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# The Total Work of Art

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## From Bayreuth to Cyberspace

Matthew Wilson Smith

*(excerpt of pages 180-186,  
on "Beyond Manzanar" )*

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in Jameson's account, science fiction<sup>23</sup>) buries "material and historical constraints," and thus performs the function of ideology, its magical worldview is nevertheless "a celebration of human creative power and freedom" (66). This celebration is ubiquitous in *Warcraft*, a world in which one's character can fly, change shape, cure by touch, and so forth in a manner impossible, as yet, on earth. Like heaven, *Warcraft* is a land where even death is conquered.<sup>24</sup> There might be utopian hope here, except that this utopia is set not in a possible future but in a world of lost enchantment, a magic kingdom that sprinkles fairy-dust on our own unrecoverable past.

Total-entertainment realms such as Gates' "home of the future" and Blizzard's *Warcraft* suggest that the continuation of the digital *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the twenty-first century will not be limited to the world of galleries and museums. Like theme parks, wired homes and online worlds are becoming mass-cultural elements in a single global nexus, a neo-medieval landscape of multiple total theatres linked by routes both physical and virtual. Such virtual spaces do not simply mirror the essential lack of identity and place that defines cyberspace; if anything, these sites attempt to compensate for that essential lack by emphatically insisting on that which digital culture tends to eradicate. Identity – whether in the form of a wearable pin containing one's preferences or a character with fixed features of race, class, and gender – returns with a vengeance in these two projects. And particularly with *Warcraft*, so does the fantasy of territoriality, located now in the radically deterritorialized realm of networked cyberspace.<sup>25</sup>

### The gardens of exile: *Beyond Manzanar*

I would like to conclude by touching on a work of more modest proportions than any we have examined thus far. It is not a networked piece like *Aspects of Gaia* or *World of Warcraft*, it does not have the commercial potential of Gates' wired home, and the VR it utilizes is not so all-encompassing as that of *Osmose*. At least technologically, *Beyond Manzanar* is a comparatively unspectacular virtual world. It is also a world that takes its inspiration from two very real moments in history. Created by digital artists Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar* is a virtual-reality installation that reflects on the post-Pearl Harbor internment of Japanese-Americans in camps such as Manzanar (an oasis in the high desert of eastern California), and threats made against Iranian-Americans in the wake of the hostage crisis of 1979–80.<sup>26</sup> The work is an immersive, surreal journey, but it is also a critical reflection on cyberspace and the total work of art. It draws our attention to the longings that are at the center of the digital *Gesamtkunstwerke* we have explored thus far, but it does so in a way that simultaneously acknowledges and estranges their force.

Standing in an enclosed, darkened room before a wall-sized screen, the visitor to *Beyond Manzanar* controls all movements with a simple joystick (Figure 8.3). No virtual paraphernalia (visor, glasses, gloves) are used; as Thiel explains, "if you have a screen that's big enough to present the material life-sized, then the image is

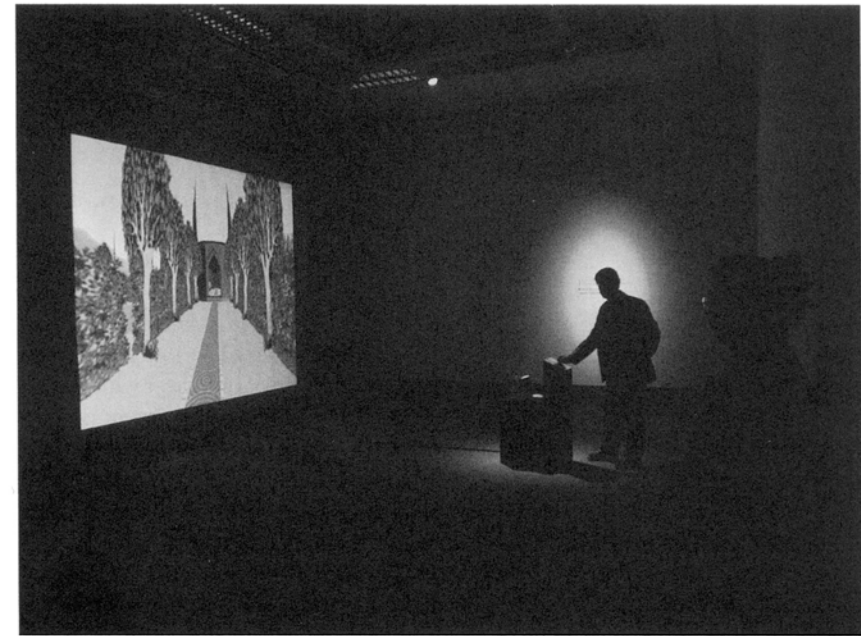


Figure 8.3 Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000. Spectator at the controls; on the screen, Iranian garden.

already immersive. You see the image in your peripheral vision, and your body reacts to it not as a picture but as a space."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Thiel wanted the piece to be accessible even to "people who had never touched a computer or never would touch a computer, or veterans who were missing arms and sitting in wheelchairs." The effect is successful: the size of the wall-projection, the accuracy of the three-dimensional recreation, and the use of music and ambient sounds (crunching pebbles, wind, soft voices) palpably simulate the alternate environment without technical accessories. The result is an immersive multimedia experience that consciously draws from the tradition of the total work of art. "I will admit that as a child I had my own fantasies about the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," says Houshmand, who used to "fantasize about what it would be to create a work of art that essentially was a total-immersion virtual reality." "This for me is the excitement of virtual reality," writes Thiel: "it provides an excellent platform for creating gesamtkunstwerke [sic] in which an environment is brought to life by the inclusion of other material such as sound, images, and texts (and for that matter other characters in the form of avatars)" (Thiel 3). VR, according to Thiel, surpasses the stage in its ability to create total artworks. She continues:

Traditional theatre can integrate objects, images, sounds, texts and characters into a gesamtkunstwerk. Virtual reality can go beyond theatre not only by exploiting the irreality of a space with no physical laws, but also by use of a first-person viewpoint to bring the user's own body and personal character into the piece.

(5)

But if *Beyond Manzanar* draws from the tradition of the total work of art, it also deconstructs it in intriguing ways.

At the outset of *Beyond Manzanar*, the visitor finds himself in a reproduction of the internment camp, surrounded on all sides by barbed wire and guard towers. Wandering between the rows of identical barracks, the visitor can see scenes of daily life (taken from period photographs) through the barrack windows. Exploring further, the visitor is taken by surprise to discover the sky clouding over with period newspaper clippings announcing war and rising anti-Japanese sentiment (Figure 8.4). These clippings, like many elements in the world of *Beyond Manzanar*, have a ghostly reality, shifting in and out of our vision; sometimes the sky is clear and bright, at other times it is cluttered with headlines. The effect on first seeing the newspapers filling the sky is unquestionably estranging, bringing the visitor out of the hyper-real simulation of Manzanar and recalling the political and historic context of the event. At the same time that they estrange the visitor from the simulation, they add to the feeling of imprisonment that will be the dominant motif of the work. "The confinement is not only physical," explains Thiel, "it's also a media confinement, a public opinion confinement. You're confined by the hysteria that was provoked." If the visitor explores the site further, a barbed-wire fence eventually materializes in front of the visitor and blocks further movement. Again there is a moment of estrangement from the simulated internment camp: caught between the wires of the camp are the words of poems about exile, longing, and imprisonment, written in English, Japanese, and Farsi. The surprise of finding the barbed-wire poems, like that of the newspaper clippings, furthers the dominant motif of confinement even as it dislocates the spectator from the realistic simulation of the prison camp. *Beyond Manzanar* is rife with such estrangement effects. Unsurprisingly, Houshmand describes Brecht's influence on her work as "profound and all-embracing," and says that she is indebted to the Brechtian techniques of the Iranian playwright Bijan Mofid, with whom she studied.<sup>28</sup>

The Manzanar camp site is only the first of several zones the visitor passes through in *Beyond Manzanar*, and the remainder of the virtual experience furthers the artists' critical engagement with the tradition of the total work of art. While a full analysis of the remainder of the journey – which begins with the lives of Japanese-Americans and ends with those of Iranian-Americans – lies beyond the bounds of this chapter, two further sites should be mentioned. The first is a Japanese garden, which the visitor reaches after passing through one of the barracks of Manzanar. On a historical level, this site (Figure 8.5) refers to an actual Japanese garden that the internees constructed at Manzanar. Reflecting on the inspiration



Figure 8.4 *Beyond Manzanar*: internment camp with newspaper headlines.

for *Beyond Manzanar*, Thiel discusses the recollections of one internee who used the Manzanar garden as a way of mentally escaping the camp.

She talked about this garden and how she would sit herself very carefully and try not to move for as long as possible. Because as long as she held still, and held only this view, she could pretend she was in paradise of her own accord. But as soon as she moved, she fell out of the garden, because you could see the barracks or see the fence or see the watch-towers. And this was for me the key that said this project has to be done in virtual reality, because only that medium can capture that moment for other people ... It was that moment, and all of those associations and also the realization that a garden is an ancient form of *Gesamtheater*, of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of virtual reality, where you try to create an imaginary world that you can fully inhabit. There were so many cross-associations that we decided that we had to do this.

Thiel's discussion suggests that there is more than the literally historical referent here; the gardens of *Beyond Manzanar* (there are both Japanese and Iranian formal gardens in the piece) are also *Gesamtkunstwerke* themselves. Noting that the "garden is an ancient form of *Gesamtheater*, of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of virtual reality," Thiel suggests that the garden is a "paradise" (a word with Iranian roots, originally meaning an enclosed garden) that is all too easy to "fall out of." There is a nod here to the Edenic aspirations of the total work of art, to Wagner's desire to recover a

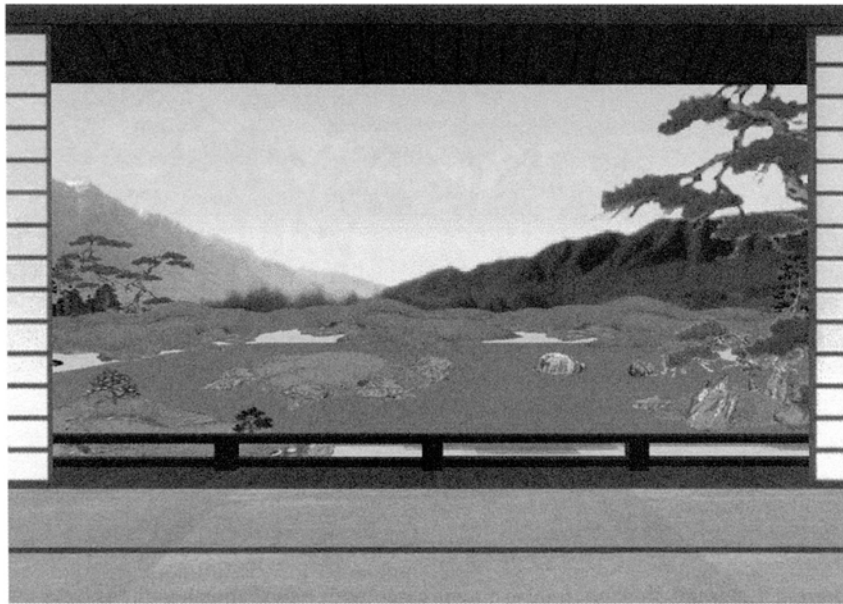


Figure 8.5 *Beyond Manzanar*: Japanese garden.

lost utopian condition through aesthetic unity. But there is also an awareness that the perfect totality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is held only through constant effort. Thiel and Houshmand reflect this precariousness by making the Japanese garden a very transient site; as soon as the visitor starts to explore it, he is thrust out, unable to return. “This sense of unity with nature is deceptive and temporary, a momentary dream in the dull reality of camp life,” writes Thiel. “Users are left with the feeling of responsibility, however inadvertently, for having destroyed the dream of the garden” (7). The recurring aspiration of the iconic *Gesamtkunstwerk* to create a work that might reunify nature and humanity is here both celebrated and critiqued. We appreciate the attempt to create utopia (and the Japanese garden is certainly a beautiful, peaceful respite from the more disturbing sites in *Beyond Manzanar*) and yet we are forced to acknowledge, too, its fragility and its impermanence.

The garden motif returns in *Beyond Manzanar*, when the visitor travels through a Persian paradise garden toward the end of the piece. After exploring for a minute or so, the visitor is suddenly thrust from this garden as well, and finds himself flying high above the camp in a fighter plane or bomber (Figure 8.6). The visitor has now lost control of the joystick, and the image on the screen replicates that of a first-person “shooter” game. The work thus culminates in a reference to the origins of virtual reality itself. The ending, says Thiel, “is a subliminal message about our stance on war, that this whole technology was developed in order to train jet fighter pilots and is used mostly now for shooter games. That’s how VR technology was

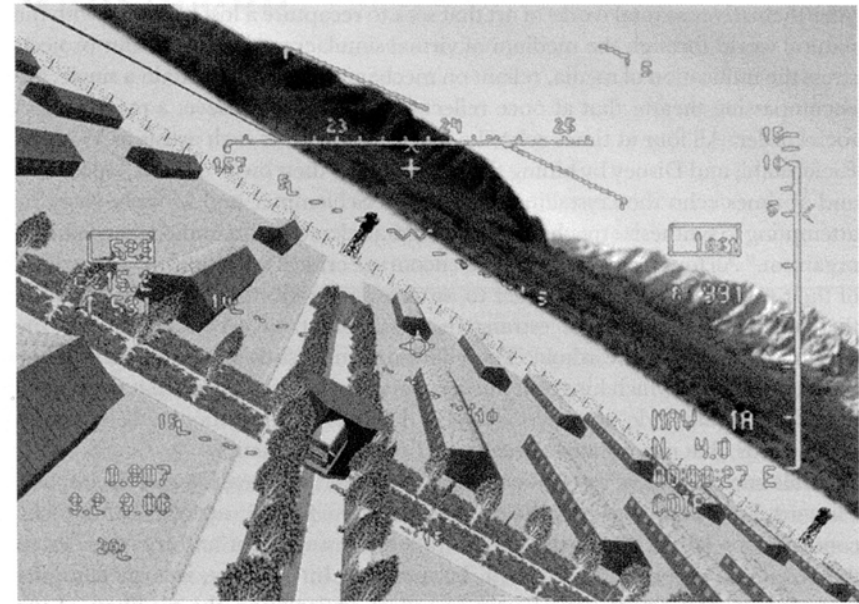


Figure 8.6 *Beyond Manzanar*: bomber perspective.

developed.” The second “fall” from the garden, then, takes the self-reflexive critique one step farther, exposing the ties between VR technology and modern warfare. In their guide to *Beyond Manzanar*, Thiel and Houshmand title this scene “Video/Game/War. The only way out of the garden.” But if the paradise garden itself was a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then it may be more precise to say that these two scenes – the garden and the video game – show two sides of the same aesthetic form, the edenic and the apocalyptic aspects of the total work of art.

This combination of reflexive formal critique with explicitly political content makes *Beyond Manzanar* a rarity among VR artworks. It indicates one Brechtian approach to cyber-arts, a form of dialectical virtuality. At times it exhibits many of the features of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: full immersion, unity of aesthetic media, longing for utopia. At other times it deconstructs those very features: estrangement effects pull us away from immersion, montage replaces organicism as a principle of unity, and paradise proves precarious and illusory. In the end, it draws our attention to the historical and economic foundations of virtual reality itself, to the uncomfortable relationship between the total work of art, mass media, and the military machine.

### The digital dawn

While *Aspects of Gaia*, *Osmose*, the Gates house, and *World of Warcraft* are quite different projects – ranging from VR to networked cyberspace, art installation to

mass entertainment – they all participate in a broadly Wagnerian genealogy. They offer themselves as total works of art that seek to recapture a lost harmony with the natural world through the medium of virtual simulacra. All of these four projects stress the unification of media, reliant on mechanics, in order to attain a single, all-encompassing theatre that at once reflects, and helps to achieve, a more perfect social order. All four at times echo the iconic strategies of such artists as Wagner, Riefenstahl, and Disney by hiding the mechanics of their own “organic” spectacle, and at times echo the crystalline strategies of Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy by attempting to synthesize mechanical and organic elements in a unified “mechanical organism.” All four projects, therefore, encourage critical reflection on the medium of their own creation only in order to assuage such reflection, and reincorporate the audience’s moments of estrangement (should they occur at all) into the “organic” totality of the whole. The continuation of such iconic and crystalline strategies, both of which hinge on the occultation of labor, suggests that networked digital media alone do not undo ideology. There is nothing about cyberspace, in other words, that necessitates a break with bourgeois aesthetics.

While such visions of restoration as those offered by Gates, Davies, Ascott, and Blizzard Entertainment may hold some promise for the artworks and social constructions of the future, their narratives of estrangement and return sidestep the economic and social realities of the medium. In this light, it is encouraging that some digital artists have begun to reflect critically on the tradition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to introduce estrangement devices that are not ultimately reincorporated back into the totality of the work. Such a Brechtian response to the total work of art is most clearly in evidence in *Beyond Manzanar*. Here, confinement rather than freedom is the subject, and a journey through the historical legacy of ethnic internment in America becomes also a meditation on the promise and danger of the total work of art. *Beyond Manzanar* gives us virtual gardens, but these gardens have weeds: we are given both hope and oppression, rootedness and dislocation. The gardens comfort, but not for long. They provide refuge, but only as stations on a journey that remains as resistant to totality as cyberspace itself.

## The Total Work of Art

*‘The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace is an outstanding accomplishment. Matt Smith has written an original and provocative analysis that “fast forwards” the Gesamtkunstwerk into the 20th and 21st centuries, demonstrating how the project of creating a total work of art has been taken up by very different artists working not only in theater but also film, theme parks, experimental happenings, and digital media. This work will recast how scholars approach the total work of art and help stimulate new research across several fields.’*

Jon McKenzie, *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA*

*‘In this groundbreaking study, Matthew Smith shows us that the ideal of a total work of art was the driving engine behind the greatest accomplishments and the scariest fantasies of modern culture. Weaving Wagner, Warhol, and virtual reality into a rich and compelling narrative, The Total Work of Art is theater studies at its best. This book, written with precision and flair, should be required reading for anyone interested in theater history. And who knows, it just might serve as a blueprint for the theater of the future.’*

Martin Puchner, *Columbia University, USA*

Richard Wagner, Oskar Schlemmer, Bertolt Brecht, Leni Riefenstahl, Walt Disney, Andy Warhol, Bill Gates: these disparate figures all represent important stages in the development of the total work of art. Impacting fields of theatre, architecture, music, literature and film, the tradition of the total work of art has exerted tremendous influence on modern culture, in a way that has so far been only partially understood.

The tradition of the total work of art has been studied primarily as a branch of the history of opera. This wide-ranging study, however, stresses the connection between the total work of art and developments in mass culture. Comparing Bayreuth and Disneyland, the Crystal Palace and the Bauhaus Totaltheater, Brecht’s Epic Theatre and Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, Matthew Smith finds that the total work of art has as much to do with mass media as with high art, with commercial spectacle as with music drama.

*The Total Work of Art* will be of interest to students and scholars across a broad range of disciplines, including theatre and performance studies, history of art, music history, cultural studies, and comparative modernism.

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