Technology has changed the world and while we all recognise the benefits of social media and the internet, the dangers are evident when you realise the importance of privacy. Facebook, Instagram and other platforms create a culture of recording photographically every moment, important or otherwise. However, these images are being used to feed powerful Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems whose purpose is to define people, emotions and gestures. The consequence of this 'artificial' imaging is that it is inherently 'false' because it is classified, categorised and normalised by political, economic and social biases. Technology is not neutral.

Recently, Paglen created a series of artworks called 'Bloom' which is essentially an allegory (interpretation of images that reveal some hidden meaning) of AI. This time, he chose flowers as his subject, the symbolism a poignant reminder of the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (reflecting the sense of mourning, loss and death but also of regeneration) to reveal this invisible, automatic interpretation of images by AI systems. The pandemic has dramatically changed normal everyday life and through the specificity of these times, he uses flowers to give new meaning to the fragility of life in a digital era, cleverly revealing through his art how computers "perceive" human faces, emotions and nature (Pace Gallery interview, 2020).

Using very high resolution black and white photos of trees in bloom that he took during the lockdown, Paglen fed them into machine-learning computer models that infer an object by classifying the images by searching for patterns and combinations of texture and colour. As the original images were black and white, the computer models automatically assigned relevant textures and colours. Paglen analysed these assignments and then reprogrammed the computer to re-assign the characteristics randomly. The resulting colour images were powerful, yet hauntingly illuminating.

Lockdown had closed many gallery spaces, but Pace Gallery (London) devised a unique way to exhibit Paglen's allegoric AI artworks. A virtual experience was created using a web portal by locating cameras throughout the exhibition, allowing anyone to view and participate in, from anywhere in the world. Its code-named was 'Octopus.' This approach challenged the viewer to really look at what they see, to understand how AI and technology mediates an image and encourages them to consider where 'history is going and how.'



Fig.11 &12: Bloom, Trevor Paglen, 2020



Whilst these AI generated blooms reflect what the essence of a flower is, this 'computer vision' is an artifice of reality. This is an example of a hyperreality, as defined by Jean Baudrillard [The Precession of Simulacra], where the consciousness is not able to distinguish between what is real and what is simulation. The images are a Simulacrum – AI has substituted its own representation of reality, defining their essence, "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true."

These two different notions of artifice and reality both highlight the very subjective nature of our interpretations of what we see.

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List of Figures & references

Fig. 1: Wave Pools around the World

<https://wavepoolmag.com/surf-planner-guide-to-global-wave-pools/>

Fig. 2: Concourse at world's largest wave pool, South Korea

<https://www.surfertoday.com/surfing/worlds-biggest-wave-pool-opens-in-south-korea>

Fig. 3: Primary Resource at The Wave Bristol

Fig. 4: Primary Resource, Caswell Bay

Fig.5: Tsunami at Wave Pool

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcW0XOXS4_Y

Fig.6: Overcrowded Wave Pool in Asia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNGvDQafrlQ>

Fig. 7: Primary Resource, Caswell Bay at dusk

Fig. 8 & 9: Sites Unseen, Trevor Paglen, 2018

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Fig. 10: Undersea internet cable, Trevor Paglen, 2015

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Fig. 11 & 12: Bloom, Trevor Paglen

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