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## **Review: CyberMedienWirklichkeit. Virtuelle Welterschließungen**

### **Abstract:**

This paper shall give a review of Goedart Palm: CyberMedienWirklichkeit. Virtuelle Welterschließungen. München: Verlag Heinz Heise, 2004. 240 Seiten Broschur. 19,00 €

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## Short introduction

"Without virtuality there will not exist reality - mere virtuality constructs reality" suggests Goedart Palm at the very beginning of his book. With this declarative statement Palm, who holds a doctorate in law and practices law, begins his disputation of the relationship between reality and virtuality. He focuses on questions concerning virtuality which plays, in his view, a major role in the construction of reality and even constitutes preconditions for the existence of reality. The former reality is a product of ideas and imaginations, but in fact also the current reality. In doing so, virtuality is the interface between visualizing and behaviour.

For the explanation of this statement of affairs, Palm's book "CyberMedienWirklichkeit. Virtuelle Welterschließung" provides philosophical theories and theories of media. His ambition is to explain virtuality in combination with multitudinous practical examples, to give broadly a theoretical base for virtuality and to find an answer to the question of how we tap new realities or worlds by using technologies and cyberspace. In such a way, Goedart Palm has created a moving rumination on the meaning of virtuality. The book is based on a various number of essays and articles which were composed for the online magazine "Telepolis".

## Summary of the book's content

In the course of computerization and development of cyberspace we are situated in a new reality which exceeds our present imaginations about virtuality. This development demands a reflection of how to tap into new virtual worlds and about notions of virtuality. Due to the fact that in the present virtual situation, the subject of behaviour, the human being, gets a part of virtuality leading to the consequence that human beings will change over time. As a result, the human being can be newly-constructed, dissolved, or reversed into another virtual existence. This possibility of this development spawns a new theory of virtuality, as part of philosophy and a theory of media. This theory allows one to trace fragmentarily the changes of virtual worlds and reality and establish a hybrid base for an explanation of them. Palm does contend, as his title suggests, that there exists various kinds of "virtual openings of worlds", which are anchored in different forms of access to virtuality. These anchors are constituted by individual and shared memories.

The specific chapters of the book are split into two sections: "virtuelle Wirklichkeitslehre" and "virtuelle Passagen". The first one is a philosophical approach to virtuality and reality linked to technical aspects. This also includes an interpretation of cyberspace as the virtual opening of worlds. Palm conceives the first part as a depiction of the virtual lore of reality, which he justifies by reference to philosophical theories and theories of media related to technology. In Palm's view virtuality begins in everyone's own head: our brain filters, interprets and forms our cognition. Reality is an elusive phenomenon, but virtuality depends on reality and vice versa. Even the outcomes of philosophy are no more than variations of reality. Palm suggests that the beginning of the knowledge lies in the virtual opportunities of Socrates. He traces the development of the notion of virtuality, from Aristotle, Descartes, Nietzsche through Baudrillard. His philosophical "tour d'horizon" explains virtuality as "schöpferische Schnittstelle zwischen den Potenzen, dem Möglichen, Denkbaren, dem weiten Feld der Vorstellungen, Imaginationen und Konzepten auf der einen Seite und ihrer stofflichen Einlösung und konkreten Handlungspraxis auf der anderen."

Palm asks himself whether virtuality is the precondition and preliminary accomplishment of technology. His framed answer is 'yes', it does begin in such an understanding. Cyberspace he describes - in the extreme case - as a place where everything that is conceivable could be realized. The point is not that everything has to be realized. It is matter of preserving against the failure of an imagination through the absence of possibilities.

Thus, cyberspace offers some new possibilities for "virtual openings of the world". Cyberspace can split up in different forms when looking at virtuality. It can be described as a database of reality or, in other words, as a warehouse of knowledge. It can also be a virtual space of communication or a closed space of simulation. And, at the extreme, it can be seen as an autonomous creation. In these spaces, virtuality, reality and individual and collective memory were and are created. Hence, more than ever, cyberspace is difficult to describe with conventional patterns of explication. With appeal to notions of interactions, inter-relations and interdependences between reality and virtuality, cyberspace would be insufficiently defined by theories related to media. Palm suggests that these theories try to run after changing situations.

The second chapter of the book includes different fields of internet applications. In this section the

book gets more concrete. Palm describes virtuality by considering such technical examples as email, virtual museums and search engines. His analysis discusses various facets of virtuality in cyberspace. In the middle are individual applications like email or games, but there are also scientific applications like "SimNerv", a model of synthetic nerves of frogs, or search engines and artificial intelligence. These are all concrete examples of the "how" of the virtual opening of the world by using digital media.

## Evaluation

The articles and essays of the book, which respond to new questions about virtuality in cyberspace, were written mostly for the online magazine "Telepolis". By reason of this they all emerge based on various periods and backgrounds. In the book reviewed here they were published with sparse revisions. The overview of only some aspects, which are mentioned in the book, shows how many inspiring questions, analysis and thought-provoking impulses the book includes. Interested readers would discover even more and could deal with this in an affirmative or deprecating way. Both the advantage and disadvantage of the book lie in its character as a collection of articles over a period of time and circumstances. It is an advantage because of the possibility to address various kinds of aspects. It is a disadvantage because of elusiveness of any conclusions. Hence, "CyberMedienWirklichkeit" presents a composition of fragments of knowledge which Palm tries to bring together. They do not

coalesce as a visible whole and have consequently a patchy effect. But, this is maybe exactly what represents the results of the common knowledge of virtuality. By reading the book, to some extent, the differences of emerging approaches, the variety of themes and the repetition of similar lines of thoughts may interfere with its coherence. And another potentially aggravating factor is the multitudinous numbers of citations. In every case a lot of philosophers and scholars are consulted, and this continual referencing interrupts the flow of reading. Thus, the book is more to dip into rather than to be read in a stringent way. Even asserting this, by all means the book may be useful. If one does not expect a complete answers to questions about virtuality and/or a complete theory of virtuality, even so one can gain an insight through the fragmentary structure of virtuality by philosophical approaches and practical examples.