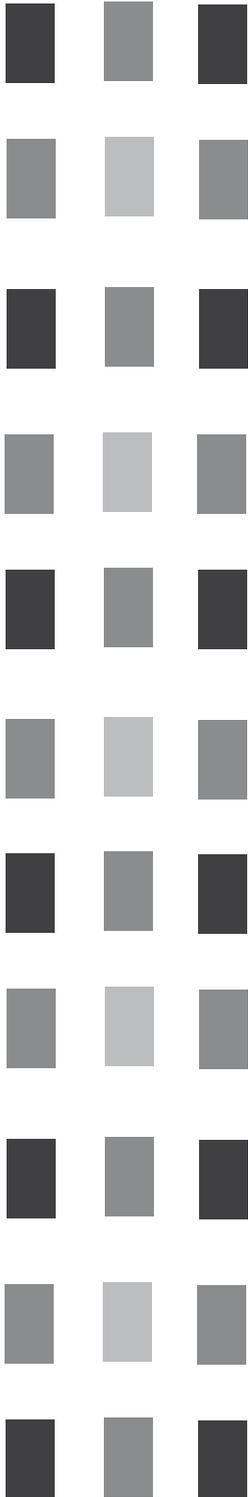


The Virtual Space of Immersion/The Third Turn of Modernity

On the collapse of the subject/object field

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This contribution follows from earlier work in which I refer to "the three turns of modernity."¹ The first turn is characterized by Baudelaire's notable description: "By Modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable." By this I understand modernity's submergence into purity, into the 'eternal and immutable'; and simultaneously an immersion with the impure, with the 'ephemeral and the fugitive'. The second turn, which will not be presented in this paper, I discuss as emergence; this condition is categorized under terms as typically found in descriptions of post-modernity. It can be summarized as image culture, or the flattening out of a denatured field, typically understood as surface or simulacra; a field in which 'the medium is the message' and in which information (if not meaning) emerges directly from this image field. The third turn, which will be the focus of this paper, I also refer to as immersion, in fact extending into what has been termed 'virtual immersion space'. This notion of 'immersion', as it differs in the first and the third turns, lies in dual figures such as the immaterial and material, and immediacy and presence in the first turn; and penetrability and impenetrability, and simultaneity and succession in the third turn.

For the sake of brevity, this paper will pass almost exclusively through the figures of Walter Benjamin and Henri Bergson. My premise is simple: discussions on virtual architecture must deal with the body, not merely as extensive² but as intensive. The subsequent argument derives from two basic suppositions. First, the need to address the inevitable shift in our 'modes of sense perception & experience', as Benjamin discusses it, which results from the advance of technology (or 'historical circumstance'), and which modify not only our 'means of production' but alter also the very of nature of both sensorial and the sentient modes of being in the world. In order to argue this I will work from Benjamin's seminal essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Second, that it is necessary within this discourse, to 'decompose and recompose' both the time/space & subject/object composite in order to more accurately discuss notions on 'virtual immersion' specifically and subsequently, 'virtual architecture' as well. In order to get at the problems of this composite I will discuss the notions of intuition and penetrability as found in Bergson's work.

I

As the passage above from Baudelaire indicates, intellectuals and artist of modernity searched for universal oneness and absolute spirit. But they also sought for the immediacy of the present as they journeyed through the relativity of the day to day,

through the subjectivity of the individual, the personal, in their desire to achieve a balance, a harmony between the seemingly disparate conditions present in the figures of the immaterial infinite and the materially finite. Immediacy however, has within it the quality of collapsing the classical distinction between subject and object, a collapse that was inherently problematic during the first turn of modernity. The nature of this problematic revolved around the self-referential quality of abstraction as it simultaneously set its gaze to the future and sought its presence in the tangibility of the 'real'. It seems to me that this collapse of subject with object forms a 'composite', which continues to be problematic today.

The transition from what we might rightly refer to as the enlightenment's 'regime of knowledge' to that of information – or to Lyotard's "cognitive regime of phrases" – has not come free of intellectual crisis. Computers were first to be seen as depersonalizing knowledge for the sake of the market good. At the cost of all previously held forms of representations as well as non-representational forms of reality, they would herald the loss of the humanist subject and its ideals of knowledge as self-constituting. Computer technologies have been seen as both a tool and a cultural transformer, as I will argue, containing the potential to alter our very 'modes of existence'.

II

Walter Benjamin in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* brings forward an insight worthy of further consideration, writing: "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well."³ The historical circumstances of the day, the technological advances currently underway, as Benjamin suggest, had the power to alter the very mode of human sense perception. As such, we must be willing to accept that the very technological developments we are questioning here are not merely passive, elective, or supplemental, but active, non-discretionary and fundamental.

Warren Neidich, of ArtBrain, NY – arguing from the point of view of the neurological sciences, suggests that new forms of visual and perceptual stimuli exercise our neural networks in such a way that the perceptual apparatus of the brain itself is altered. In what he refers to as "wiring and firing", certain links – neural pathways – are established through repetitive and concentrated use.⁴ These links, Neidich argues, become dominating structures informing not merely our knowledge systems

but, in the terms presented here, performatively altering the very nature of our 'sense perception' and our 'modes of experience' as well.

Inherent in discussions of any form on advancements in technology, the question of novelty (imagination) is raised. In Benjamin this question relates to the breach between progress and tradition; in Baudelaire it raises the question of subjective vision in relation to universal absolutes; and for Bergson it goes to the very question of free-will as it pertains to the continual unfolding of life (*durée*) through experience both conscious and unconscious, both actual and virtual. Following from Baudrillard⁵ and his reference to Bergson's notion of the 'possible' one might say that for Bergson "it is in imagination that the possible and real are gathered together."⁶ Returning to Benjamin's essay, it is safe to say that he saw clearly the potential of technology to substantively alter the significance of sense perception and its corollary, the subject-object relationship. It is worth noting that our primary and sensorial perception, located at the site of the body, is subject here not to epistemological 'truth claims', or 'effective states of knowing'; but is understood as radically ontological, it is an "affective state of being in the world"; and to be consequent, within the dual figure of Bergson-Deleuze we must say that it is the "affective condition of becoming".

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin discusses the notion of Aura, in short, a notion related to that of authenticity. Although both George Baird and Kari Jormakka mention this in their respective contributions to this colloquium – the first in relation to his discussion on the 'virtual' and the second in his mention of 'cyber-space' – I will not elaborate here on the traditional aspect of uniqueness (and of the function of ritual) but will jump ahead to two points: first, where Benjamin discusses the work of art in terms of its reception by the masses, and second to the technology of film as it alters our conscious perceptions. He writes: "With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles [the poles of 'cult value', inherently secretive and unapproachable and 'exhibition value', inherently exposed and approachable] turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature"⁷ (my parenthetical inclusion). And continues later with: "Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous [spatial] collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, on for the movie today"⁸ (my parenthetical inclusion).

In relation to film, Benjamin notes that the camera was inserted between the actor and the audience. By this the continuity of the perform-

ance is destroyed, allowing, for the first time an immaterial decomposition of the 'integral whole' and subsequently a material re-composition of the fragment and 'positional views' which are placed in alternate, or 'virtual', sequential (temporal) movements. In fact the 'movements' are no longer those of the actors but of the camera itself. Further still, the technical possibilities of the camera created new modes of perception, he writes: "By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of the snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.... Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man."⁹

Architecture, Benjamin writes, "has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art. Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight. ... On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion."¹⁰ Here Benjamin is referring to the distinction between controlled contemplation and the ability to master certain 'tasks', as "modes of appropriation in architecture, while in a state of distraction." He continues, however poignantly, "(f)or the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation."¹¹

III

Accounts of the experience of 'Virtual Immersion Space' have become suffused with both spiritual and physical descriptions. They revolve around intensity of emotion; feelings of freedom from body and heightened sense of consciousness (not contemplation); a strong sense of spatio-temporal collapse, of subject-object consolidation, or, the sense that one can no longer determine the limits of the body as extensive and time as intensive: in other words, a total immersion into the space of the virtual domain. These descriptions are similar to those of meditative or transcendental accounts of experience, for instance: "an intense sense of realness, as when inner stimuli become more real than objects themselves"; and "unusual modes of perception". But even further: "feelings of undifferentiated unity or merging of distinction between things and/or self and world."¹²

Brian Massumi writes: "The virtual, as such, is inaccessible to the senses. This does not, however, preclude figuring it, or constructing images of it. To the contrary, it requires a multiplication of images. The virtual that cannot be felt cannot but be felt, in want of potential, outside possibility: in its effects. When expressions of its effects are multiplied, the virtual fleeting appears. Its fleeting is in the depths between and the surfaces around the images."¹³ Remaining with my own argument however, we can safely broaden Massumi's observation of the 'effective', understood as extensive, to include that of the 'affective', understood as intensive. Massumi's critique does approach, with an almost heightened clarity, that which Bergson began over a century before in his attempts to qualify *durée* (translated typically as duration or durance), that which Deleuze later approached when transforming previously held categorical notions in philosophy to a new form of 'transcendental empiricism' in the manifold of multiplicity, simultaneity, and the virtual field.

IV

For Bergson questions of experience go not merely to the 'state of experience' but the very nature of the 'condition of experience': a condition which can only be reached, as Bergson argues, beyond the turn, where we engage with our will not the simple effects of action but the pure affect of all action (both virtual and real: both virtually present and actuated even if not realized).¹⁴ Here scientific notions of time and space have been ultimately collapsed: Bergsonian intuition in the perpetual process of becoming. The notion of Intuition is critical in Bergson's work; in fact he develops an entire philosophical method upon it. Intuition is typically understood in opposition to intelligence, as an immediate search for the eternal; whereas for

Bergson, it is of the means of finding "true duration".¹⁵

In *The Creative Mind* he writes: "An intuition, which claims to project itself with one bound into the eternal, limits itself to the intellectual ... it assumes a unity, a world as one Intuition, then, signifies first of all consciousness, but immediate consciousness, a vision which is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even coincidence. – Next, it is consciousness extended, pressing upon the edge of an unconscious which gives way and which resists, which surrenders and which regains itself: through the rapid alternating of obscurity and light, it makes us see that the unconscious is there; contrary to strict logic it affirms that the psychological can be consciousness as much as it likes, but there is nevertheless a psychological unconsciousness."¹⁶ Yet here the question of subject must be raised: is this intuition merely the intuition of ourselves? Or, does this not go much further? For, as Bergson continues to argue, that which lies between our consciousness and other consciousnesses – the matter distinguishing these intensities – is less obvious than that which distinguishes or separates our body and other bodies; for, in fact, it is space – extensive and divisible – which makes these divisions sharp.

In *Time and Free Will*, in a chapter titled *The Multiplicity of Conscious States/The Idea of Duration*, Bergson develops his notion of penetrability. I will summarize this notion remaining true to Bergsonian distinctions. Bergson deals with the problem of the singular and the multiple in terms of spatial and temporal distinction and uses the case of the mathematical numeric in order to identify the confusion between quantitative and qualitative categories. Here, number is understood as both an individual collection of units and a unity of multiple parts. Either conceived inclusively in a single image or in succession as discrete elements, the mistake, he consistently argues, is in thinking that succession places these elements in time (*durée*) as opposed to space.¹⁷

Dealing directly with the subject/object collapse he writes that "we sometimes set up impenetrability as a fundamental property of bodies, known in the same way and put on the same level as (for example) weight or resistance."¹⁸ He suggests that when we try to picture one body penetrating another (a 'picture' that computer software today allows fluidly as evidenced in the work of many architects today) we must assume an 'empty space' in which particles can fill this space, merging into the interstitial voids left by the one and/or the other. In fact, he suggests, that our thoughts can prolong this process indefinitely in preference to picturing two bodies occupying the 'same place' at the 'same time'. If impenetrability is an actual qua-

lity of matter, Bergson argues, "there is no clear reason why we should experience more difficulty in conceiving two bodies merging into one another than a surface devoid of resistance or a weightless fluid". Further, "in reality, it is not a physical but a logical necessity which attaches to the proposition: 'Two bodies cannot occupy the same place at the same time'."¹⁹ The assertion which insists on the impenetrability of matter does so due to the fact that notions of number and that of space have been inextricably linked, so much so that in stating the properties of matter, we are, in fact, reducing these properties to only those which exist properly as properties of number. Nevertheless, it is equally certain that when it comes to feelings, sensations and ideas, we can accept the notion of permeability. The composite of space and duration in which we act, in which we actuate (or presence) our memories into (already past) perceptions, is given to us by experience, not merely 'lived' experience, or 'immediacy'; but the very 'condition' of experience, as stated above.

Bergson, foreshadowing Benjamin, questions: "If, in order to count states of consciousness, we have to represent them symbolically in space, is it not likely that this *symbolical representation will alter the normal conditions of inner perception?*" He continues: "In the same way, our projection of our psychic states into space in order to form a discrete multiplicity is likely to influence these states themselves and *to give them in reflective consciousness a new form*, which immediate perception did not attribute to them"²⁰ (my italics). If we wish to separate out our feelings and sensations, our ideas, it is necessary to "count them", to reduce them to number and represent them "symbolically in space", as homogeneous units "which occupy separate positions in space and consequently no longer permeate one another."²¹ In other words, in order to continue this 'false', or 'inaccurately stated problem', which confuses quantity with quality, we continue to apply to our experience of time (*durée*) the notion of succession, yet understood as discrete and discontinuous sections, as extensive and homogeneous; in fact, we thus spatialize our experience of time as simultaneity. And it is this conflation of time and space, in Bergson, which prevents us from understanding the condition (as opposed to the state) of the subject/object categories as delimited on the plane, within the multiplicities and singularities of the virtual.²²

The problem for the architectural discourse, which must, to my mind, advance more consequently upon notions concerning this subject/object 'collapse', is that this 'composite' must be de-composed in order to be clarified, but it must be properly re-composed if it is to aid us in furthering our positions on both knowledge and sensation within the virtual field. Deleuze, in para-

phrasing Bergson, summarizes the composite as such: "The important thing here is that the decomposition of the composite reveals to us two types of multiplicity. One is represented by space (or rather, if all the nuances are taken into account, by the impure combination of homogeneous time): It is a multiplicity of exteriority, of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of order, of quantitative differentiation, of difference in degree; it is a numerical multiplicity, discontinuous and actual. The other type of multiplicity appears in pure duration: It is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organization, of heterogeneity, of qualitative discrimination, or of differences in kind; it is a virtual and continuous multiplicity that cannot be reduced to numbers."²³

V

Although the traditional problematic surrounding subject/object distinction and/or collapse appear in no way to hinder the cyber-users 'futuristic and mythical experience' of 'virtual immersion space', this distinction appears to remain problematic within architecture and its subsequent and inherited spatial discourse. Preventing, or avoiding, this collapse of the subject/object field seems to be that which maintains architecture's critique of the virtual (virtual architecture) as merely yet another advance of formalism, or as George Baird has put it so succinctly, as an architecture "without the polemic of its predecessor".²⁴

I would like to close with a re-turn to – or perhaps a "translation and rotation"²⁵ on – Benjamin, and suggest that his definition of the "aura of a natural object" as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be"; is perhaps today, in the third turn, and in the light of further advances in technology inverting the past composite of simultaneity and succession, and recomposing the "aura of the historical object" as the unique phenomenon of proximity, however distant it may be.

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Notes:

- 1 Hauptmann, Deborah: *Turning Turning in the Widening Gyre*, in: *OASE*, issue 59: *Scratching the Surface*, ed. Lara Schrijver, Amsterdam, 2002.
- 2 Baird, George: Lecture, *The 9th International Bauhaus-Colloquium*, April 2003. Extensive can here be understood, for example, as Baird mentions it, as a 'visceral organism'.
- 3 Benjamin, Walter: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in: *Illuminations*, New York, 1969, p. 216.
- 4 Neidich, Warren: Lecture, *Cyborgs and the Cultured Brain*, delivered at *The Body in Architecture Conference*, TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Theory, Nov. 2002. Also see forthcoming publication, *The Body in Architecture*, guest ed. Hauptmann, Deborah; *The Critical Landscape Series*, series ed. A. Graafland, Rotterdam, 2004.
- 5 Baudrillard, Jean: Lecture, *The 9th International Bauhaus-Colloquium*, April 2003.
- 6 Bergson, Henri: *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Mabelle L. Andison, 1946, New York, 1992. (Orig. pub., *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, 1941), see: Chapter III: *The Possible and the Real*, pp. 91–106.
- 7 Op. cit., note 3, p. 219.
- 8 Ibid., p. 228.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 229–230.
- 10 Ibid., p. 233.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Davies, Char: *Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being*, in: *The Virtual Dimension*, ed. John Beckmann, New York, 1998, p. 48.
- 13 Massumi, Brian: *Line Parable for the Virtual: On the Superiority of the Analog*, in: *The Virtual Dimension* ed. John Beckmann, New York, 1998, p. 305.
- 14 See: Bergson, Henri: *Matter and Memory*, trans. by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, New York, 1988, p. 184, (Orig. pub., *Matière et Mémoire*, 1886). Also see: Hauptmann, Deborah: *Interval & Image in the Embodiment of Memory: On Henri Bergson's Matter and Memory*, in *OASE*, issue 58, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Amsterdam, 2002.
- 15 Deleuze, Gilles: *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York, 1991, (Orig. pub., *Le Bergsonisme*, 1966).
Deleuze, in *Bergsonism*, titles chapter I: *Intuition as Method*, and traces this trajectory through the entire of Bergson's work and argues that Bergson's intuition as a 'philosophical method' is developed to the highest degree of philosophical precision. Throughout many of Bergson's writings the notion of 'Intuition' is developed. In *The Creative Mind*, he extensively develops his notion of 'true and false' problem statements.
- 16 Op. cit., note 6, pp. 31–33.
- 17 Bergson, Henri: *Matter and Memory*. "Questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than space", p. 71
- 18 Bergson, Henri: *Time and Free Will: An Essay On The Immediate Data Of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson, Oxford/New York, 1919. This paper works from a Kessinger Publishing Edition (non-dated) (Orig. pub., *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 1889). The notion of penetrability is developed in chapter II: *The Multiplicity of Conscious States: The Idea of Duration*. All citations in this section of the paper are sourced from this chapter of *Time & Free Will* unless otherwise noted.
- 19 Ibid., p. 88.
- 20 Ibid., p. 90.
- 21 Ibid., p. 89.
- 22 Bergson reminds us that experience always gives to us composites of qualitative differences, for example – 'time/space', 'subject/object', 'memory/perception', 'extension/inextension' ... etc. One of the main tasks of philosophy, he argues, is in decomposing these composites so that we can avoid the dangers of thought which follow from 'poorly stated questions' or 'improperly analyzed composites.'
- 23 Op. cit., note 16, p. 38.
- 24 Ibid., this notion of 'Translation & Rotation' is developed in Chapter III: *Memory as Virtual Coexistence*, pp. 51–72.
- 25 Op. cit., note 2.