

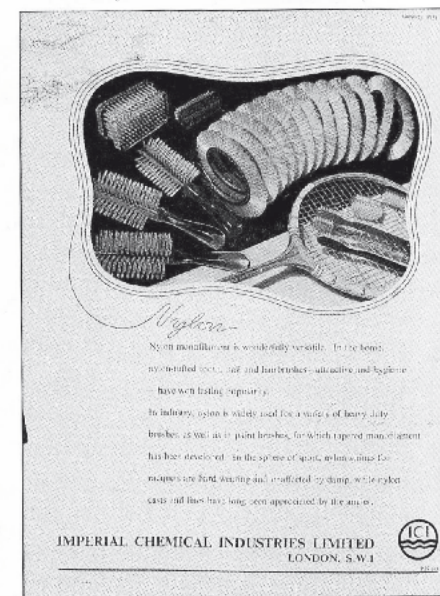
PLASTIC 2.0

Burk Koller

Despite having the name of a Greek shepherd, virtuality is in essence the stuff of alchemy. In utilization of the world wide web, the user takes part in the accomplishment of the magical operation par excellence: the transmutation of life. An ideally-shaped machine, tabulated and oblong (a shape well suited to suggest the secret of an itinerary) effortlessly puzzles together, out of a stream of zeros and ones, shiny and complex simulations of life. On the one side, raw, binary digits from some backbone under the sea (or a cloud service), on the other side one of almost endless possible, ever changing surfaces of the world wide web. Between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit, hardly watched over by a half-god, half-robot, the internet.

So, more than a physical perception of truth, virtuality is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as the origin of its name indicates, it is ubiquity made potent. And it is this, in fact, which makes a miraculous phenomenon: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature, a metamorphosis of life. Virtuality remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a presence of existence than the trace of a movement.

And as the movement of information here is almost infinite, transforming the binary digits into a multitude of more and more startling applications, virtuality is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its surfaces. At the sight of each terminal form (app, network,



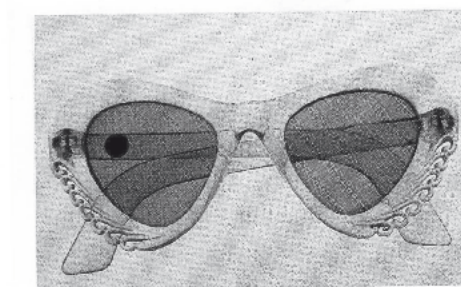
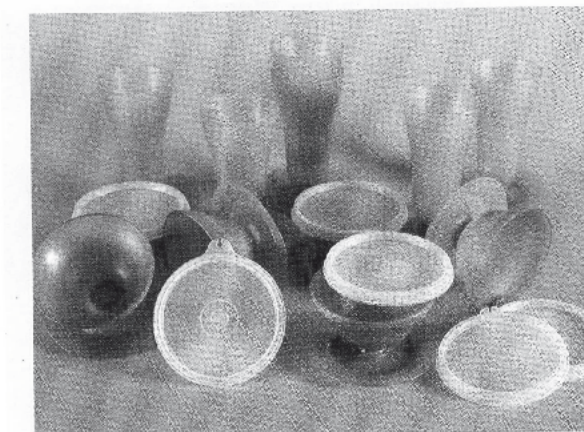
An advertisement for ICI, showing a range of nylon products. (British Plastics, Jan 1955).

cloud, ...), the mind does not cease from considering the digital information as an enigma. This is because the quick-change artistry of virtuality is absolute: digital information can become sound as well as moving image, and it can even get encrypted. Hence a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferating forms of presence, and the connection he detects between the singular of the binary digit and the plural of the effects. And this amazement is a pleasurable one, since the scope of the transformations gives man the measure of his power, and since the very itinerary of virtuality gives him the euphoria of prestigious free-wheeling through life. But the price to be paid for this success is

that virtuality, sublimated as informational movement, hardly exists as substance. Its reality is a negative one: Neither here nor there, it must be content with a 'substantial' attribute which is neutral in spite its utilitarian advantages: globality, a state which merely means an absence of tangibility. In the hierarchy of the major poetic worlds, it figures as a disgraced reality, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal; it embodies none of the genuine produce of the real world. It is 'shaped' reality: whatever its surface, virtuality keeps an ephemeral appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of life. But what best reveals it for what it is is the touch it resists; its hollow and flat feeling is its undoing, as are its colours, for it seems capable of retaining only the most chemical-looking ones. Of red, green and blue, it keeps only the aggressive quality, and uses them as mere names, being able to display only concepts of colour.

The fashion for virtuality highlights an evolution in the myth of 'imitation' techniques. It is well known that their use is historically bourgeois in origin (the first photographic reproductions date back to the rise of capitalism). But until not long ago, imitation technologies have always indicated pretension, they belonged to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use; they aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest impressions, all the luxurious brilliance of life on earth. Virtuality has climbed down, it is a everyday reality. It is the first magical perceptibility which consents to be prosaic. But it is precisely because this prosaic character is a triumphant reason for its existence: for the first time, artifice aims at something common, not rare. And

as an immediate consequence, the age-old idea of reality is modified: it is no longer the pure highlights of life to be regained or imitated: an artificial world, more bountiful than all the real deposits, is about to replace life itself, and to determine the very invention of being. A human life is still of this earth, it still recalls, albeit in a precious mode, its origin, the spirited theme of which it is but one actualization. Virtuality is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used by the user: ultimately, virtual entities will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them. The hierarchy of realities is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world can be virtualized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to program virtual hearts.



Polythene cups and food containers. Tupperware Plastics Company, USA 1940s-1960s.

Plastic sunglasses. 1950s.