introduction

Vahid Vahdat

> The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of [Virtual Reality,] is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality . . . a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist.
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> —André Bazin[1]

A senior architecture professor of mine used to tell us that overlooked experts on spatial relationships are cats! "They fully understand space hierarchies, borders, and thresholds," she would say, "and use that skill to occupy the corners and edges of the space that would position them in a state of observational power—secure from potential threats." Architecture students learn early in their studies that such anecdotes are appreciated for their provocative power, rather than their factual accuracy. This story, and maybe what comes after in this introduction, is such.

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1. André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema: Volume II*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 23-27. Note that in this excerpt, I have replaced "cinema" with "Virtual Reality."

It has become a redundant but necessary task to rethink the idea of the virtual, especially as new potentials for epistemic raptures arise with each emerging form/technology of mediation.[2] With the rapid development of VR technologies, previous theories of virtual space can benefit from being revisited, dusted, polished, and refurbished. One well-exhausted approach to define the virtual is looking into its opposite realm in the hope of detecting a defining border where the two collide—this collision between the virtual and the nonvirtual was the premise of the first book. But situating the virtual in a dichotomous relation with the real, the physical, or the built has been a problematic approach that has rightly been contested in the literature. But, what if, as the "Physical/Virtual Continuum" section in Book One asks, one starts at the border with a deliberate disregard for all that constitutes the exclusivity of a supposedly comprehensive definition of the virtual? What if the virtual is no longer seen in a hierarchical relationship with the real that positions it as inferior and secondary? What if the relationship is flattened and the virtual is no longer dependent on mimicking an external, more "authentic" reality? Moreso, what if, in addition to the ontological autonomy of the virtual, one positions it at the center of theorization and thereby pushes the non-virtual into the periphery? In an attempt to contemplate these questions, Book Two catwalks the thin fade border at the edge of the virtual world, with some disregard to whatever lies outside, in opposition to how the "Liminal Encounters" section in Book One dwelled on the threshold between the two.

This approach thus assumes an interiority inherent to the virtual. The virtual—whether a Homerian epic, an impressionist painting, a choose-your-own-adventure novel, a pornographic anime, or a hyper-casual game app—affords its subject with an internal logic/narrative that is occupied through experience. This immersive quality has a three-dimensional and embodied quality that feels rather spatial. That perhaps explains the emphasis these three books put on the interiority of the virtual.

2. See Deniz Tortum, "Embodied Montage: Reconsidering Immediacy in Virtual Reality," (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016), 19; and Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* (Beacon Press, 1986).

It is no wonder why artistic and filmic references to the virtual often find a territorial representation. While exiting the border of the virtual can assume a variety of forms—a red pill, perhaps, that factures *The Matrix* (1999)—too frequently does it find an architectural expression: climbing a staircase in *The Truman Show* (1998), sliding through a hole in the wall in *Being John Malkovich* (1999), jumping from a high-rise rooftop in *Vanilla Sky* (2001), or stepping into a wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005).

With emerging technologies of virtuality, the modes of mediation are becoming less visible in a never-ending quest to achieve an absolute, subjective presence within the immersive experience of virtual interiorities—a phenomenon that media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "immediacy."[3] Technologies of virtual reality are soon to achieve a recreation of human experience with an artificial interiority that is indistinguishable from reality,[4] a desire that Deniz Tortum, a contributor to these books, indicates to be the intention of the pioneers of the technology.[5]

The intention of the pioneers of the technology, as I discuss elsewhere,[6] is the same logic that French film critic and theorist André Bazin uses in *The Myth of Total Cinema* to justify his advocacy of "objective realism." "In their imaginations," according to Bazin, "they [the pioneers] saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world."[7] These inventors, Bazin continues, "conjure up nothing less than a total cinema

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3. Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 18.

4. Ibid.

5. See for example *Wired* magazine's interview with Palmer Luckey, the inventor of the Oculus Rift, and the TED Talk by Chris Milk, a public leader in the field of virtual reality. Deniz Tortum, *Embodied Montage*, 17-18.

6. Vahid Vahdat, "Meta-Virtuality: Strategies of Disembeddedness in Virtual Interiorities." *Journal of Interior Design* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12230.

7. Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," 25.

that is to provide that complete illusion of life."[8] Is the suppression of modes of mediation, including the ever-thinning of the screen and continuous minimization of the VR apparatus, not a reflection of the desire to achieve "total virtuality"?

This totalizing immersivity of VR technologies in constructing the perfect illusion of the outside world should be contextualized within the consumerist nature of our societies, where, as Jean Baudrillard observed, the hyperreal order of simulation extends to our very cities.[9] Not only has it become harder to discover the edge of mediated spaces, represented in the wireframe landscape of digital simulation in *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), it has also become increasingly more challenging to exit the "entangled orders of simulacra."[10] An inability to imagine alternatives to mediated spaces keeps the subjects suspicious of the possibility of any occupiable exteriority—not unlike the infinite darkness of the abyss surrounding *Dark City* (1998)—and ultimately consumes their will and ability to escape the mediated interiority, quite like the gravitational force that keeps the guest from leaving in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).

The need to reimagine utopian visions has been examined in Book One[11] and will continue to be discussed here,[12] but the emancipatory potential of resisting the immersive quality of virtual interiors requires an awareness about the mediation involved in a virtual experience, which I refer to as "metavirtuality."[13] It is in this book and under the section titled "(Dis)embeddedness" that strategies of un-immersion, which bring the mediating role of virtual technology to the forefront, are introduced. The virtual expansion of physical space in immersive theatre productions, as Bakk explains, is possible because the audience is immersed in fictional

8. Ibid.
9. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 13.
10. Ibid.
11. See, for example, Konstantinos Dimopoulos, "Imagining Cities Through Play."
12. See, for example, Anna Klingmann, "Rescripting Saudi Arabia: The Curation of a National Metaverse" and Vahid Vahdat, "The Second Fall of Man: A Filmic Narrative of Consumerist Interiorities in WALL·E."
13. Vahdat, "Meta-Virtuality."

interiorities.[14] Mirrors in games, as Gerber discusses, breaks the fourth wall of the virtual experience.[15] Disturbances in the familiar causal logic external to a virtual world, as Tortum describes, can produce an alienating effect.[16] "The Second Fall of Man" similarly engages in the discussion of discarding interiorized virtual distractions by showing its ecological consequences.[17]

The socio-political implications of mediated interiorities of the virtual are, however, discussed under the section of "Commoditized Virtualities." Freitag looks into the selective nature of paratexts in theme parks as a means to represent the sanitization of their undesirable histories;[18] Mittermeier unearths the colonial ideology underlying the practices of transmedia storytelling and participatory culture, especially at the intersection of media and tourism;[19] Kokai and Robson discuss the collision of virtual experiences in occasions when the multiplicity of narratives are mapped over the same site;[20] and Klingmann explores themed cities as agents of neoliberal economic policies and nationalist ideologies by studying cases in Saudi Arabia.[21] Ontological discussions of virtuality will be left for last, as Book Three offers a critical outlook to anthropocentric theorizations of virtuality.

14. See Ágnes Karolina Bakk, "The Hunter and the Horrors: Impossible Spaces in Analog and Digital Immersive Environments."
15. See Andri Gerber, "The Mirror Chiasm: Problematizing Embeddedness in Video Games Through Mirrors."
16. The concept of *verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) was introduced by the German dramatist-director, Bertolt Brecht, as a strategy to detach the audience from becoming emotionally consumed in the play. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 136.
17. see Vahdat, "The Second Fall of Man."
18. See Florian Freitag, "The Happiest Virtual Place on Earth: Theme Park Paratextuality."
19. See Sabrina Mittermeier, "Transmedia Storytelling in Disney's Theme Parks: Or How Colonialism Underpins Participatory Culture."
20. See Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, "Competing Interiorities in the Theme Park Space."
21. See Klingmann, "Rescripting Saudi Arabia."

The quirky-cat approach used in this introduction—mooning over the content of the book, rubbing against chapters, and selectively kneading some of the themes—is meant to provide a territorial view of *Virtual Interiorities* that helps the reader navigate through the chapters without spilling the depths, nuances, and complexities that each author offers.

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