

VIRTUALITY VERSUS SIMULACRUM

Tamás Seregi

Eötvös Loránd University

seregitamas@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In the paper I focus on the concept of virtual art gone so viral recently. My statement is that in the literature discussing the concept of 'virtual' in art the word is either undefined or used in a way which makes it interchangeable with simulacrum. The main aim to be achieved by most of the art works in question is *immersion* which is, as I have tried to show, is exactly the opposite of what is to be achieved by virtuality. It is a *fake* presence in the absence, unlike virtuality that can be defined by the *real* absence in the presence. To prove my statement I return to the history of art prior to new media arts in order to show that the new technological devices used by new media art works are not only unnecessary for making an art work virtual but sometimes they literally hinder it from being able to become something more than the modernist presentism and the society of the spectacles imposed upon both the art works and the beholder.

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In the last two decades we have been accustomed to using the concepts of 'virtual reality' and 'virtual art' without truly knowing what exactly 'virtual' in these expressions should mean. Looking up, for example, the book entitled *Virtual Art* written by Oliver Grau, one of the most famous proponents of these concepts, we are surprised to find no definition of the 'virtual' in the whole text. Instead, what we get is another concept introduced, that of 'immersion', referring to the experience of the beholder encountering a piece of 'virtual art'. Why can the word 'virtual' be found in the title of Grau's book and how can it be connected, if at all, to the concept of immersion? To learn that, we first have to make it clear what 'virtual' really means.

Instead of getting lost in the long history of the concept it may suffice here to recall the definition given by Gilles Deleuze in his *Difference and Repetition*. 'The virtual', he claims, 'is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual. Exactly what Proust said of states of resonance must be said of the virtual: "Real without being actual, ideal

without being abstract"; and symbolic without being fictional.' (p. 208) Three pages later he adds a very important note to the definition. In it he says that 'the only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible. The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is "realization". By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality in itself. The process it undergoes is that of "actualization".' (p. 211)

The problem with this definition is that it is only a formal one. The real definition would be the following: something is virtual if it exists in the way that its spatio-temporal coordinates are indefinable. It means that we are fully aware of its existence without exactly knowing where and when it takes place. This indefinability is due, however, not to a lack in our knowledge but the elusiveness of the virtual as such. Here elusive is something that emerges from the thing itself and is in accordance with its own nature.

Let's take an example, say, that of a digital image. Digital images are often called virtual images. But why exactly so? Needless to say, it is not because they are only possible images. Digital images are a special and particular kind opposed to analogue images and they exist to the same extent as the latter. Then they are perhaps *virtual*, we could say, because their reference is inscrutable and we can never know if what they show is something real or not. The problem with this answer is that if this were the case then, by the same logic, we might as well take not only the digital images, but all paintings or sculptures depicting something as virtual. But we do not. The more appropriate answer is that we call a digital image virtual in as much as it exists in a medium which enables it to circulate at an almost infinite speed and to show up absolutely anywhere and everywhere, while nobody knows where, when and by whom it was made, how many times it was altered, in how many versions it exists etc. We can find it in many places, whereas we can never be positive about it having been definitively deleted. The only way to stop its permanently changing life is to actualize it: to download or to print it out, i.e. to transpose it into a medium, which

puts an end to the endless circulation and in which an actual token of the virtual image is stranded.

What did we exclude following Deleuze's definition from the meaning of virtual? Again, the virtual is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract and symbolic without being fictional. What do these distinctions mean and what feature may join them together? The first part of the definition, i.e. the 'real without being actual' means that the virtual has no place in the world at all. It has no permanent connections to anything and has no meaningfully structured history. It cannot be seen or felt or found or intentionally made. It is beyond experience. It can only be met by its traces and symptoms. The virtual comes always too early (fancy, utopia, fantasy) or too late (myth, trauma, fossil, archive), or if it eventually comes up in the present will never be embedded in the stream of time (event, tragedy, comedy, love, invention, creation). That is to say, the virtual is outside of the actual reality, it is not a component of the actual world (including its past, its anticipatable future and its unrealized possibilities), for it is not a component of the world *as a meaningful whole*. What does the second part of the definition, i.e. the 'ideal without being abstract' mean? Ideal is something that has too many connections. Ideal is a multiplicity, an aggregate of many inconsistent perspectives. Abstraction, by contrast, means to spot and pull out some features from the world ignoring all the others in order to put them in a relation from which they can develop their own system. The ideals never constitute a system, a second world. That's why they can remain both closer to the world and freer from it. They are faced like *problems* in the world, like incomprehensibilities inside a comprehensible whole which must be solved, eased, cured for the sake of the whole's consistence. It doesn't fit in it and if it does only at the expense of having been narrowly and tightly connected to the world and becoming actual or conversely, of having lost all its connections in disappearing as a problem (we can 'let the problem go' – as it is said).

The abstract being refilled with concreteness without, however, rejoining to the real world, makes a new world be born, that of the fictional. Symbolic without being fictional – that was the third part of the definition cited. Fictional is something that has an own world equipped with laws, histories, facts, characters of its own. Fictional world, however, is not connected to the real one at all. Its only endeavor is to hold the outside world back and to keep its particular whole together. Fictional is a world disconnected from the real world which still can be a self-sufficient, full-blown world in itself. Symbolic here means something rather imaginary than institutional. In spite of his intellectual relationship to Lacan the concept of 'symbolic' in Deleuze's definition seems rather to mean what Lacan denoted with 'imaginary'. Although Deleuze didn't write much about the concept of symbol, neither before nor after his *Difference and Repetition*, when he did, however, he did it in the following way: 'The locomotive [in Zola's *The Beast Within*] is not an object, but an epic symbol, a great Phantasm, like the ones which often appear in Zola's work, reflecting all of the themes and situations of the book.' (Deleuze 1990: 330) According to the sentence, symbolic certainly refers to something that is free to the point of not being constrained by the rules of any particular world for, unlike fiction, a symbol has deep, unclear, arborescent meaning which can unexpectedly make connections with many places, times or other meanings in this world while remaining much more unbound than any component in a fictional world. Symbolism, as against Fictionalism, prefers fancy, daydream, nightmare, fantasy, hallucination to a life in the world of imagination.

To make the distinction between virtual and actual more clear, I am referring to some examples from the History of Art in the last one-and-a-half Centurie. The first example is a randomly chosen Impressionist painting, a not too famous one, the *Landscape near Monte-Carlo* of Claude Monet painted in 1883. While we take a look at the picture I mention that in the history of immersive pictures and arts this era happens to be repre-

sented by the panorama and cyclorama pictures. Cyclorama and panorama pictures truly give an illusion of being inside, and even of being there and then in the depicted scene. Why should it be, however, called virtual picture apart from the fact that it brings closer and is forcing to pass the border from the represented to the physical world and to conquer at least that little parcel of the latter inside the Cyclorama?

What painting did Monet and his friends invent in the meantime as compared to cyclorama picture? Based on modern Sensualism they created a kind of picture in which image (the mental entity) and picture (the object supporting paint) had been strictly dissociated in order to make the former as lucid and intense as possible. The mental image was supposed to be the clearest possible considering that it was born only on the retina of the painter or the beholder. And although it may be justified to retort that there has not ever been any picture in the long history of art that would only have been a material surface covered by paint without being an image in the constitution of which the beholder had a crucial part, yet the endeavor of the Impressionist painters was undoubtedly to intensify the beholder's partaking to the extreme point where the image loses all its direct connections to the picture including the most material element of the latter, the paint itself. The paradox of this endeavor is that it can only be fulfilled by making the picture as material as possible, i.e. by abjuring any underpainting and glazes. Accordingly, the problem of the Impressionists was not with the reference. They want as much to scan the waves of visual energy of the outer (perceived) or the inner (represented, fancied) world as to make it by releasing the image from any particular reference either in the outer or in the inner world. Impressionist picture is subjective only in the sense that it emerges in the eye of the painter or any viewer. But it has nothing to do with anyone's sensibility if not with the human's as such. The place where it comes into the world is not an actual place neither being connected to anyone's inner world nor to that particular place, the room of the exhibition the picture happens to hang in. It

is there and isn't there projecting an image into the room to the moment when somebody goes there and takes a look at the picture. From this very moment the virtual image has been actualized in a particular couple of eyes. It is not a *trompe l'oeil*, on the contrary, it is a pure image. While perceiving the actualized image, however, the viewer doesn't see the picture as object any more. The price to be paid for gaining a pure mental image is losing the object to be looked at. If we want to regain the picture we need to actualize it. It is not so difficult to do with an Impressionist picture – we only need to step some closer and instead of the previously actualized image we get back the physically actual picture. This basic structure of the Impressionist painting concentrating on the sharp division made between the image and the picture created a kind of virtual image which made the virtual attainable by sharpening its contrast with the actual up to an abstract dialectic (either... or...). So what the Impressionists really achieved was not the perfect representation of any inner or outer actuality but the pure image and the pure sensation. This is the image that Bergson talked about in the first sentences of his *Matter and Memory* and did so almost at the same time when Monet painted the *Landscape near Monte-Carlo*. 'We will assume for the moment that we know nothing of theories of matter and theories of spirit, nothing of the discussions as to the reality or ideality of the external world. Here I am in the presence of images, in the vaguest sense of the word...' (Bergson 1988: 17). According to Bergson making a world is to make these floating virtual images anchor as perception, memory, imagination, cognition etc.

My second example is a drip painting of Jackson Pollock titled *One: Number 31* from 1950 which doesn't mean, of course, that there were no other virtual images of various kinds between the time of Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism. One of the most famous sentences of Clement Greenberg, based mainly on Pollock's works, is the following: 'The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the

Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye' (Greenberg 1993: 90). What exactly does this sentence mean? First of all, Greenberg claims that the characteristic of modern painting is not its literariness or concreteness, i.e. not a kind of anti-illusionism. Modern painting does make an illusion that differs from that of the old painting only in its nature and not in its possible degree. At first glance, however, the end of the sentence seems to contradict this claim considering that the expression 'only with the eye' in itself could be interpreted as a kind of restriction. Is it, however, really a restriction and not more of an expansion or even a piece of disengagement?

Taking a look at the picture the only thing we can see is a tangle of lines in various colors, lengths and thicknesses and flecks and patches. Moreover, we cannot really be sure if the picture is not upside down. And our doubt is not totally inappropriate since the picture was painted laid down on the floor from all possible directions so it is really no more than a piece of arbitrary convention to view it in the way we view a picture hanging on the wall. However, it is undeniably a picture and not only in the sense that it has a frame that cuts it out of its surroundings but also in that more restricted sense that it creates an illusion of some other space different from that of the exhibition room. So it is not only a picture but also an image creating an illusion of a 'somewhere else'. What is this 'somewhere else' indeed? It cannot be somewhere else in the world we live in because it doesn't depict anything we might recognize and what is more, it cannot be some fictional place either, i.e. some place in another world because a fictional world, in spite of not really existing out there remains a world 'that one could imagine oneself walking into' as Greenberg wrote above.

A modernist painter from the first half of the 20th Century, someone like Malevich or Kandinsky, might answer this question by claiming that it must then surely be some cosmic space. Cosmic space doesn't possess the qualitative distinction of above and below that terrestrial space does. It is, however, a space that envelopes hu-

man being in his/her whole physical existence even if (s)he cannot dwell in it. Cosmic space is too big to be habitable yet it has scales and coordinates unifying it. And it is so because cosmic space doesn't only *contain* our whole flesh and blood existence but also the whole world as its widest conceivable context for all human intentionality in the Husserlian sense of the word. How large is, however, the space that we enter by our eyes looking at the picture of Jackson Pollock? If, suspending the habit of picture viewing we inherited from the time of the Renaissance, we step very close up to Pollock's painting we will be surprised at experiencing that the picture can also be viewed as an image and not only as a painted surface even from that close. And what can be seen on that little part of it is a space as huge as that of the whole picture. Or, to be exact, the two spaces are incommensurable. Detached from the whole every little part of the picture is able and even willing to grow to a cosmic scale, and having done so, it can no more be localized within the space of any larger, encompassing parts or that of the whole. So unlike terrestrial and even cosmic space this particular pictorial space in question doesn't have a scale system. And this is exactly what Greenberg's distinction between 'walking into' and 'traveling through only with the eye' points out. The pure optical illusion Greenberg talks about virtualizes the beholder in the way that in order to enter this space (s)he has to leave all his body behind, including all his senses, except for vision. And without body (s)he lacks the point of reference to which the different scales could be correlated.

The painting *One: Number 31* of Pollock is an immersive picture. It may be, however, asked whether immersion is what makes it virtual or, on the contrary, virtuality is what makes it immersive. Neither is the case. For there exist immersive pictures without being virtual as well as virtual pictures without being immersive. My third example is one of the latter.

The third example is the picture entitled *Overdrive* (1963) of Robert Rauschenberg. As opposed to Pollock's *One: Number 31* it is a picture without any deep space of

its own. It seems to be no more than a solid, flat surface covered by things as diverse as possible: photographs, drawings, imprints, patches of paint; images, diagrams, signs, abstract painterly gestures. Some represent something, while others don't, and the ones that do, do it in a way different from all the others. The whole picture, as far as its title suggests, intends to represent the state of mind of a human being living in a modern urban environment. Apart from the title, however, there is nothing that could integrate the divergent elements and anchor them as a unified image in the world by localizing the elements in a mind being the picture of a unified world. Moreover, it might be asked whether *Overdrive* is not a picture raising the same question Heidegger had raised twenty-five years earlier concerning world picture but giving a completely different answer to it. As it is well known Heidegger took issue with modern science that, according to him, transforms the whole world including the human being into an object 'placed in the realm of man's knowing and of his having disposal' (Heidegger 1977: 130). He treated modern science as an ideology that makes of the world a mental representation by rendering it separated and objective. And his only hope was to get rid of all such objectifying pictures and return to the world itself to the point of being-in-the-world, i.e. being totally immersed in it. And he spoke so in an era of totalitarian ideologies, himself being completely immersed in the most dangerous one as it was recently so blatantly confirmed by his Black Notebooks.

Rauschenberg's picture is as distant and objectified as the world picture Heidegger talks about. As I mentioned above it is not an image at all but only a surface covered by different elements among which a few pictures can also be found representing something or other but the way they are applied to the surface and put together totally thwarts all our intentions to enter the visual space either by 'walking into it' or by 'traveling through it only with the eye'. Some elements are but ready-mades cut out from a book or a magazine, others are iterated and put side by side. Both stop the eye on the surface. Furthermore, the assembling of the ele-

ments also keeps the viewer at a distance making any immersion impossible, considering that although these elements may sometimes hint at some deep space by their representative content, the direction the single elements should be viewed from is permanently changing. So as opposed to Pollock's painting, which *could* be seen from many different directions, this is a picture that *should* be seen from the same amount of directions. Namely, Pollock's picture simply ignores its own frame for its lines sometimes transverse it and return at another place so that the whole picture looks but a detail of an infinite whole, i.e. an almost arbitrary cut-out. And this fact converts each particular point of view into an entrance to the visual space rendering the former much less important than the inner space itself. They all still remain viewpoints offering a provisional perspective of the whole, unifying the picture from without. By contrast, Rauschenberg's picture holds the viewer away, in the outer space, while none of the possible viewpoints is able to unify it. Or, to be exact, the picture can be entered, but in doing so, the viewer can only get inside the space of one of the picture's borrowed details, if it happens to be a picture by itself. So being disappointed (s)he returns to the outer space and keeps searching for the appropriate point of view. And stepping back from the picture (s)he has the same experience: there is neither a distance from which all its parts could be discerned at the same time, nor is there any segue between the distant and the close view. Briefly, the beholder gets no place to view the picture from either inside or outside. Yet, the thing faced is not a concrete object but a flat, framed surface covered by representative elements, and what is more, the procedure it was produced by embeds all its elements in the very homogeneous surface. It is not a concrete, billboard-like surface, the so called 'flatbed picture plain' named by Leo Steinberg, which Rauschenberg produced in his combine paintings a few years earlier, but a silkscreen print that contains the elements instead of only supporting them. So it should be, in principle, an image as well as a picture. And it definitely is: the virtual *image* of something irrepre-

sentable, the invisible image of being overdriven experienced by the beholder through his/her own becoming-virtual in the process of perceiving the *picture*.

The three examples discussed so far represent three different ways of making a picture virtual. Virtuality as a way of being, however, is not confined to the realm of pictures. On the contrary, it can be engendered in ever so many ways in various domains. In the psyche for example it may emerge as a trauma, i.e. as an experience that can neither be remembered nor forgotten. A trauma is always present in the psyche in its particular way of absence – it is there and not there and it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time and is sending the signals of its existence through symptoms. Or it can be engendered in the body as a phenomenon that is called by Deleuze ‘a body without organs’ – an aject body that has lost its capacity to unify itself in the form of an organism. Or it can be engendered in history as myth. Myth is not fiction, for it took place in this world and it is taken as a story that did really happen sometime, but in an antediluvian time so to speak, which preceded human or even natural history – in other words it happened in a past which had never been present being the source of history itself. And virtuality can also be engendered in the future as some post-apocalyptic time, a time after history, and what is more, right now in our very present: some ecologists say that the ecological catastrophe has already befallen us, it already exists in its virtual form and what we are facing is only its process of actualization.

I chose the foregoing examples from the realm of pictures in order to make the contrast between virtualization and simulation all the more obvious. Jean Baudrillard, the most famous proponent of the concept of simulation in the eighties, writes: ‘To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t... But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: “Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and make believe he is ill. Some who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.” (Littré) Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality princi-

ple intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary”.’ (Baudrillard 1983: 8) Facing this phenomenon Baudrillard draws the conclusion that ‘simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials’ and announces the age of ‘the divine irrelevance of pictures’. Is this, however, the only conclusion that can be drawn from the very situation? And is this a true conclusion at all? If a picture doesn’t have any reference or if it has a false one, does it mean that it becomes a simulacrum? I don’t think so. There are a lot of pictures without any reference, the abstract or concrete pictures for instance, and there are a lot of pictures with false reference, the fictional ones, and none of these are simulacra. Baudrillard is right that simulacrum can have something to do with reference but it is not its relation to reference that makes it a simulacrum. Namely, there exist referential as well as irreferential simulacra and the former can work more easily and maybe more efficiently than the former because it can take advantage of the belief we have in the one and only world, i.e. *the* world we live in. In case of a simulacrum, however, this belief doesn’t primarily concern the reference, i.e. something outside the picture but the perception itself. Being inside a simulacrum one takes the percepts as real and not their references and this is exactly what the irreferential simulacrum makes obvious. Consequently, the core of the problem of simulation is rather the age-old and well-known problem of make-believe and not that of reference.

Simulacrum is an image, it cannot be otherwise, even if a very peculiar one. It is an image feigning not to be a picture, feigning not to have any medium or support. It tries to conceal its own frame, which is always there in one form or another, and tries to bring the percept (and not the reality) as close to the beholder as possible. That is why it needs immersion. Not every kind of immersion is a simulacrum considering that there are situations, even in everyday life (a love affair is one of them for example), in which one can be immersed to the

extent of neglecting almost everything else, but it seems to be quite sure that a simulacrum cannot be other than immersive in order to be able to engender the belief in question. And this very belief should encompass all our cognitive capacities: it has to cover the perceptual faith on what Merleau-Ponty based his phenomenology but it also has to abolish the famous ‘psychical distance’ favored in aesthetics by Edward Bullough among others and what is more, it even has to inhibit the beholder’s taking any reflexive attitude concerning the ontological status of what is experienced. That is the reason why I claimed that simulation can work the best if it is based on our everyday experience. And here we get to the paradox of simulation. The main purpose of constructing a simulation is to create an absolute presence in something absent and the most perfect way to do so is to base it on our everyday experience familiar to everyone; however, if we manage to do so it simply loses its sense. Why else would we want to make a double of this world if not for the purpose of changing something in it? But the more we change, the more unfamiliar the simulated ‘world’ immediately becomes and then we are not able to believe in it any longer. The only way to get rid of this paradox would be the elimination of the dual structure of simulation, the elimination of the distinction between real and unreal. But this distinction is a constitutive feature of simulation – without the distinction of the real and the unreal there is no simulation. So what remains is only a schizophrenic endeavor of trying to totalize the simulation while hoping that this very totalization won’t cease to be a simulation. I think that this is what is called Virtual Reality or Virtual World in recent theories. The latter is an expression which, in my opinion, simply doesn’t make any sense: a world cannot be virtual and the virtual cannot make a world because the virtual simply lacks the coherence and reliability required for anything to be recognized by us as a world. But the former, the virtual reality, does definitely make sense: in philosophy it refers to a part or to a kind of reality considering that reality consists of two different parts, the one is actual and the other is virtual. In recent theories

of virtual reality, however, the expression has a completely different meaning: as far as I can see it functions as a final idea (*Zweckidee*) referring to a future or maybe to a present condition of a system of mediation which has already been made as complete as to become reality itself. I don’t know whether we have already reached this condition or not but one thing seems to be sure: if we have then it is not a simulation any longer in which we can be *immersed* but a new reality in the proper sense of the word in which we must be (re)born in a new body with new kinds of senses. And what is more, to “enter” this very reality we may have to forget everything we brought with us from our good old world for being able to feel at home in it. It is truly not an immersion any longer but a kind of *incorporation* about which the new computer game theories have already begun to ponder (Calleja 2011: 167-179). Today nobody knows yet what will happen when it is managed to be fully developed, one thing, however, seems to be quite certain: it will be no mere game anymore.

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