Michael Naimark

"X"ing the World in 80 Days

In 1873, Jules Verne published *Le Tour du Monde en Quatre-Vingts Jours* in both novel and serial form. Verne, already an accomplished and popular writer, captured the world's imagination with the title alone: circumnavigating the world in 80 days was at the time considered science fiction. It was such an incredible premise that real people reading the serial mistook it for an actual challenge and, like the fictitious people in the story itself, placed bets on whether its protagonist Phileas Fogg would be successful or not.

The premise seemed incredible because it was based on the newest technologies of the day. The story begins in the present, 1872 in London, with Mr. Fogg discussing with members of his social club an article in the Daily Telegraph about the opening of the final railway section in India to link the entire sub-continent. That event, which was actual, along with the opening of the Suez Canal and the completion of the first American Transcontinental Railroad, both three years earlier, did indeed enable regular people to travel around the world, possibly in 80 days.

Readers in London and throughout the Empire and the rest of the literate world (admittedly a small and privileged class) were mesmerized and seduced by the marvels that their state-of-the-art industrial technologies could provide. Throughout the narrative, Fogg showed little concern for the actual people or places through which he traveled: he was entirely focused on winning his wager with the club members. Verne's heroes were as much the rail engine and steamship as they were Fogg and his resourceful valet Passepartout. With only small dashes of compassion, anger, and (ultimately) love to keep things spicy, Jules Verne crafted a timely and relevant cliffhanger based almost entirely on these new, not-yet-familiar technologies.

That was then.

Last week's Daily Mail of Great Britain (11 July 2008) graced its front page not with a story exalting the wonders of new technology but with one about Google Earth's "Spy Cars" photographing "EVERY [their uppercase] front door in Britain," calling them a "burglar's charter" and a "gross invasion of privacy." Readers throughout the nation, and indeed the rest of the world (privileged or not), were as frightened and anxious as mesmerized and seduced. They could also read about oil prices increasing more than tenfold in under ten years, and how, for the first time in modern history, the North Pole ice may fully melt away this summer. Our relationship with new technologies and how they shape our world has become more complicated, with the dark side as visible as the brighter, rosier side from an earlier era.

Of course, the rosy side also exists today. Almost everyone privileged enough to be reading this right now has their own laptop, mobile phone, and probably their own blog. But suppose we were to take a fresh look at Jules Verne's famous narrative and ask: how would we redo it today? What are the new global-scale technologies and what do they enable? What's the wager? What constitutes global-scale meaning and relevance? If not "physical travel," what's today's "X" for "X"ing the World in 80 Days?

These are the questions quietly mulled over by our crew throughout the past year in preparation for *80+1: A Global Voyage,* an 80(+1) day actual event in Linz next summer for Linz 2009, European Capital of Culture.

One answer clearly has to do with the Internet and global networks in general, in that they

Michael Naimark

enable telematics and virtuality to replace physical travel. An 80-day virtual voyage around the world need not be physically contiguous, traveling from physical point to physical point by land, sea, or even air. "Hyper-travel" is possible, moving from place to place, perhaps based on theme rather than geography, as quickly as a cut in a movie. The technologies for live, interactive, immersive two-way experiences are worthy of creative exploration.

What, for example, is a "telematic window" today? A legendary project from the arts was called *Hole-in-Space,* produced in 1980 between New York and Los Angeles by the Electronic Café. Two physical sites, one in Lincoln Center and the other in a Century City shopping center, were connected via live satellite (very expensive at the time) to show projected, life-sized television images with live audio in both directions. *Hole-in-Space* lasted three evenings and—critical to its concept—was unannounced and unpublicized. An updated version could use global networks from satellite to mobile phone to Internet, and could use 3D and immersive capture and modeling processes, to provide a broad range of possibilities.

This range of possibilities extends beyond telematic windows. Imagine connecting people to people around the world via live ambient audio, or by the color of the sky, the temperature of the air or the currents of the wind; or by the beat of a heart, the warmth of a breath, or the touch of a hand. We envision *80+1* as a unique and important venue to explore these broader telematic forms of expression. We've organized an Open Call for Proposals and we're confident and excited about what the creative community will propose. We're looking forward to surprises!

But there's a deeper question to our voyage: how can we, like Jules Verne, use the technologies of the day to give a meaningful snapshot of the entire planet? What does that snapshot convey?

We have some ideas.

We'd like it to convey places representing where the global future is conceived and mastered, and where it's prevented and destroyed.

We'd like it to connect people to people and particularly children to children. Hence we're making a major effort connecting local schools in Linz with schools in our remote sites.

We wish to encourage the idea of "Local Pride" as something that exists everywhere on the planet, and we will begin with exchanges of music, food, and "stuff" (inexpensive everyday objects).

And, as our title suggests, there's a "+1" element to our voyage. It serves as both an actuality and a metaphor. The actuality is a one-day event in Linz on the 81st day (6 September 2009), intentionally fixed to coincide with the Ars Electronica Festival 2009, whose goal is to resolve and end our voyage. The "+1" metaphor is that we intend to do more, try harder, and take greater risks to contribute to the understanding of how to "X" the world in 80 days, today and in future times. We may even add small dashes of compassion, anger, and (ultimately) love to keep things spicy.