Mubi.com, 16/10/2018, « Novel Perspectives: Experiences in Virtual Realities »
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# Novel Perspectives: Experiences in Virtual Realities

Looking for the state—and the true potential—of virtual reality at a pavilion dedicated to the art at the Venice Film Festival.

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16 OCT 2018

*Spheres*

Virtual reality is really a sly misnomer, for as a survey of the variety of experiences at hand (or eye?) in the Second edition of the VR pavilion in 75th Venice International Film Festival reveals—there is nothing more *real* about VR than any other artistic experience.

The VR experiments, trials, and installations at Venice's VR pavilion run the gamut of the possible: from the most banal mainstream promo plug *A Discovery of Witches*, to the awe-inspiring creative science trilogy, *Spheres: Chorus of the Cosmos*, to the thoughtful, art-inspired *VR_I*. A two-day stroll through the once

plague-infested halls of the VR pavilion (the 30 virtual reality worlds are installed in a leprosarium on its own island, Lazzaretto Vecchio) is a good introduction into the potentials and qualities of this new art and technology during its still-awkward nascence.

## THE PRIMACY OF SPACE

And birth is indeed the visual simile intended in *In the Cave*, a drawn-out meandering work, which takes fifteen minutes to arrive at the unsurprising reveal that a voyage through a dripping wet cave was in fact a travel through a birth canal. An introduction to VR that should reveal that the technological experience itself is not sufficient to please or interest, but only the enhances the triteness of a poor idea.

Yet what *In the Cave*, like many others works from Venice's program makes clear, is that VR is not cinema, and its works are not films. In fact, the VR pavilion is more easily imaginable as part of Venice's architecture biennale or art biennale than the film festival. Virtual reality is not even an offspring of cinema—which, like literature or music, is fundamentally an art of time—but clearly an art of space whose progenitors are architecture and sculpture, as well as the video game. The primarily spatial nature of VR is explicit in the pavilion's works, each of which provided an opportunity for an immersive experience in a constructed digital space, one which goes beyond a solely visual experience. Unlike cinema, constructed from a series of framed still images, seen from a mono-focal static perspective, VR is the opposite of all these things—the perspective is fundamentally mobile, bi-focal, and "unframed," yet VR also is a continuity of cinema in that it takes the illusion of a world created for the user that is at the heart of film to its ultimate extreme—not only is the VR world created for the user, but it is created for the user *alone*.

Although VR is often touted as a fundamentally visual procedure, any experience with VR makes evident the importance of sound, even more so than in cinema because poorly designed sound on VR can undermine the visual experience. Without sound, there is no space.

Images are always suspect, are always imbued with the uncanniness of the unreal, but sound always feels phenomenologically real. And only by creating a 360° space in sound can the illusion of space become complete.

## AN EXPERIENTIAL ARTIFICE

*Awavena*

How many times have we heard people exclaim how "real" visual artifices are? First was the uncanniness of the photographic image, and then that of the moving image, of the color image, of the 3D image, and now of VR. Although the tendency our video-saturated times is to separate the senses and privilege sight, and to declaim every new technological breakthrough in cinema as a step closer to an ideal reproduction of the real, in reality the phenomenological experience of the world is no more reproduced in VR than in any other art—it remains artifice in its entirety.

In a way, ironically the fundamentally immersive quality of VR only drives home the duality of the artistic experience and the virtuality of the non-material of which all the works are composed. At moments the VR experience induces a drug-like trance, but once its ends, the realization of its artifice comes rushing back, an effect even more pronounced when the VR work is tedious. Drifting through stalactites and stalagmites *In the Cave* at an agonizingly slow pace whose speed and path are unchangeable (the only interactive movement is your ability to look around) can only provoke feelings of helplessness and terror, like that of being stuck in a body over which you have no control.

With images that are essentially digital, the virtuality of VR is ever evident, and in this its appellation rings true. Yet, although VR as a form and technique is currently adept at presenting digitally constructed works, it still has a long technological struggle ahead of it if it is ever to reproduce the real.

The limitations of VR using cinematic capture as a source is evident in *Awavena*, a work which attempts to convey the experience of the Amazonian Yawanawa tribe's first female shaman's formative experiences with a sacred hallucinogenic plant. *Awavena* boldly mixes live images with digitally composed ones to attempt

to faithfully translate a mystical drug-induced experience across cultural and perceptive borders. But the work is far too technocratic to translate the world as experienced through a sacred drug. *Awavena* explores an interesting possibility, but the work never successfully translates the bizarre feeling of otherness that hallucinogens impart upon the taker, possibly because of VR's limitation to two senses, trying to transduce into the visual and aural what is essentially a physiological and spiritual experience.

Particularly weak are the 360° video-captured images, which only re-project captured images them as a convex ball, whose angles tapers oddly to the corners. Finally, in order for the live images to work at all, a central fixed-point perspective must be imposed (in *Awavena*'s case, a hanging swing-chair) in order to properly perceive its space, a severe limitation which works against two of VR's most potent capacities—that of interaction, and that of the mobile perspective.

There may yet be some future for live-capture VR—it's not difficult to imagine a day when live-capture images will be successfully mapped on 3D objects in post-production, to create an experience that reproduces documentary images captured from the real world, but that day is still far away.

An indigenous story is the core narrative of second work: *The Roaming - Wetlands,* a tale of two children being pursued by murderers through a swampy region. *The Roaming*'s experiment is to mix the VR experience with the physical experience of the world: the player walks barefoot over an actual a patch or waterlogged turf to evoke the swamp; there are physical objects and characters in the room to touch that to compliment the VR objects; et cetera. The experiment, however, discovers that its hypothesis is erroneous—physical touch not only does not add to the VR experience, it actively detracts from it. The vast discrepancy between the artifices of the VR phenomenon and fullness of the physical one only how serves to highlight how uncannily immersive and limited the VR experience sometimes is; every encounter with the material world breaks any suspension of disbelief, and violently so. Being touched while wearing a VR helm, when you cannot see the hands that grope, rips you out of the VR experience brutally and thoroughly in a way that leaves the body in discomfort.

## INTERACTIVE BODIES

*Buddy VR*

The real core of VR's potential seems to be in the potential for physical interaction with a virtual space, a stroke of genius conceived of over a decade ago in the Nintendo Wii. And all of the works of any interest at the VR pavilion were in one way or another interactive.

The more linear VR works which attempt to imitate film like *Fresh Out* (a story about the life of underground carrots) or *Crow* (a retelling of a Native American legend) fail, for the straight narratives they propose are at odds with the very material VR creators have to work with—digital space. The works propose "films" (i.e. works in time) in a medium in which space is in fact capital. Watching a non-interactive linear work in a VR glasses feels like have your gaze locked in a room, bombarded with pixels, with little or no control over the experience, a little like the mind-cleansing torture that Kubrick's Alex is obliged to undergo in *A Clockwork Orange.*

The undeserving prizewinner *Buddy VR,* an unimaginative, derivative Disney-like creation about a squirrel befriending a mouse, illustrates just how mind-numbingly empty of an experience VR can be. Although the work is listed as an "interactive" experience in the Venice catalog, its only interactivity is to require the player to shake the joystick at a predetermined moment, to force one sole real pre-programmed effect. Infantile in conception and hokey in narrative *Buddy* VR's story goes hand-in-hand with its false interactivity, and it takes the intelligence and the will of any player in contempt (even a 6-year-old, which is the presumed target market, would be disappointed in his lack of agency in such an experience).

Conversely, the more interactive a work is, the more pleasurable it is, and more "open" of a world it offers, the more inspiring it becomes. *Kobold,* a work of horror that is more pure video game than anything else, resembles a stripped down

version of early PC adventure games, like the *King's Quests* or *Space Quests*, where the game's objects which can be taken (key, card, letter, photo) and "interacted" with, albeit in a very basic manner, to move forward with the narrative. The interactive possibilities in *Kobold* are extremely limited (all the actionable objects are highlighted; only one action is possible; et cetera), but at least with some real interaction; the player is allowed to explore the world at his or her own's pace, even if the world explored is one we have all seen before. We only have to await the development of VR's depth and complexity to get true open worlds like that of *Skyrim* or *Red Dead Redemption*, and there is no doubt that this future is already on its way.

## TOTALITARIANISM AND LIBERATION

*Make Noise*

With the captive gaze as virtual reality's fundamental pre-requisite yet another fundamental divergence between cinema and VR emerges. To have ones eyes and ears locked up in a VR headset is an act both of perfection of the individual gaze and of its isolation, a gaze so vastly different from what has been the fundamentally shared experience of cinema. VR reveals the rational conception of the experiential individual *par excellence,* and hand-in-hand with that individualism comes a concomitant obligation to provide choice to the player (or at least the illusion thereof). In VR, the potential for pleasure seems directly linked to measure of that choice—interaction is an expression of will, and without at the very least the illusion of interaction, VR works can only evoke feelings of helplessness and frustration (you can walk out of a bad movie, but how do you "walk out" of images being projected into your eyeballs?). The most powerful, enjoyable, and liberating VR experiences of the future will likely be those that not only give the player the

power to choose (and thus act), but the power to express their will in ways the would be impossible or unimaginable in the material world.

Yet without that choice, the VR experience can be fundamentally the opposite—negative oppressive, totalitarian—of which the well-meaning *Make Noise* is a perfect example. *Make Noise*, a work that revolves around the foundation of the suffragette movement in England illustrates how experience without choice is oppression. *Make Noise* places the user in a public forum, exhorting each player to shout words like "rage," "revolt," et cetera, in order to construct a virtual statue of a suffragette with revolutionary hammer in hand. The politically-charged work is simplistic, reductive, authoritarian and politically correct in the worst possible sense, leaving no space for discussion, for forum, for ideas, for critique. *Make Noise*, in using totalitarian means to impose its ideology, becomes exactly the opposite of the progressive idea it pretends to represent. The illusion of interactivity that allows no actual choice (there is no way to “not build” the statue) is representative of an ivory-tower bourgeois culture which wishes to impose its morals on the entirety of society to the exclusion of any criticism (a perspective which has been a main cause for the right-wing backlash of the last years).

If lack of choice is the most authoritarian of VR’s potentials, one of its most liberating capacities is that of being immersed in the experience of another body, a fundament which at least half of the works in the Venice program seemed to seize upon, instinctively or otherwise. It is easy to imagine VR experiences of other sexes, other races, other genders; even having the perspective be changed to an alien, an animal, a machine, an object, as a path towards both liberation and understanding.

**CHANGING PERSPECTIVE—THE IMAGE OF THE BODY**

*VR_I*

*VR_I*, a multi-person installation, and part of the "best of" program at Venice, was in many ways festival's most experimental and artistic VR work. The experience is a fundamentally social one (up to five users wearing computer-backpacks and free to roam within a delimited space) which allows movement in space, even if the interactivity is only that of bodily motion and the experience never allows any effect on the objects or characters within it. The five players start off in a crystal cave, which is revealed to be a rock when it is lifted by a giant hand of a virtual dancer. There is, truth be told, a Lilliputian pleasure in having the body reduced or expanded in size.

This insightful work seizes naturally upon many of VRs fundamental strengths. *VR_I*embodies the experience of space to create a reflexive world, which is experienced on several levels (and at several sizes). Rather than working against VR's nature, it isolates itself to VR's fundaments—immersive picture sound as the core of the experience—by citing other works of art: land art, architecture, painting as well as dance. Finally, *VR_I* is also wise enough to play on the potential of perspective change. The dancers which enter the visual space as giants, transform into miniature avatars, and as the experience remains free and mobile (one can spend the entire time of the experience staring at the virtual Picasso on the wall if one likes) it presents a space filled with intellect and wonder.

And wonder is exactly what *Spheres: Chorus of the Cosmos* provokes, when it takes the potential of perspective to its limit—offering the player the chance to witness the universe as a celestial being, immersed in the deep blackness of space, surrounded by the wonder of the stares cosmos. Any body is effaced, invisible. Perspective is reduced to a point and below your flesh-and-blood feet, above your bony skill, there is nothing but stars—a gaze and its encounter with the universe just like an omnipresent being might look at his creation with contentment.

The immersive visual experience of *Spheres* places the perspective inside a digital sculpture, which also has the very science-oriented purpose of re-imbuing the player with a renewed sense of wonder for the universe in which we too often forget we live in. The harmonious musical planets can be pushed around with like marbles, can be peered into to reveal their inner music—and this imaginative experience succeeds more than any other in conveying a childlike sense of wonder, and the experience merited its well-deserved prize (Best Virtual Reality).

## SOLITUDE AND COMMUNION

As wondrous as the VR experience can sometimes be, a measure of irony always accompanies it, an organic sense of ridicule for all the technological apparati required to generate this illusion. Spending a few minutes watching others immersed in VR experiences can be embarrassing, frightening, and hilarious all at once. Players stand in place, cables linking their heads to the ceiling, oblivious to the world, cut off from its sensorial experience, like so many solitary androids, hands flapping with fright at invisible monsters, feet probing the floor with the cautious fumbles of the blind. Yet, the VR experience is never so immersive that you are not at moments aware of the outside world, of the possibility of being watched. Despite having two senses (sight and sound) cut off and isolated, one never really forgets that there are others wandering about these once-leprous halls. And the eerie discrepancy between the physical and the virtual (you cannot help but think sometimes how weird you must look from the outside) is also a part of the VR experience.

Funny or ironic as this may be, it emphasizes the very solitary and individualist nature of VR, so far removed from the pleasure of shared emotion of the theater of cinema. In virtual reality experiences, the laughter and sadness of horror and ridicule are hermetically sealed and the individual experience of the rational age is brought to its apogee—solitary, confined, restrained individuals immersed in the private fantasy.

That is why perhaps those few VR experiences which are fundamentally social expose virtual reality's full potential. *VR_I,* in allowing all its players to move and explore in a unified space, is one example. Another is the brilliantly conceived*Eclipse*—a space puzzle experience which requires two teams of two players to collaborate in order to determine the fate of abandoned spaceship's missing crew before it all blows up (the core narrative is an homage to

Tarkovsky's *Solaris*). The experience is a fun, visually and narratively rich race against the time, suffused with images inspired by *Solaris* or *Star Trek*, and visual and spatial puzzles akin those of *Myst* or *Metroid*. *Eclipse* embraces a gameplay that requires camaraderie, cooperation, communication to create one of Venice' most pleasurable experiences, one that exhibits the full rich potential of VR's future.

## THE FUTURE OF VR: PRODUCTION, POLITICS, POTENTIALS

Beyond the VR creations themselves, there is a worrying fundament to this experience, so technological in nature. Capital-intensive and technology-intensive VR will run the danger of reinforcing the power privilege of a technocratic and moneyed elite minority, and can leave behind the lived experience of that far vaster majority of the global populace. Given the apparati necessary for the experience, and their high cost, access is bound to be anything but universal, never mind the creation of the works.

Yet there is hope as well, for more choice-infused experiences, for experiences which attempt to transduce incomprehensible experiences (the politics of the other, changes in identity, impossible experiences, interaction with the avatars of distant beings, or immersion into yet unforeseen visual and aural spaces). VR is a technology full of potential, and one of which a good portion will have nothing to do at all with the artistic experience—VR can easily be used for pedagogical experiences (learning through doing) and therapeutic experiences (imagine talking to an image of yourself).

Yet, as is clear from the banal unimaginative and authoritarian works that VR, being so immersive, also leaves wide open a great potential for propaganda and manipulation, especially since the experience is so often isolated and solitary. Not so much because of a stronger resemblance to anything real, as much as the devices required, or the potency of the immersion, as strong as a frail body steeped in an alien gel to evoke a virtual existence.

Given the technological and financial investment necessary, and given the entities which control those technologies and finances, it too easy to imagine a dystopic future which only validates the worst paranoias of Philip K. Dick. So, when you tire of the novelty of the immersive experience, maybe it will be a good time to put down that VR headset, break out that VHS of *Total Recall* or *Videodrome* from your parents attic, pop it into a VCR attached to an old flickering tube screen, and enjoy the imaginative thrills of an image of the virtual dystopias which still await.