

Phenomenology of VR Images: Phantasy, Image and Perception

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to offer a phenomenological description of VR images and their experience. In the first section, I briefly present the peculiar features of these kinds of images; in the second section, I compare VR images with *phantasms*, especially in the light of the idea of “presentification” (*Vergegenwärtigung*), and then I discuss the reality or unreality of VR image-objects; the third section elaborates an analysis of VR images according to the notions of image object (*Bildobjekt*), and discusses the issue of “presence” both of the representing image and the user; finally, in the last section, I focus on the correlated experience of the subject, which I describe as a *switching* between image consciousness and perceptual apprehension.

Keywords: Virtual reality, phantasy, image, perception, an-icon.

1. *The An-Icon*¹

Contemporary image metamorphoses continuously challenge the traditional image paradigm. Virtual reality (VR) images, i.e., the environmental images experienced through VR helmets, offer a peculiar experience, which still needs to be fully investigated. In fact, by wearing a HMD (head-mounted display) device the user is sealed inside a digital image-world, as the perception of the space outside is interrupted. The images visualized in the helmet

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simulate the depth of a space thanks to stereoscopic lenses placed inside it. The result is that the image occupies the entire field of vision, and appears literally unframed² *again and again*, as it extends to the limits of the user's gaze. Thus, one has the impression of being inside what appears to all intents and purposes to be a traversable environment³. The external world *visually* simply disappears, so that users feel surrounded by images to 360 degrees. This immediateness is possible because the medium responsible for the projection aims at being "transparent." According to the idea of "transparent immediacy"—which refers to "a medium whose purpose is to disappear" (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 21)—VR headsets seek to create a non-mediated experience of the image-world, although in order to elicit this transparency, the images paradoxically need to be hypermediated. In other words, this is a case where "media display something without displaying themselves" (Wiesing 2010: 123), since the medium is not *visible* at all. Considering their peculiarity, VR images constitute a category in their own right, which, in accordance with Pinotti, is named "an-icons": "[VR] Images are consequently transformed into habitable environments, which tend to negate themselves as representational images of something—i.e., as icons: they are veritable 'an-icons'" (Pinotti 2017: 1)⁴.

Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of this kind of experience is the feeling evoked in the user: a strong sense of presence—above all understood as *spatial* presence (Schubert 2009, Slater 2009)—defined in the literature as *being there* (Ijsselstein and Riva 2003). VR offers something which goes beyond the mere contemplation of the image, as users are actually inside it, at least with their gaze. Although it is often interpreted as an evolution of the cinematic *point-of-view shot*, namely the *first person shot*, which "constitutes the immediate *transcription* of a subjective experience of an embodied grasp of the world and implies a relationship of symbiosis and hybridisation between a human subject and a camera" (Eugeni 2015: 52, emphasis added), what happens in VR worlds is almost the opposite. The crucial difference lies in the performing acts of the subject. Whereas in the movie image the viewer identifies with a point of view that is already prescribed, i.e., everyone will see the same scenes, in the VR experience the visualised image depends on the bodily experience of the user (Dalmasso 2019). To be more precise, VR images are a set of images created in synchrony with the movements of the user's head and body. It must be emphasised that different experiences allow for different *degrees of freedom*, i.e., different capacities of movement in virtual space. Some offer 3-DoF, three degrees of freedom, that allow users to enjoy an experience limited to head

² On the notion of "unframing" see Conte 2020.

³ In this respect, Tavinor (2021) speaks about the property of VR of being a "virtual remediation of spatial experience".

⁴ Here, I only have had the chance to briefly describe this type of image. However, we have presented the main features necessary to develop the analysis, and besides, other specifics will emerge in the development of the essay. For a detailed overview of An-Iconology see Pinotti 2021 and 2018.

movements. Others, in contrast, offer 6-DoF, six degrees of freedom, which allow free movement within the room or a circumscribed area. Depending on the different degrees of freedom, different kinaesthetic sensations occur. In the case of 6-DoF, the association between visual and kinaesthetic sensations maintains the same structure: as one varies, the other varies (see Bandi 2021). What is in play here is a “being positioned” in this image-space, where our own body and its ability to move are also directly engaged and challenged. In a nutshell, a completely different type of aesthetic experience occurs that needs to be clarified, an exhaustive description of which nevertheless takes account of their essential ambiguity: being *spatialised*.

While an initial phenomenological analysis of the perception of space in VR environments has already been undertaken (Bandi 2021, Champion 2021 and 2019), this contribution presents an investigation which, in a phenomenological framework, can describe the *essence* of this experience from the perspective of image consciousness. I will take as my point of reference the concepts developed in Husserl’s lectures collected in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (Husserl 2005). My aim is not to force a theory formulated at the beginning of the last past century to describe a much more recent phenomenon. Rather, in the spirit of Husserl’s lectures, which aim to investigate the structures of our experience of the world, I am convinced that the VR image brings into play a new object to be thematised, the experience of which can be comprehensively described on the basis of the principles disclosed by this method.

The argument will be developed as follows: 1) I will attempt to highlight those elements which allow us to distinguish VR images from phantasy images, within the debate about the reality or unreality of virtual objects; 2) subsequently, I try to conceive of the experience of VR images as a particular form of image consciousness, focusing especially on the component of the image object; 3) finally I propose that the particular mode of consciousness enacted in the VR experience is to be positioned somewhere between image consciousness and perceptual apprehension.

2. VR Image-Object Between Phantasy and Reality

The literature on virtual reality often—perhaps inevitably—questions the character of reality or unreality inherent in virtual image-objects, resulting in debates which all too frequently mix purely aesthetic issues with ontological concerns. Nonetheless, these debates make intuitive sense. Once the helmet is put on, the user is confronted with digital objects which, given their insubstantiality and mode of fruition—most often solipsistic experiences—tend possibly to resemble hallucinations. It is no coincidence that virtual reality is often associated with dreams and lucid dreams.

A brief distinction among these terms (dream, lucid dream and hallucination) is needed to highlight the analogies with virtual worlds. Antti Revonsuo,

by his *Threat Simulation Theory*, defining what dreams are, makes a direct comparison with virtual reality:

In their overall form, dreams are like virtual realities, or immersive hallucinations that simulate the perceptual world. We find ourselves fully immersed in the dream world, interacting with its hallucinatory objects, observing its events, and communicating with its (imaginary) inhabitants. (Revonsuo 2018: 8)

But if we only realize that we are dreaming once we have woken up, the idea of lucid dreaming may be more appropriate to describe this type of experience. Jaron Lanier, the “father” of VR, summarizes the definition of lucid dreams, inspired by LaBerge’s theory (1985), in this way:

Lucid dreaming means you become aware within your dream that you’re dreaming. [...] you can direct the events of the dream. You can fly or will diamond palaces into being. It can feel not only ‘real,’ but realer than real, even though you know it isn’t. (Lanier 2017: § Nautical Dawn)

Also, Revonsuo provides a definition of what “lucidity” is, which is clearly helpful in understanding the analogy with VR: “Lucidity is like an awakening within the dream. It is to possess the revelatory knowledge that the whole world around me right now is unreal or hallucinatory, none of the objects or persons around me really exist, and they are mere inventions of my dreaming mind.” (Revonsuo 2018: 117)

Another frequent analogy used to describe VR is hallucination. The relevant feature of this psychic phenomenon in this respect is evident from this concise definition:

Hallucination involves belief in the empirically real precisely because of the vivid sensory quality of hallucinated content. We adhere to the reality of what we hallucinate inasmuch as it appears to us not only as the sort of thing that could be perceived (this is true of many things we imagine) but as actually perceived. By “actually” is meant perceived in the present as an occupant of the very same spatio-temporal field in which one is situated oneself. (Casey 2003: 77)

In this acceptance, the hallucination brings into play the question about the actual perception of a fictional or imaginary object which is pivotal in VR.⁵

In this respect, one of the most famous examples is the study carried out by David Chalmers, who investigates the status of the objects represented in the VR image. In his *The Virtual and The Real*, confronting virtual realism and virtual

⁵ For an in-depth look at the analogies and mediarchaeological perspectives linking dreams and virtual reality, but also film studies, see Grossi 2021. For an exhaustive description of hallucinations, see Ratcliffe 2017; for a phenomenological inquiry on of this phenomenon, see Giorgi 2003.

unrealism, he comes to the conclusion that virtual reality should be considered as a genuine reality and virtual objects as real digital objects (Chalmers 2017: 309). In his view, virtual objects are real because they have digital structures “which are grounded in computational processes which are themselves grounded in physical processes on one or more computers” (2017: 311). Furthermore, the author stresses the reality of these objects to support the idea that events really do take place in VR, and so they are as valuable as those in the physical world. In general, I would agree with considering virtual objects as digital, i.e., computer-generated and characterized by a material structure that is in no way perceived. However, Chalmers fails to address a preliminary issue: virtual worlds, as well as the digital objects within them, are (part of) the VR images that are displayed. Therefore, I would like to start precisely from this assumption to try to understand how images, through these media, are considered digital objects and “perceived” as such. This issue, after all, echoes the well-known topics of the reality or unreality of fantastic objects, as well as that of the image object in pictures. To put it another way, does this objecthood attributed to these images make them somehow similar to the *phantasms* of imagination⁶?

Husserl’s first lectures on phantasy (1904–1905) highlight a clear opposition between ordinary perception and phantasy, which implies two different types of *emergences* of content: on the one hand, the *presentification* (*Vergegenwärtigung*)⁷ of something to oneself *internally*, typical of phantasy; and on the other hand, an *external* appearing of something as *present* (*gegenwärtig Erscheinen*), required by perception (Husserl 2005: 3). These descriptions, focused by the opposition between *presentification* and *actual presence*, makes evident that “Phantasying is set in opposition to perceiving [*Wahrnehmung*]” (2005: 4).

In light of this, at first glance it would seem that VR images have nothing to do with *phantasms*. VR image-objects cannot be compared to fantastic images, since, in the first place, they are not the result of an *internal* presentification, that is to say, they are not solipsistic images created by a re-productive imagination. Although they retain a dreamlike aura—digital objects seem to appear almost magically—they are always designed by someone else; secondly, VR experiences are shareable and replicable, and may even engage several people, unlike objects of imagination.

⁶For an accurate analysis of phantasy consciousness, i.e., the “constitutional performance” in involved in it, and the comparison with the individuation of real objects, see Lohmar 2020; for an in-depth examination of the development of phantasy consciousness and image consciousness in Husserl’s thought, see Rozzoni 2020 and 2021.

⁷In this paper I follow the translation of “*Vergegenwärtigung*” as “presentification”, as in O’Shiel 2022, instead of the “re-presentation” as in the English translation (Husserl 2005) by John B. Brough, since the first term highlights more deeply the connection with the concept of “*Gegenwärtigung*,” that is “presence.” I will also insert here in parentheses, as throughout the paper, the words in the original language, when I feel it necessary to point out moments where the English seems to lose the meaning of the terms, or to point out some linguistic similarities that are inevitably lost in translation.

So why focus on phantasy when it comes to VR? In what respects can this description of the experience possibly help to describe that of virtual reality?

However, despite these differences, the apprehension of the phantasy image helps to outline some characteristics of the VR image-object. In the same way as the former, indeed, “it is as though it were, but only as though” (2005: 18), and “hovers before us” (2005: 20). For instance, we cannot say that a blanket that I experience in a virtual environment *presents* itself in the same way as a woollen one. The blanket in VR certainly does not allow us to cover ourselves and keep ourselves warm. It cannot perform the basic functions of the woollen blanket, as in the case of *phantasms*. However, although we can still re-shape it, grasp it, move it or even tear it up just like a real one, it “appears in a sense entirely different from the sense in which the subject [*die Sache*] appears” (2005: 20). A clarification is necessary here. As Wiesing also states, in the wake of Sartre, only perception can “surprise” us again and again. In the case of the imaginary object, the subjects always and only find what they put there. Here, too, the VR image-world lies somewhere between perception and phantasy: on the one hand in the VR world, we can only experience the (sometimes many) possibilities offered by VR creators—in a way similar to the “passivity” of the actual perception mentioned by O’Shiel (2022: 61); but at the same time, these worlds are so unexpected that they manage to surprise users in a similar way to reality. (Wiesing 2010: 97–99).

Notwithstanding that perception and phantasy are distinctly different—since “perception makes a present reality appear to us as present [*gegenwärtige*]”, whereas phantasy “lacks the consciousness of reality” (Husserl 2005: 4)—they still have something in common. Both situations imply a representation (*Vorstellung*), here understood as “apprehension” (*Auffassung*), i.e., as that which “produces the appearing in intentional acts independently of believing or not believing” (2005:10). So, in both cases, whether one is confronted with an object in the flesh or experiencing a phantasy image, one is faced firstly with an apprehension, without expressing a judgement on its believability. This common very first approach to the two phenomena is something that can be relevant for VR image-objects too. Although they are images, they emerge as three-dimensional and even circumnavigable objects, effectively enjoying a status that we could define as intermediate between internal presentification and external appearance as described above. They seem to presuppose, to use Husserl’s vocabulary, a different way of being, which I might call a kind of *external presentification*, meaning “external” in this context as something that happens outside the subjective solipsistic mind and can therefore be shared inter-subjectively.

3. VR Image-Object as Bildobjekt

As we have seen, although they have a strong protean component, VR image-objects cannot be assimilated to phantastic objects. Although it seems

somewhat counter-intuitive, one must then look upon VR images as what they are: physical images. However, considering the traditional meanings (*Bildding*, *Bildobjekt*, *Bildsujet*) with which the phenomenology refers to the physical image, VR seems to redefine this description. In my view, the short-circuiting effect and ambiguity of VR images lies precisely in the different relationship between these three components: the material support of the image (image carrier), the representing image, and the object (if any) to which the image refers.

Let us therefore proceed in order. Indeed, the first difference from the usual physical image can be noted in the relationship between *Bildding* and *Bildobjekt*, i.e., between the material thing and the image representation. As I briefly mentioned at the beginning, the aim of VR technology is precisely that the material substrate supporting the image—i.e., the two stereoscopic lenses onto which high-definition images are projected together with HMDs—is not perceived. Although VR helmets are far from transparent media—anyone who has tried wearing a helmet for more than twenty minutes knows what I mean—the impression of being “in contact” with the image in an unmediated manner is still incredible. Thus, the question is how this feature changes our experience of the image.

Due to the transparency of the image carrier, what seems to be missing in the perception of the VR image is precisely a sort of *double apprehension process* that the physical image requires (2005: §22). When the beholders stand in front of a painting, the physical image is perceived together with the image object, which is finally *presentified* through a perceptual (*perzeptive*) process—which is also defined as *perceptual phantasy* (2005: 605). In contrast, VR images do away with this process of double apprehension as just described. Related to this is the constitutive lack of adherence of the VR image to surroundings. This must be attributed to the corresponding absence of the device which has historically allowed for the distinction between an inside and an outside with respect to the image: the frame. I stress this point because Husserl of course recognises the importance of the device in determining what is a physical image and what is not (2005: 49); but more importantly, through it, he establishes the ontological difference between objects properly seen and those “quasi-seen” (2005: 50). The frame, in this way, seems to suggest *how* we should look.

Conversely, the VR image presents itself as an environmental image, since the visual field beyond the image vanishes completely. This eliminates that constitutive *contrast* which in the case of the physical image allows us to distinguish the apprehension of the material from the apprehension of the image object. In the case of VR there is then no “triumph” (2005: 50) of the image object over the physical image. Here, we are presented with the first evidence: the image carrier, while we are perceiving the image itself, becomes transparent. In fact, once the helmet is put on, it is no longer within our field of vision (only haptically, we might say, since we perceive its weight); while the lenses, the true support on which the images appear, are so close to the eyes that they too are invisible, making the image seemingly *unmediated*. Virtual reality thus

forces the relationship between *Bildding* and *Bildobjekt* to be set aside, as the physical image seems to be absent from my perception. For these reasons, the VR image-object must be considered *only* an image object.

Let us return for a moment to the original question of the reality or unreality of VR image-objects. Perhaps, following a more rigorously phenomenological method, we can exercise a kind of *epoché* with respect to the question of the existence of virtual objects, maintaining the focus of the investigation on the structural aspects of our perceptual experience. As De Warren reminds us with regard to imaginary objects:

[...] the question of “existence”—of whether imagined objects exist or not, or possess a special form of existence—is to be bracketed or neutralised, thus allowing for a genuinely phenomenological account of the constitution of imaginary objects in their distinctive form of transcendence as unities of meaning and their corresponding form of givenness, or manifestation, in experience. (De Warren 2014: 98)

I agree that we should comprehend what sort of objects we are talking about by describing the subject's acts towards, in this context, the virtual object. But in the case of the *Bildobjekt*, we are essentially dealing with something that is ambiguous from the very beginning, since it is neither a thing nor a fantasy image. We are dealing with something that “truly does not exist” (Husserl 2005: 23).

Although, as I said, the *contrast* with the “real outside” of the image may slip away, it is difficult to set aside definitively the ostensibly *unreal* character of this type of image. Nevertheless, as in image consciousness the image object has, in fact, the character of *non-existence*, so does the VR image-object. It is, indeed, a kind of intermediate entity, which differs from the medium on which it is depicted, but at the same time does not have the evidence of the thing. No one would ever say, even in front of the most hyperrealist painting, that we are actually seeing the person, the object, the landscape depicted. However, it is precisely through the ambiguity of the *Bildobjekt* that beholders understand that set of signs as person, object, landscape without, however, perceiving them fully. This is clearly stated by Husserl when, referring to the perception of a painting, he speaks about the image object depicted in it as something that in fact does not exist *per se*:

What does actually exist there, apart from the “painting” as a physical thing, the piece of canvas with its determinate distribution of colour pigments, is *a certain complex of sensations* that the spectator contemplating the painting experiences in himself, as well as the apprehension and meaning that he bases on this complex so that the consciousness of the image occurs for him. (2005: 23, emphasis added)

Even VR image perception can be conceived of as a set of sensations, evoking a certain consciousness of the image. And yet, this experience raises a number

of other questions, and that is probably because the “intermediate position of the image object between the objects of perception and the objects of phantasy [...] is by no means the same for each and every image medium—quite the contrary” (Wiesing 2010: 92). Can the fact that the image object is presented in a virtual environment make the same conclusion less effective? Namely, that the represented object does not really exist, but what exists is the apprehension of a set of sensations that lead us to “objectivise” the image? Let us ponder the question. The canvas exists in the same way as the lenses that accommodate the digital images in the VR helmet. But if nobody could ever state that “the potato eaters exist” in the same way that the physical medium on which they are depicted exists, why should we say that about VR image-objects? Does the fact that they appear to us as three-dimensional, that one can “apparently” walk around them, interact with them—that is, manipulate their shape, position and appearance—*ipso facto* make these objects *more* existent⁸?

I would disagree. I must then say, even in this case—and perhaps even more radically—that objectifying consciousness takes over, and “brings about from the content’s *blind factual being* the apprehending of the content as objectively this or that” (Husserl 2005: 24, emphasis added). Similarly, Sartre in his *Psychology of Imagination* (1936) gives the example of the relationship between the material support and the content depicted in a portrait in terms of “quasi-face,” emphasising how a certain arrangement of signs cannot but lead us to an objectification of what is represented:

The material of a portrait is a quasi-face. [...] As a matter of fact, the spontaneity of consciousness is strongly aroused—these forms, these colours, so strongly organised, proclaim themselves as being almost the image of Peter. If a notion strikes me to *perceive* these elements, they resist. (Sartre 1948: 72)

The VR object does not exist: there are a series of signs which as a whole evoke an objectivity, and furthermore there are a series of these images which, in a perceptual sequence, allow us to objectify VR image-objects, *as if they were* perceivable objects. In short, just like every image object, they are “intentional object[s]” (Wiesing 2010: 19). I return here to the area of the “but only as though” which characterised phantasy apprehension and which is quite close to the expression “blind factual being” of content concerning the physical image. In truth, the image object already has a constitutive ambiguity in itself: to describe its particular state, Wiesing speaks of an “artificial

⁸ Perhaps this last point is the most delicate. Here we will not address the issue of the interactivity of virtual worlds. This is indeed another element that complicates the ontological investigation of virtual reality. Moreover, both VR and AR not only allow for interactions with the environment, but also offer the possibility of intersubjective interactivity in a shared virtual world (Slater and Usoh 1994; Schroeder 2002), which sometimes results in the creation of new collective subjects with shared perceptions, intentions and needs (Hunter, Soro and Brown 2021).

presence,” defined as “not a real,” “physics-free presence to the object of image perception” (Wiesing 2014: 137), “without substantial attendance” (Wiesing 2010: 20).

Indeed, the VR image-object makes this ambiguity even more intricate as result of the peculiarity of its medium and the experience related to it. Stating that VR image-objects have a kind of artificial presence does not seem to fully describe their condition. If they cannot be said to exist in the same way as physical things, as mentioned above, we can nevertheless recognise them as having a kind of opaque, momentary existence and as being, above all, *necessarily linked to users*. In fact, users through their head and body movements, and consequently by their own visual process, create *their own* experience step by step. Since the VR image-object is *constituted* by the interaction with the experiencer, its presence must be defined a “quasi-presence” (Dufrenne 1973: 351, Carbone 2022), because the object is not just “reduced to visibility” (Wiesing 2010: 51). The relationship between users and image is much more *essential* than in physical images *tout court*. In the wake of Dufrenne’s theory of aesthetic experience, which configures the spectator as both *witness* and *performer* (Dufrenne 1973, Bandi 2018), it can be argued that, in this specific case, the role of the percipient subject is not only aimed at the objectification of a content: the VR image-object is literally *constituted* by the user’s *kinaesthetic visualization*.

4. *The Experiencer In Between Image Consciousness and Perception*

Taking my cue from the series of questions proposed by Wiesing to clarify the perception of images (Wiesing 2014), I must add one more to elucidate the VR image experience: *what happens to me* when I experience an immersive VR image, that is, a VR image-world? So, as the image object in the frame is “quasi-seen” (Husserl 2005: 50), should it be stated that VR object-images are seen *properly*?

We might then ask ourselves *how* we perceive the VR image, as the contrast with the external world falls away. Undoubtedly it is not a “quasi-observation” as Sartre describes the experience of the imaginary object, i.e., a process that teaches nothing (Sartre 1948: 13; see also O’Shiel 2022: 59) since there we find only what we have placed. In immersive virtual environments, we are in fact not faced with a lack of grip on the object: the user is called upon to freely perceive and explore the images of the environment and the objects represented in it, drawing from them unseen aspects, as if, indeed, they were real objects. The immediate succession of new images which are continuously created according to the movements made by the user, namely the *experiencer* (Pinotti 2017: 3), allows us to speak of an actual *observation*. In short, we are confronted with the image of an object that at least *visually* responds to us as an actual object.

We find ourselves transported into another world of which we feel to all, or almost all, intents and purposes to be a part. This is the much-discussed issue of presence⁹ elicited by VR worlds: the feeling of *being there*, in a certain environment, as if we were actually teleported into another dimension. Completely reversing what Wiesing states about the relationship between spectator and image (Wiesing 2014: 145), we can argue that in an-icons the experiencer is there, participates, is part of the event, and, finally, belongs to it. In a way, this sense of presence can be again analogous to that conveyed by the apprehension of a phantasy image when it is particularly vivid. Since the object presents itself as if it were actually in front of us, we feel ourselves to be in a corresponding perception (Husserl 2005: 33–34). The condition of the VR user could also be likened to a certain extent to the experience—always pertaining to the phantasy world—of the ego that “immerses” itself in the picture. If the ego “live[s] entirely in the image”, so as to be “part of it” the result is a perceptual (*perzeptives*) ego “though not a positing” (2005: 557) one. The words, borrowed from Husserl’s lectures, which are addressed to a different kind of immersion¹⁰—similar perhaps to the “dream” that Kurosawa makes us experience, in which the protagonist enters Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Crows*—can also describe *analogously* at least a part of users’ VR experiences. However, no matter how convincing phantasy or virtual images are, we will never say that we feel as present as in a physical space. Therefore, in virtual reality the subject feels part of an *image-world* (*Bildwelt*)—not of a *quasi*-world of phantasy (2005: 642), but rather as in theatre (2005: 585)—to which both the image-object and the subject belong. Just as there is no possibility of confusion between VR object of phantasy and physical thing—since, as already observed, the one is *externally presentified*, or *quasi-present*, and the other is *present*.

According to O’Shiel, VR is a case of “virtual technology”, part of what he calls “irreal virtualities”, namely “any aspect of self, world, others and value that are implicitly (or explicitly) operative on the level of presentification and

⁹ The notion of “presence” in VR studies refers initially to the notion of “telepresence” (Minsky 1980, Sheridan 1992), which indicates the possibility of acting in a physical space from a distance through the exchange of information. In recent studies, it refers to “presence” as the feeling of inhabiting different forms of virtual environments (Slater and Wilbur 1997, Slater 2018). A peculiar case is the “Break in presence” (BIP) described by Slater and Steed 2000, when users stop responding to the VR environment and instead start responding to their physical environment.

¹⁰ As Wiesing argues, “So-called immersive images are [...] not reinventing immersion” (Wiesing 2014: 142). Various devices, from the oldest to the most contemporary, have tried to elicit in viewers the sensation of being surrounded and elsewhere (Grau 2004): either images or environments explicitly aimed at that kind of sensation, such as panoramas or the more recent Caves; or media that are not explicitly immersive but can be considered as such in an indirect way, such as television. However, if one can speak of degrees, virtual reality aims at a users’ total immersion—at least visually—which makes it distinctive from other media. In other words, unlike other images, virtual reality is constitutively immersive.

imagination, as opposed to presentation and perception” (O’Shiel 2022: 118). The opposition does not seem so clear. Or rather, the aim of this medium, its specificity, is to challenge where these “aspects” operate, whether at the level of presentification or presentation, that is, whether at the level of imaging or perceiving.

Hence, it is now necessary to turn to actual perception—conceived of in the most straightforward way in these terms: “I am perceiving and living in the perceptual world, actually comporting myself toward it in such and such a way” (Husserl 2005: 558)—to understand if, in VR, it makes sense to talk about perception. So, for this last step of our argumentation, it is useful to consider first this passage, where Husserl describes a particular case which occurs in certain deceptions:

The frequently mentioned deceptions *à la* the waxworks, the panorama, and so on, show that the transformation of an image phenomenon through the ceasing of the imaginative function allows an ordinary perceptual apprehension [*gewöhnliche Wahrnehmungsauffassung*] to come forth, perhaps even a full perception furnished with normal belief. [...] If we suddenly become conscious of the deception, image consciousness makes its appearance. But image consciousness does not succeed in lasting in such cases. (2005: 43)

It seems then that some depicting experiences offer something similar to what we experience in perception *tout court*. Just as the spectators inside the panorama were *immersed* in the image and for a moment felt themselves inside the scene being observed, in the same way the images in VR headsets evoke the same feeling of immersion, which leads to an ordinary perceptual apprehension. To be more precise, the process that is enacted seems to be a *switching* between image consciousness and perceptual apprehension: in such examples, from an image consciousness a perceptual apprehension emerges. Inside VR worlds this is exactly what happens: we are aware that we are looking at an image, yet we cannot help but *address* that image as if it were a real world filled with real objects.

Therefore, involving perception in this analysis is not meant to lead to the conclusion that VR is dangerously close to reality, so much so as “to supplant, or even ultimately replace, the real and perceptual” (O’Shiel 2022: 182). Nor is it the case that “the viewer of this image *believes* the seen image object not to be an image object, but a real thing.” (Wiesing 2014: 141, emphasis added). Although it may seem a nuance, I think that this is the crux of the issue with VR images. In effect, the experiencer looks at the virtual object as a real thing, but does not confuse (Wiesing 2010: 87) one with the other, as when one wears a helmet, there is not really a “believing” at stake. In comparison to the ordinary perceptual experience of the thing—and thus not the mere perception (*Perzeption*) but perception in the sense of “taking as true”

[*Wahrnehmung*]*—*the VR object lacks the complexity involved in ordinary perception, where the visual field exists in a multifaceted intertwining with the other sensory fields (Husserl 2005: 74). The user is always aware of being inside an image-world, that which I called an *external presentification*, and not a presence.

I have, however, spoken of *switching*. Indeed, it is not that the user is actually deceived: we are experiencing an image, yet “the perceptual consciousness [*Wahrnehmungsbewusstsein*] momentarily prevails again and again” (2005: 43, emphasis added). It is then in this comparison that the experience offered by VR can be fully described. Just as in the case of the mannequin mistaken for a man, *I can* continue to perceive it as a man despite knowing that it is not a real man, so in the same way I can persist in an ordinary perceptual apprehension despite knowing that it is an image. At the basis, then, of this *switching to* is the will, a pact, that the *experiencers* enter into with the environmental image: despite knowing that it is an image, they treat it *as if* it were a real space. In short, a real and continuous *suspension of disbelief* does not occur, even if the immersive nature of VR images leads us *momentarily, again and again*, to allow a perceptual consciousness to arise.

In conclusion, to go briefly back over the points of the argument developed so far, we can state that the experience of the VR image is not to be described in the terms of phantasy image, as its form of *presentification* is external (namely not solipsistic), shareable and replicable. VR images are physical images, even if we are not able to visualize the image carrier responsible for the traditional contrast between the object itself and the representing image. However, a specific kind of objectification occurs in VR experience, as the experiencer through her kinaesthetic visualisation constitutes step by step the scenario, as well as the objects depicted inside it. Finally, in virtual reality there emerges *momentarily* from the initial image consciousness an apprehension analogous to ordinary perception.

To sum up, the phantasmagorical spectacles that anyone who has ever worn a VR helmet experiences turn out to be once again the product of a peculiar relationship between subject and image which, through a specific medium, allows for a type of (*quasi-*)total immersiveness in an image-world. What we therefore experience must be classified among the phenomena of image-consciousness, at times traversed by a perceptive attitude, although the user is never deceived: the experiencers, although they are aware of being surrounded only by images, *act* in an ephemeral *play* wherein the visual contents of VR pretend to be real objects.

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