Perfect Thought

Beneath a gray sky with streaks of suffocating green highlighting the horizon, in the center of a plateau surrounded by the rich blue mountains of the Shenandoah Valley, lies the Perfect Thought Memory Access Training Center for Gifted Minds. It is small, only housing 300 students, which isn’t much when compared to most of the other massive Access Training Centers in Virginia, and looks like a brown puddle in the ground with roads coming out of it.

The main building of the training center is shaped like the combination of an H and a U, with the H’s rung lower than normal and the U’s curve bent into corners. It is located four miles west of the city of Elkton and although it has only one floor, the ceilings inside the building are twenty feet high. Its rigid walls span over six acres of land and are made from mud-brown colored bricks, held together by concrete and steel. A great ring of dead dirt encircles the building, and within that ring the bordering asphalt roads intersect with Route 33, which later crosses Route 340.

Painted brown with highlights of white, the building looks like a Post-Modern gingerbread house. Its roofs are black and gabled and its windows and sliding glass doors are wide, open and seemingly frameless. A parking lot is nestled between the building’s asymmetrical legs, stemming down from the adjacent road above it and providing ample parking for commuter students. Next to the lot is the exterior playground which is composed of a blacktop with basketball hoops and several four squares and a volleyball court and is used mainly by the younger kids (who aren’t into drugs yet). Due to the irresponsible disposal of toxic waste caused by an unprecedented spike in Harrisonburg’s population, the land surrounding the building is infertile, allowing nothing to grow. To solve this, the center has purchased a number
of synthetic trees and bushes and flowers that line the path leading up to the entrance. The fibers of the artificial plants feel real, the colors look genuine and the given off with a periodically irregular frequency sometimes smell better than the real thing. The only difference is that the fake plants don’t need nutrients to survive.

When passing through the sliding glass doors and into the entrance hall of the Perfect Thought training center, one notices the many obnoxious variety screens placed along the walls. They look like little rectangular mirrors, each about the size of a movie poster, and are linked to an image mainframe that regularly cycles through millions of different slides. Each image is expresses specialized information and reading them allows the students to constantly exercise their memorization abilities.

The floor of the entrance hall is covered in a once-white memory foam carpet, now stained yellow. Walking on it feels like a cloud as it sinks weightlessly beneath. A receptionist sits behind the semi-circular metal desk at the far end of the room. Before her are numerous leather chairs and circular and square glass tabletops and magazines and pamphlets advertising memory chips. On the desk is a clipboard with check-in times and the names of students written next to them. The receptionist looks bored. To the right of her desk, past a few potted synthetic philodendrons and dracaenas and fiddle leaf figs, is the hallway that leads to the rest of the rooms in the building.

Straight down the hallway are the dormitories. Though the students of Perfect Thought have many luxuries, ample living space is not one of them. Long and sporadic rows of triple bunk beds monopolize the room. Clothes and slip-on shoes and thermo-adaptive sleeping bags fill the floor. The dressers, closets and suitcases lining the perimeter of the room are overflowing
with student uniforms and data pads and athletic gear and memorabilia and vacuum-sealed food packages brought from home. The walls are a creamy beige color and have a few variety screens hanging from them; the floors tiles are maroon and made from rubber.

In the shower room next door, the drains in the floor drink up the water released through the adjustable propulsion systems that power each shower. In the bathrooms, numerous stalls and urinals and sinks and holes in the floor (for trash and urine) dispose of human waste; the bathrooms and shower room are gender divided. High-definition projectors and sound systems, along with replica pet terrariums that have screens on every visible side (and can be switched between snakes and turtles and iguanas and fish and gerbils and bearded dragons and water dragons and a few others) and theater-style seats accompany pool, poker and foosball tables in the lounge area. In the study room, self-adjusting recliners with built-in data pads allow students to study with maximum comfort and ease.

Down the hallway, to the left of the entrance hall is the library. Inside, a few select shelves carry what remains of the Perfect Thought book collection, which dwindles more and more each day. Instead there are cabinets and bookcases full of data pads and Brain War trophies and bags of used memory chips and old photos of past arena winners and then a bulky black console that is compatible with most memory chips and data pads and can be used to install software updates.

Gazing at the library, with its chestnut paneling and technology and nostalgic literature reserves, one spots a thick steel door in the back left corner of the room. Through the door is the research area, where certain exceptional students are chosen to be used in situation-specific studies that measure the effects of memory chips on the brain. There is a mouse maze in one
corner of the room, wherein a mouse with a memory chip is able to repeat his route through the maze multiple times. Nearby, scientists stare into a large fish tank full of goldfish—some with memory chips inserted, some without—and observe its effect on their interactions. A young psychotherapist with blonde hair and purple-rimmed reading glasses patiently guides a student through the learning process: 1. Memorize, 2. Recollect, 3. Discard, and then repeat the process over. Near the door to the lab, three students sit at desks too small for them, all holding the same unread novel: Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and eagerly await a researcher to say “begin” so they can start scouring through a sea of pages and an ocean of words.

Charged by the power of an underground nuclear generator, the lap equipment beeps and hums and whirrs noisily from one room over, where one scientist, wearing protective goggles, solders memory chips and circuit boards, all the while intermittently taking bites from a cheeseburger, that wasn’t supposed to eaten in the lab. Another scientist compares two Erlenmeyer flasks, each filled with a separate medicinal compound designed to treat and protect against the side effects of memory chip usage (like migraines, seizures, strokes, cerebral contusions, epidural hematomas, etc.), and then tests each one. A third scientist who has a big nose, thick brown eyebrows and a very sharp chin is looking through a high-definition digital hyperscope at a sample of bluish brain tissue taken from a woman who attempted an unauthorized memory chip installation on herself. The installation process is an advanced surgical procedure that involves cutting through the skull and brain and installing a receptor site deep within the brain tissue, where the memory chip is inserted and the incision is sewn back up. Like many who risk an unlicensed surgery, she died during it. Through the right side door of the lab is the simulation chamber.
Scenario simulations are used to train specially selected students in memory access. Region by region, school by school, students are chosen based on their scores in Brain Fight, the junior form of Brain War (which is an interstate intellectual competition that essentially measures a student’s ability to use their memory chip). If they graduate from the training program, they will become eligible to compete in Brain Wars.

The challenges in Brain Wars work sort of like an improvised trivia game, where only the first topic is chosen by draw and the rest follow the initial sequentially and exponentially as the knowledge required to compete continually builds on itself until only the best memorizers can keep up. Scenarios require the participant to be extremely specific, articulate and aware of entropic decay, because each successful scenario leads to a more difficult and complicated one.

The simulation chamber is fairly large, roughly the same size of the dormitories in height and width, and all the floors, walls and ceilings are coated in a layer of shining steel. Projectors are positioned all throughout the room at differing angles to allow for their projections to combine together and create artificial three-dimensional representations of the individuals and materials involved in any possible scenario. These projected individuals act in accordance with the scenario’s evolving fiction and perpetuate the participant’s use of materials as a means of progressing to the next (and more competitive) level of difficulty. After a stint in the simulation chamber, the door leading into the pharmacy is often quite tempting.

A tiny silver bell rings each time the pharmacy’s door opens. The man standing behind the marble counter doesn’t look like a pharmacist—he doesn’t even look like he likes being a pharmacist—but he is the pharmacist. He wears a tight striped blue and white one-piece weatherproof suit beneath his white lab coat, which is open and unbuttoned. His terrible black
chest hair protrudes out and around his spandex tank top, which must have exceptionally comfortable stitching to be worn so freely, and on his feet are sparkly blue cowboy boots with white embroidery. The strangest thing about him, aside from the cowboy boots, is his beard. Well, it isn’t a beard. It, at first glance, seems like a beard. A curious beard, but a beard nonetheless. But upon closer examination, what had looked like a beard was revealed to be something so much worse: a neard (neck-beard). He had grown it out, for months probably, possibly even years, always shaving his cheeks and his jawbone and his chin and above his lips, and in one final act of social lobotomy, he decided he would wrap his three foot long neard around his neck every morning of the year like a starched ruff that only an insane anachronistic Shakespeare would wear.

Behind him on either side the walls are lined with cabinets stocked full with multiplicities of multivitamin jars and jugs made from orange, clear, and brown plastic with white lids and light blue, green, and red labels filled with concentrated vitamin doses and supplements and additives and powder for mineral shakes and memory chip medicines and ointments and supplements and the gold-plated Lazarus syringes that sometimes bring the dead back to life and BULLETPROOF® Brand condoms that are solid black and tend to break in ten minutes or less. Anyone sly enough to notice would see the rectangular countertop piece—three feet wide by two feet long—covered with a knockoff marble cloth that is obviously frayed from being sawed lengthwise, to reveal newly rotting wood beneath the artificial rock. Under the panel—which is removable—beneath the candy wrappers and empty cigarette packs and old newspapers, sits twenty vacuum-sealed bags, each filled with a cocktail of amphetamines and codeine and benzodiazepines and MDMA and ketamine and PCP and Vicodin and acid tabs and morphine;
because of heightened smoking regulations, pills have become the most popular drug of choice for students at Perfect Thought.

Through the men’s side of the bathroom is the dining area. Everything is designed to look like an old diner from the 50s, with red, white and blue Cadillacs converted into booths and square silver tables highlighted with red and surrounded by white chairs with blue seats. Behind the red-lit countertops are the chefs, wearing tall white toques and double-breasted jackets and checkered pants. A few seem to be working hard, but most of them are standing around, going from the back of the kitchen to the front and back again, looking overstaffed, underworked, but most importantly overly concerned with not having their slacking observed.

The final room in the Perfect Thought Training Center is an important one. It is composed of the competition arenas, where students are able to practice and prepare for the Brain Wars by competing with each other. It is an open room, and in every corner as well as in the center of the room there are five small circles each drawn around two podiums facing each other. It is in these five arenas that students learn the true lessons of the Perfect Thought Training Center; where the true limitlessness of human thought is simultaneously challenged and honed into such a hyper-real science that true genius becomes the ultimate sport and knowledge the ultimate athleticism.

However, if our learning is being simulated, such as in this case, and the true purpose of that education is not to learn information, but to learn how to learn information, to learn how to memorize and recall and forget information to make room for more just to forget it again, and if the students sent to this center have been chosen due to their success in the junior Brain Fights, which they have and therefore have the potential to receive Brain War certification, after which
they will have a much better chance of getting into a collegiate information school, where they would continue their study of information memorization, graduate with a degree in it, and begin a career in information memorization—a career stemmed by the pursuit of the perfection of a practice that is, in itself, hyper-real.

Following the successive phases of the image as outlined by Baudrillard, what began with the good reflection of the basic reality of education, became the masking and conversion of that reality into an emphasis on memorization, and then the masking of the absence of that basic reality by turning education into a sport, wherein the process of memorizing, recollecting and forgetting became what is valued and tested, rather than the learning of information in and of itself.

This place, as a metaphor, represents the use of information on a short-term basis, and the devaluing of information on a long-term basis. And it was the idea of “Brain Wars”, of learning and remembering and forgetting and being rewarded for doing so in an effective manner that was the simulacrum. So far distanced from the original phase of the image was this new one that it was something new entirely, and something entirely different from the original idea.