

5. Interaction and Immersion Logics in *Encounters*: Coalescence of Bodies in a Liquid Space

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Abstract: *Encounters* is a free roaming collective experience in virtual reality. Participants are engaged in different ways and at different stages during the production process and the reception of the work. Based on analysis of this original project, how the complex relationships between spaces (physical, virtual, scenic, representational, narrative), time (real, narrative) and bodies (lived, simulated) determine a dynamic, spatialized and “embodied” narrative are examined. This involves questioning the concept of “immersion,” not only in its theoretical presuppositions, but above all in its practical applications and, thus, in its relation to multiples issues within artistic creation (technological, corporeal, affective, narrative, etc.). Also, it shows that the concept of “border-contact” from Gestalt Therapy could assist the understanding of specific immersive experiences.

Keywords: virtual reality, Gestalt theory, water

From Immersion to Immersions

The metaphor of immersion—that is, immersion in a liquid—is systematically used in the rhetoric of manufacturers who develop new tools of diffusion (virtual reality headsets, mixed-reality glasses) and in the cultural and media discourses that accompany the creations conceived for these devices, as if the technology did not only predetermine, but also homogenize the receptive experience. The multiple aesthetic potentialities offered by these artworks, the diversity of the proposed setups, the disparity of the involved “users-spectators”—and thus their reception—indeed seem to dissolve in

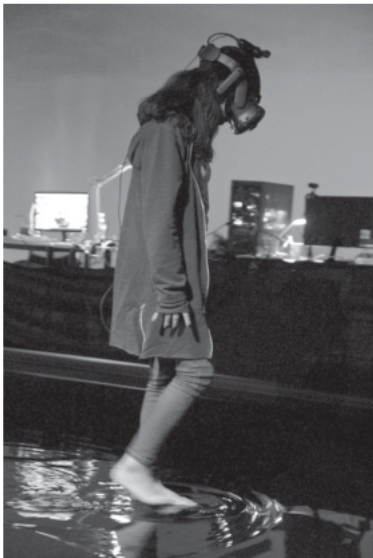


Figure 5.1: © La prairie productions, SoWhen? and Serendipity Films

an immersivity which appears constituent, both as an aesthetic principle of the artworks and as an "horizon of expectation" (*horizon d'attente*¹) for the public. Yet, immersion is difficult to apprehend as an aesthetic concept, to say the least, and probably even more so from an ontological point of view.

1 The concept of "horizon of expectation" was coined by Hans R. Jauss for literary theory. See Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

Can it only be defined or at least circumscribed? Doesn't the polysemy of the term require taking its plural nature into consideration? Not a single immersion, therefore—because there could not be a definitive and unique form of reaching out to the public—, but various *immersions*, whose nature should be specified each time: psychological, physical, emotional, sensorial, perceptual, or even fictional, technological, or narrative. For some researchers, such as Mathieu Triclot, the very notion of “immersion” constitutes “an epistemological obstacle to thinking the relation to the images and the technical devices that generate them,” because by replacing “more ancient other modes of conceptualization of media forms,” the metaphor of immersion might occlude “the ways of tangible engagement with the apparatus itself and the making of a specific regime of perception.”² In the field of video games, Gordon Calleja, relying in particular on the work of Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman,³ insists on the double meaning of the term: immersion can be apprehended as an *absorption* and as a *transportation*. Calleja refers here, on the one hand, to the fact that the player is involved in the medium, and, on the other hand, to their *sensation of being present* in a different space.⁴ Instead of the ambiguous concept of “immersion,” he favours the concept of “incorporation,” which allows us to consider this double phenomenon:

Incorporation thus operates on a double axis: the player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated through the avatar into that environment. [...] We can thus conceive of incorporation as the *absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systematically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar.*⁵

Incorporation, in this perspective, is considered as an intensification of the “internalized” engagement manifesting itself following multiple more or less imbricated dimensions: kinaesthetic, spatial, shared (in the case of setups soliciting a collective reception), narrative, affective, or ludic engagement. However, for Calleja, it is the spatial and kinaesthetic dimensions that appear essential in the experiential phenomenon of incorporation.

2 Triclot, “L’immersion n’existe pas.”

3 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*.

4 Calleja, *In-Game*: 167–179. It can be noted that Richard Gerrig also uses the concept of “transportation” in the literary field to analyze the experience of narrative worlds. See Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*.

5 Calleja: 169, original emphasis.

On the artists' side, we note that the notion of "immersion" is also subject to caution. For example, plastician Grégory Chatonsky criticizes the aesthetics of the absolute that underlies the concept of immersion: "What we question is not only the immersive aesthetic, it is also the immersive ontology, an ontology of the absolute that makes us believe that we could have access to the real as such, that we could get rid of this inextricable relation between the two, the thing and the object [...]."⁶ Artist-researcher Liam Jarvis insists on the manifest contingency of the immersive experience: "[I]mmersion through an aesthetic experience is contingent—we are already 'in' a world, much as we are already bound 'within' a body. The specific 'in' of immersion hints at a desire to reach something beyond or extranormative."⁷ In a general way, to apprehend the immersion starting from the technological dimension of the equipped body only and from the "explorable" or interactive nature of the virtual environment proposed via the head-mounted display occludes the genuine quality of the experience. What is the real engagement of the physical body? What about the spatiality of the body and the perception of space in these devices? Also, what are the emotional and affective implications of the "body-subject" (*corps propre*), as this body, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is what reveals and at the same time supports the subjectivity, and is proved to be the principle of all perception?⁸ If, like William James, we consider that aesthetic emotions are essentially bodily,⁹ and if we follow another representative of the pragmatist philosophy, John Dewey, in saying that "the scope and content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience,"¹⁰ then it is important to grasp the artistic experiences that the devices of virtual reality or mixed reality offer us, according to the relations that they engage between the body (perceiving and lived) and the spaces (real, virtual; corporal, pericorporal, emotional; and yet, scenic, representational, narrative). It is indeed in this confrontation of the body (in movement) with spaces with multiple dimensions that the possible configurations of a significant immersion are drawn.

Initiated at the end of 2019, during the *Novembre Numérique* (Digital November) event of the French Institute and the Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) in Quito, *Encounters* was further developed during the summer

6 Chatonsky, "L'immersion comme ontologie et esthétique de l'absolu."

7 Jarvis, *Immersive Embodiment*: 73, emphasis added.

8 Merleau-Ponty, *La phénoménologie de la perception*: 114–179.

9 See Shusterman, "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James": 347–361.

10 Dewey, *L'art comme expérience*: 95.

of 2020 at the VRHAM! festival in Hamburg, and during a multi-user residency in Avignon in the spring of 2021. A fourth creative residency was held in October 2022, in Kaohsiung, as part of the selection of the project for the Taiwan XR residency. Part of the elaboration of the project was thus realized *in public* and *with the public*. The approach during these residencies was mainly focused on the work of staging, correlated to that of the user experience. Mathieu Pradat and his team proceeded by iterations from observations that aimed to examine how different audiences adopt an immersive narrative. The experimental sessions with the public were recorded and questionnaires were given to the participants at the end of the experience. Filmed interviews, allowing for more open exchanges, were also set up. The aim of these sessions, questionnaires, and interviews was to use these multiple feedback materials to identify what each person understood and felt, and thus adapt the project for a better reception. In this chapter, we will therefore examine the double dynamic of immersion that *Encounters* proposes, namely a poietics and aesthetic dynamic, to use the terminological distinction made by Paul Valéry.¹¹

Encounters as a Setup and as an Experience

Encounters is a thirty-two-minute virtual reality experience that is still in a production phase. Four parts of eight minutes follow one another—"The Crowd," "Birds," "Colossus," and the "Epilogue"—and constitute an accelerated approach to the trajectories of humanity, like a shortcut of the Anthropocene. Participants live the experience equipped with stand-alone virtual reality headsets with open-back audio headphones. They roam freely, barefoot, on a horizontal waterproof platform of 10x5m, which can accommodate up to eight participants. Water that is 3mm deep spreads over the substrate. A screen with video-mapping, suspended above the pool, reflects what the participants see in the virtual world. In the virtual universe, users are visible through avatars that are graphically close to the fictional characters of this world, inducing a voluntary blurring between the entities represented.¹² As for the sound environment, four loudspeakers on stands placed on each corner of the set emit ambient sounds. These sounds come from recordings made in real time via microphones placed in ecosystems

11 Valéry, "Discours prononcé au Deuxième Congrès international d'esthétique et de science de l'art."

12 However, there is a detail that distinguishes them: only virtual entities wear a hat.

directly threatened by rising water levels (for example in Camargue, a region located in the south of France). The experiment is a fiction but, in addition to the sound recordings produced in these fragile places, it relies on two other documentary materials: the real-time positioning data of planes, container ships, and satellites in the China Sea, off the coast of Shanghai, in "Colossus"; and the movements and voices of the participants of the experiment in "The Epilogue." It should be noted that the voice of the participants is subject to a singular treatment, which makes it unintelligible during the first three chapters, thus hindering communication before "The Epilogue."

From a narrative standpoint, the different parts of the narration are interspersed with an interlude of rain (seen in the virtual space), which refers as much to the birth of life on earth as to the imminent and inescapably destructive rise of the waters. In the first chapter, "The Crowd," characters spring from each of the participants as if they were their doubles. Seemingly refusing any form of exchange, these humanoid entities quickly turn away and gather among themselves. In "Birds," small, sublime birds are transformed by the actions of the public into greedy fowls that grow, burp, and fart. They end up poisoning themselves in a pantagruelic atmosphere. In the third chapter, "Colossus," users in turn become immense, without immediately realizing this change in scale. It is the landscape and the objects that surround them that allow them to apprehend their new size. 12,000m tall, they move above an abstract and infinite ocean where tiny container ships sail. In the sky, airliners, at eye level, are perceived as mere buzzing mosquitoes. Planes, boats, and satellites are diverted one towards the other by the users' actions and they end up exploding through the body envelopes of their virtual avatars. All the interactions of the participants lead in the end to a saturation, in visual and sonic terms, of the different worlds discovered successively in the chapters. This phenomenon aims to implicitly show that each of our actions constantly builds and rebuilds the world around us and has a real impact. Finally, "The Epilogue" constitutes a moment of hope during which each participant sees a virtual character trying to enter into relationship with them by a kind of childish mimicry. The participants are invited to follow the movements of the characters and to respond to them. They then understand that they can leave an imprint of their passage in the world of *Encounters* and thus call out to other participants from a distance in time.

From the point of view of interactivity, a double graphic treatment responds to the presence of users. A blue envelope draws the volumetric contours of all the characters, animals, and objects (the avatars of the participants, the humanoid entities, the birds, the ships, etc.). The aspect of the envelope



Figure 5.2: The narrative progression of the first three chapters functions according to the same principle of passage from the one to the many, then to the countless. When the saturation is total, the water takes over again. La prairie productions, SoWhen? and Serendipity Films.



Figure 5.3, 5.4: The blue envelope is a function of the distance. The operation is dynamic and dual. © La prairie productions, SoWhen? and Serendipity Films. Shader artist: Florent Brillet.

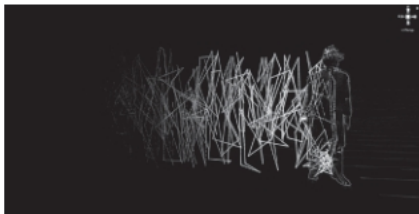


Figure 5.5: The blue envelope is a function of the distance. The operation is dynamic and dual.
 © La prairie productions and SoWhen? and Serendipity Films Shader artist: Florent Brillet.

varies according to the position of the users, which is calculated by a tracking system. The level of detail increases as the participants move closer to the characters and objects and decreases as they move away from them. Moreover, each entity comprises an inner material made of white particles. This material reacts to the level of movement. Conversely, after a few seconds of immobility, the inner matter of the characters or of the user's avatar fades. The visual perception of the environment thus depends on the position of the users in the space and on their level of movement in time. The public evolves in a dynamic, vibrant, and reactive universe which transforms itself from them, and in real time, throughout the experience.

The Immersive Logics of *Encounters*: Formativity, Performance, and Contact

The double involvement of the spectators-users in the work, at the moment of its conception and at the moment of its reception, is a distinctive feature of *Encounters*. The public fully participates in the "instauration" of the project, to take up the notion developed by René Passeron following Étienne Souriau,¹³ but more generally in its "formativity." We refer here to the "operative" conception of the form as a process, as developed by Luigi Pareyson in the 1950s.¹⁴ Seeking to focus "on the making more than on

13 Souriau, *L'instauration philosophique*; Passeron, *Recherches poétiques*: 14 and following.

14 Pareyson, *Esthétique*.

the contemplating," the philosopher considers the artistic experience as a complex dynamic which exceeds the cleavages between invention and production, between form and content, between finished work and work in becoming, and between creator and spectator, to propose "an aesthetics of the formativity" where the form is rather apprehended as "a result, or better the success of a process of formation," and the artwork like a "formed form" and a "forming form."¹⁵ Although the use of this theory can seem anachronistic, considering the contemporary technological context, it nevertheless seems enlightening to us when examining the experiences of virtual reality, as long as one integrates the spectators-users as stakeholders of the dynamic process of formation of the work, and thus here, of its actualization. The immersion that *Encounters* proposes should not only be considered as a simple reception modality, but also as a formative operation, while constituting a performative experience. Experimentally involved in the conception, then sensorially and corporally incorporated into the setup, and cognitively immersed into the fiction, the participants are indeed "immersants," in the sense that Liam Jarvis, following the artist Char Davies, uses this term; that is to say, they are subjects who perceive, experiment, and *perform*—and we could add: subjects who, at the same time, "form."¹⁶ Immersion in the project *Encounters* is therefore a setting in space, a setting in motion, and a setting in action. It implies a practice in which "the practitioner sets up in the sense of action: they do not only operate an apparatus foreign to them, they become apparatus."¹⁷ And the practitioner also becomes an interface, via their body. They are thus as much an "incorporated interface," a "body-operator," as a body-living and a body-perceived in a multidimensional space where real and virtual intermingle.¹⁸

"As soon as we arrive, the first characters we see [in the VR headset] are the ones that are supposed to represent our classmates, so we were touching

15 Pareyson: 73–109.

16 "[T]he immersant [is] both performer and perceiver, and experimenter-subject. The immersed spectator is audience to themselves from within their unrehearsed act of performance," explains Liam Jarvis, *Immersive Embodiment*: 77. Char Davies coined the term in the 1990s and theorized it in several papers, such as Davies, "Virtual Space."

17 Mahé, "Les pratiquieurs": 126. Jean-Paul Fourmentraux and Samuel Bianchini have previously used the term "practitioner" to define the spectator of interactive installations. See Fourmentraux and Bianchini, "Médias praticables." The term seems particularly adapted to qualify the status and the role of the participants in the experiences of Free-Roaming Virtual Reality, in particular because it conveys the idea of agency.

18 On the notions of "embedded interface" and "body-operator," see Chatelet, "The Body at Work."

each other," explains Baya, a young participant in an experimentation session during the creation residency in Avignon.¹⁹ She continues: "[T]hen, others are added, so we no longer know who is who."²⁰ The blurring of the borders voluntarily established between the space of the representation and the physical space, notably by the fact that the representation of the androids and of the avatars embodying the participants is graphically similar, and the fact that water is present both virtually and in reality, imply, as the testimonies clearly show, that the body, although destabilized, appears to be an essential reference point for situating oneself in this unique environment. It is important to situate one's "own body" or "body-subject," according to Merleau-Ponty's concept, but also to situate the bodies of others in order to apprehend space. Jade, another participant, explains: "I didn't dare go too far into the dark or get too close because I didn't know from which distance I was going to touch the person."²¹ In *Encounters*, we experience the phenomenological affirmation that the perception of space is in and through our bodies. "The body is our general medium for having a world," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us.²² In *Encounters*, the body becomes this "storm center" constitutive of our relationship to the environment, as William James describes it: "The world experienced comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest."²³

The body involved in the project is also a machinic body, because it is technologically equipped. It is not, however, reduced to the head-mounted display alone. Through its complex device that makes water a decisive parameter of perception, *Encounters* seeks to distinguish itself from a majority of virtual reality projects that grant vision a central place. Falling within the enactive perspective of art, *Encounters* is not only about seeing, but above all about doing and feeling in order to see.²⁴ This is why it was conceived as a collective kinaesthetic and sensory experience. If the water felt by the participants with their bare feet, the sounds heard in their headphones, the images seen on the screen on their head-mounted display, and the touch of the other participants felt on their bodies constitute exteroceptive

19 La prairie productions, "Rencontres—récit d'une création avec et en public." These testimonies and the following ones come from the recordings made during the creation residency of 2020, at Le Grenier à Sel, in Avignon.

20 La prairie productions, "Rencontres—récit d'une création avec et en public."

21 La prairie productions, "Rencontres—récit d'une création avec et en public."

22 Merleau-Ponty, *La phénoménologie de la perception*: 171.

23 James, *Essai d'empirisme radical*: 137–138.

24 See on these notions, Noë, "Experience and Experiment in Art"; and Noë, *Art as Enaction*.

stimulations, the setting in movement of the “practitioners,” for whom the water incites a certain slowness, situates them in a proprioceptive perception, which corresponds to their exteroceptive perception, thus placing them in a real wandering, redoubled—or “translated”—via their avatar in the virtual environment. The process of performative corporeality induced by this “technaesthetic experience”²⁵ thus implies a plurality of bodies. Following Don Ihde, we could consider, for example, a “body one,” the “phenomenological body” engaged in “microperception,” and a “body two,”²⁶ culturally constructed and engaged in “macroperception.”²⁷ But it seems difficult to distinguish them strictly in *Encounters*, because we are more in a logic of reciprocal interactions, where each body ultimately turns out to be the product of technological mediations. What we must also remember is that the mediation of touch is essential here: “I was trying to touch to see if she [Baya] was there,” Amine said after the immersive experience, “and it was another person ... When Philemon touched me, I had a little jolt ... It was weird ... We were really in there.”²⁸ Philemon, another participant, added: “You are under the impression of being in the experience, because these are not the same sensations as usual, in particular because we walk barefoot in the water.”²⁹ To touch is to “come into contact with someone or something,”³⁰ and one of the issues of *Encounters*, in terms of its narrative and staging, is precisely to work on the notion of “contact” as a link, an edge, and a border. In this perspective, water is an essential element.

According to Gestalt Therapy—which is inspired by the great philosophical currents of the twentieth century, such as phenomenology, pragmatism, and existentialism—psychology consists in observing “what happens at the *border-contact between the individual and the environment*.”³¹ Frederick S. Perls indeed considers that: “[i]t is here, at the boundary between the two-limit that psychological phenomena happen. Our thoughts, actions, behaviour, emotions are our way of interacting with and experiencing these borderline events.”³²

25 We borrow this expression from Edmond Couchot. See Couchot, *Images*, and *La technologie dans l'art*.

26 Ihde, *Bodies in Technology*: 69 and following.

27 Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*: 29 and following.

28 La prairie productions, “*Rencontres*—récit d'une création avec et en public.”

29 La prairie productions, “*Rencontres*—récit d'une création avec et en public.”

30 “Toucher.”

31 Perls, *Manuel de Gestaltthérapie*: 34; our emphasis.

32 Perls: 34.

It seems fruitful to us to import the concept of "border-contact" into the artistic field in order to apprehend more finely the immersive logics at work in *Encounters*.³³ In this context, the notion has a rich polysemy: the "contact-border" first refers to the link between the real and the virtual created through the familiar sensation of water on the skin, which summons the memory of the "practitioners" inside the virtual experience. It then refers to the correspondence between real and virtual, which is created through the real sensory restitution of the virtual representation seen inside the headset, that is to say the same shallow water that they really go through. Finally, it evokes the frontier between the material and the spiritual to which walking on water, commonly known as a miraculous journey on liquid matter, refers. Beyond the question of immersion, the sensoriality of water on the skin gives the "practitioners" an anchorage. It even amplifies their perception of the "border-contact" by giving it a materiality. Water thus offers a concrete support to their engagement in the environment of the experience: it simultaneously crosses the real, virtual, and imaginary dimensions of the relations they maintain with the multiple spaces of the experience. Physicality thus gives consistency to the fictional world of *Encounters*, making the immediately felt physical sensations interact with the technologically remedied sensations of the experience. In the "theory of contact," Gestalt Therapy distinguishes between the notions of "pre-contact," "contact" (or "making contact"), "full contact," and "post-contact."³⁴ To schematize, the first refers to the phase of emergence of the need; the second to the encounter with the object; the third to the actual experience; and the last to the assimilation of the experience. We could then interpret these different phases in the light of the experience proposed in *Encounters*. The pre-contact phase would be the discovery of the apparatus: the pool envisaged from its perimeter, the public looking not only at the participants already in immersion, but also at the screen above the pool, giving access from the outside to a vision of the virtual world. The contact phase, envisaged as a transition phase, could be both the vision of the virtual world through the screen and the preparation to the experience, with the various related thresholds: the removal of the shoes, the washing of the feet, the installation of the headset. The full

33 During the project's development phase, Mathieu Pradat wondered whether it was possible to use the concepts of Gestalt Therapy, originally conceived from a therapeutic perspective, to imagine an artistic experience such as *Encounters*. In this section, we propose to retrace this questioning and expand it.

34 See Masquelier-Savatier, *La Gestalt-Thérapie*: 61–86.

contact phase could correspond to the experiment run, and in particular to the phases of interaction with the characters. The post-contact phase, finally, could find an echo in the project's fourth chapter, which has a reflective dimension. In this chapter, we meet another self, similar to us, and we are led to reflect on the effect of our actions on the world. The goal here is indeed to assimilate the experience. The exit from the experiment, with the removal of the headset, the putting on of one's shoes, and the leaving of the place after possibly wandering around the basin, could also be apprehended as a phase of "post-contact."

From the narrative standpoint, these concepts also seem relevant. The first chapter thus presents a situation of pre-contact with a perceptual exploration at a distance from the characters, before the participants are allowed to instigate a first relation with them. The phase of making contact is found when the users try to face the characters, while they evade and seem to flee a little further. We can note that these two sequences of pre-contact and making-contact take place at a distance: users are spectators of a 360-degree space, where an action is being prepared and in which they have not yet taken part, or where an action is taking place while they momentarily remain simple witnesses. The full contact phase is the narrative moment when users carry out an action, a gesture, or pronounce a word. It is the moment of action, beyond the perceptual and spatial exploration that the experience implies. The graphic treatment of the experiment gives legibility to these phases of pre-contact and making contact, in particular. This is particularly the case with the blue envelope of the fictional characters, which densifies little by little, at a short distance, when the full contact phase is about to occur. On the contrary, the white particles, which are like a visual sounding board of the movements of the characters, inform us of the phases of pre-contact and making contact as well as of the post-contact phase. Generally speaking, we note that immersive experiences possess a singularity in their succession of *exploration* and *action* or, in other words, in the alternation between phases of pre-contact/contact and phases of full contact/post-contact.

A second concept originating from Gestalt Therapy also seems enlightening for our project, both for its development and for its analysis: that of "field," which led to the founding idea of "organism/environment field." According to Perls, we are part of a field and our behaviour is always the result of a global field including ourselves and our environment.³⁵ Kurt Lewin, one of the major contributors to "field theory," defines it as "the totality of coexisting

facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent.³⁶ The field is therefore not given once and for all, but because it is part of a dynamic co-evolutionary process, it appears as a potentiality that is actualized. Moreover, the field does not exist by itself, it always proves to be in relation with something. Jean-Marie Robine explains:

To install an "organism/environment field" is to emphasize that there is an articulation between the organism and its environment, indicated by the slash. The place of this experience between the two poles of the field is called the "contact-border," since it is the locus of the movements of differentiation and integration that animate the field, at the same time unifying it into a totality and limiting it by tracing its own contours.³⁷

Thanks to the "field theory" of Gestalt Therapy, we realize that the virtual cannot be detached from the real. Working on the association of the two terms, on their synergy, was precisely one of the creative tracks for the *Encounters* project. Importing these concepts from Gestalt Therapy to the field of virtual reality allows to consider that users, by integrating the field of the virtual during an experience, see that their behaviour is really affected. They respond to audiovisual stimuli via their head-mounted display by acting on the virtual environment. But the simulation only produces the expected real effect if the user can act on this virtual environment. It is on this principle that virtual reality therapies are used, for example, in the treatment of vertigo or arachnophobia.³⁸ We are reminded that:

During cognitive behavioural therapy, the reference psychotherapeutic technique in the treatment of anxiety disorders, exposure, must be progressive, hierarchical, and long enough to be therapeutic and to allow anxiety to be reduced by half, thus leading to the phenomenon of habituation with extinction of the fear response. Traditionally, exposure is carried out either in reality (*in vivo*) or in imagination (*in imaginio*).³⁹

VR technologies seem an interesting alternative for conventional therapies, because they operate with *presence*: beyond exposition, there is an

36 Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*: 240.

37 Robine, "Le fond du champ": 198.

38 See Bouchard et al., "Efficacité d'un traitement d'exposition en réalité virtuelle pour le traitement de l'arachnophobie chez l'enfant."

39 Levy, Rautureau, and Jouvent, "La thérapie par la réalité virtuelle dans la prise en charge des troubles anxieux": 662.

embodied action. Thus, the virtual reality experience ultimately remains anchored in reality. In other words, the *in imaginio* works at the same time as the *in vivo*.

The virtual world could therefore be described, following the definition of Gestalt Therapy, as a world where potentialities constantly cease to be potentialities, only to be actualized in an accelerated time, a time distinct from the temporal unfolding of the non-virtual world, in which potentialities very often remain latent. Here, we find the Deleuzian distinction between virtual and actual, and between real and possible, later renewed by Pierre Lévy, who explains that the virtual is not opposed to the real:

The word "virtual" is derived from the Medieval Latin *virtualis*, itself derived from *virtus*, meaning strength or power. In scholastic philosophy the virtual is that which has potential rather than actual existence. The virtual *tends* toward actualization, without undergoing any form of effective or formal concretization. The tree is virtually present in the seed. Strictly speaking, the virtual should not be compared with the real but to the actual, for virtuality and actuality are merely two different ways of being.⁴⁰

In the virtual world, the characters around us engage us more than in the real world, and space is constantly changing. Walls can come down to afford a change of view. This is the case in Benjamin Nuel's *Isle of the Dead* (2018), where we go from a mundane apartment to the open sea in a matter of seconds, or in Jennifer Brea and Amaury La Burthe's *Unrest VR* (2017), where a patient's room turns into a lush forest. The constitutive immateriality of the space induces a change of its status. The potentialities induced in the environment are in fact actualized in the virtual, accelerating the slow, uncertain chronology of the real in order to give place to a vibrant world where space as field is no longer simply a decor, a secondary element for the narrative action and the characters. It rather constitutes a character of the narrative in its own right, evolving according to a dramatic course and a dynamic component of the experience, revealing it, through work on the rhythms, the allusions, the ellipses, which one could bring closer to the work of editing in cinema. Placing users in the field of the virtual is equivalent to positioning them in a world where the potentialities of the real, by being accomplished in the virtual, are based on an increased possibility of actions. They thus experience condensation of amalgamated realities.

40 Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual*: 23.

Virtual reality does not hack the brain. It hacks perception. It tries to immerse the perceptive organs in a different sensory "bath," but the immersion is never complete because the brain keeps its reference points and remains anchored in the real. Therefore, it does not lead to a switch from one state to another, or to an effective cut-off from reality, but rather to a cohabitation of two perceptual states that play precisely on their articulation. If this coexistence of states, or better, this redoubling, is perceived as a limit, it seems to us, on the contrary to, that it constitutes a richness. It is in this sense that we can apprehend the virtual experience, thanks to Gestalt Theory, as an edge or a surface of contact which offers the remarkable possibility to be *here* and *elsewhere* at the same time. Because the singularity of the virtual resides in this constitutive duality, the term "immersion" thus seems to characterize less the virtual experience itself than the general phenomenon of virtualization at work in our digital societies.

By working on this dual relationship between the real and the virtual, *Encounters* ultimately seeks to be faithful to the promise suggested in its title, namely to amplify the quantity of our meaningful actions in relation to the world. A true "encounter" does indeed change the way we see and act. This is undoubtedly an underlying desire in any encounter, but it is even more so in the context of a project that is an ecological fable, with which the author wishes to show, through simulation, that another future is possible and that it is up to us to make it happen.

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