

The Closure of Imagination: The Poetics of Virtual Reality and the Body

In his Introduction to the popular anthology *Storming the Reality Studio*, Larry McAffery suggests at least one respect in which there is really nothing new about the kind of cognitive problems posed by virtual reality. In the work of writers as diverse as William Burroughs, John Barth, and William Gibson, prophesies can be heard portending some totally unprecedented, cybernetic version of the fictional. Yet according to McAffery, many of the manifest metaphysical and epistemological quandaries presented by this call for a poetics of virtual reality in cyberpunk and postmodern fiction, "can be framed within age-old, venerable terminologies that go back as far as Plato and Eastern mysticism: What is real and what is illusion? What does it mean to be "alive" or "dead"? to be "conscious"? to be "immortal"? ... (With the advent of virtual reality) speculative abstractions have now suddenly become literalized" (11).

With that said we will, for the most part, leave aside the kind of grand metaphysical questions that McAffery catalogues in this paper. Instead, we confine ourselves to a somewhat narrower, but no less important, range of "speculative abstractions" about imaginative freedom and the relationship between the human body and its instruments: abstractions which are also now suddenly literalized with the emergence of virtual reality. In particular, we want to suggest how a certain conception of cybernetic fiction can inform a kind of thought experiment concerning various ideas associated with the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In general, as technology advances and as the techniques of virtual reality become more refined, widespread and interconnected, we surmise that there will be a need to re-think Sartre's concept of imagination and, perhaps, to adopt a view more like that of Merleau-Ponty.

In works such as *What is Literature?*, Sartre privileged fiction over other art forms because he thought that consciousness had to purchase its freedom of creative activity in imagination by forfeiting the solidity of the real world in perception. In *The Psychology of Imagination*, he writes that: "the world of the imaginary is completely isolated, I can only enter it by unrealizing myself" (1948, 100), and indeed, the whole of Sartre's radically dualistic — indeed, essentially Cartesian — account of existence can be seen as positing an uncompromising antagonism between the real and the imaginary.

By the same token, however, it is precisely this presumed division between imaginative freedom and perceptual solidity that a poetics of virtual reality calls into question. It is, in fact, already becoming possible to enter fictional worlds not only through narrative and "inward" visual imagining, but also perceptually and physically through bodily motion. Thus it would seem to be at least noteworthy that the *poïésis* of virtual reality cannot be the product of anything that Sartre would recognize as imagination, in the phenomenological sense of a cognitive activity that is *essentially* free and wholly distinct from the realm of perception. It may at first blush seem strange that we would want to conjoin Sartre and Merleau-Ponty — those perhaps rather *passé* philosophers of existentialism — with the chic new domain of virtual reality. There are, however, at least two good reasons for making this connection.

First, as Richard Kearney has shown in his recent book *Poetics of Imagination*, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty rank among the preeminent theorists of imagination. In the phenomenological tradition, of which both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are emblematic, the concept of imagination plays a crucial role and receives a precise formulation. Following Husserl, phenomenologists distinguish imagination from perception, as Kearney explains, "not by reference to the objects it intends, but reference to the act of intending" (49). It follows that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are at least officially committed to articulating the concept of imagination not in terms of the *objects* of consciousness but in terms of the various ways of being *conscious* of objects. As we shall see, virtual reality can be seen as a particularly fruitful problem case with which to confront their respective views.

Secondly, as we have tried to show in some of our previous research (see Kujundžić and Buschert), Sartre and Merleau-Ponty also have rather surprising views on the relationship between the human body and its instruments, views which are particularly relevant to the possibilities of cybernetic fiction. In contrast to some other theorists of the "continental" canon — notably Heidegger and the Frankfurt School — Sartre and Merleau-Ponty can be read as asserting that no sharp boundary can be drawn between the "authentic" human body and the array of instruments which enfold and extend it. On the contrary, there are no intrinsic qualities which exclusively constitute the human body as human; instead, the body *inter-reacts* with the world in various ways. For both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the body (transitively) *lives* its instruments, weaving with them an intricate web of habitual experiences and actions, actions which shape the world while at the same time being shaped by it. It is to this facet of our argument that we turn first.

Sartre tends to emphasize only one aspect, or, perhaps more accurately, one *direction* of the body/instrument inter-reaction. For Sartre, the body is ascribed an uncanny status, it is "perpetually the *surpassed*." It could, in fact, be said that consciousness *exists* its own body. The Sartrean idea of being-for-itself can thus be understood as the respect in which consciousness integrates itself as a source

of decisions and as a commitment to freedom. Being-for-itself *lives* its body, as, in turn, being-for-itself can also "live" an instrument, incorporating it or inhabiting it.

In contrasting Sartre with Merleau-Ponty on this point, the problematic concept is that of *human action*, which can be thought of as embodying either an existential project, a possibility of freedom and choice (Sartre) or a constitution and self-discovery of fundamental meaning (Merleau-Ponty).

Our transitive use of the verb "to exist" illustrates some of the fundamental tensions in Sartre's existentialism generally. With respect to both the body/instrument relation and the concept of imagination, the one fundamental idea at work is Sartre's distinction between *objective* and *existential* relations. As Sartre puts it: "The relation between the body-as-point-of-view and things is an objective relation and the relation of consciousness to the body is an existential relation" (1965, 334).

Of course Sartre does not want to suggest, at least explicitly, any anachronistic, metaphysical mind-body dualism. Instead, he establishes this distinction with respect to a twofold quality of experience that results from the interaction of consciousness and knowledge. For Sartre, consciousness and the body represent simultaneously an organic unity and an existential integrity. Thus the distinction between objective and existential relations cuts across the presumed division of consciousness from the body and thereby provides the ontological ground upon which the integration of instruments takes place. In other words, the existential mode of experience is, for Sartre, the quality that makes humans human — the ontological source and ground for freedom, for the possibility of choice.

Our capacity to choose does not, however, empower being-for-itself to freely decide the scale or the context of our engagement with the world. Understanding leads to decisions, not vice versa. It also imposes limitations on what Sartre terms our "upsurge into the world," constituting that world in a Husserlian manner as the "cultural world." Understanding is, in this sense, a continuous and open-ended project of drawing the line between the alien and the familiar, the far and the near, illusion and reality.

By contrast, Merleau-Ponty maintains in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that: "To plunge into action is, from the subject's point of view, an original way of relating himself to the object, and is on the same footing as perception" (111). This suggests a main point of contact with Sartre and an important feature of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in its own right — its emphasis on our commitment to acting-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is situated between two different forms of movement: "concrete" movement and "abstract" movement, as he explains: "the background to concrete movement is the world as given, whereas the background to abstract movement is built up." In other words, concrete movement can be thought of as "centrifugal," always getting outside,

confronting and confirming the faces and shapes of the world, whereas abstract movement gets inside, to the paths of the body's own physiognomy.

As with Sartre, the role of instruments is of crucial importance. Objects are appropriated, or — even closer to Merleau-Ponty's conception — *incorporated* as instruments in two ways: abstractly and concretely. As with Sartre, the body can be understood itself as a kind of instrument, but in a rather different sense. The body, for Merleau-Ponty, can best be described as an immense and intricate living *instrument for understanding* — as a living system of meanings.

In integrating and incorporating the totality of the life-world, the human body does not dissolve. It remains capable of being the centre around which all intentional threads are spun. It retains its own physiognomy, not as an absolute, godly image of authentic human being unaffected by its environment, but as a psychological/physiological equilibrium between abstract and concrete movement woven into the fabric of understanding. This fabric simultaneously regulates and enables, by tightening and loosening its threads, as it were, the very process of the *osmosis of meaning*. It lays down paths "outside" and "inside," toward what we discover in the world and what we make of it. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty points out, to understand is to experience "the harmony between what we aim at and what is given."

To summarize this facet of our argument, it is apparent that, for Sartre, the body and its instruments can only serve the purposes of our existential project, whereas, for Merleau-Ponty, instruments yield to the ever-present physiognomical gravitation of the human body. In each case, instruments are portrayed as external, supplementary instances, but in neither case are they portrayed as *alien* substances, ontologically distanced and inaccessible.

In fact, for both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, "instrumentality" and "human existence" can be seen as referring to essentially the same phenomenon. At a minimum, they readily agree that the human body is highly interdependent with its instruments and, furthermore, that there are no apparent limits to their mutual integration. The choice to be made between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty amounts to deciding whether such integration "commits human beings to freedom," as Sartre would have it, or, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "makes the physiognomy of the human body matrix the fundament for all understanding." In making such a choice, we might turn again to the concept of imagination and the case of virtual reality.

In the popular media virtual reality has sometimes been portrayed as if it amounted to little more than a kind of individualized, multi-sensory cinema. The prospect of "cyber-sex," for example, is typically insinuated in terms of private fantasy: in particular, the ability to select options from a menu of fetishes and special interests. For that matter, the commercial virtual reality packages that have actually appeared on the market so far — such as those of the English company *Virtuality* — unsurprisingly tend toward the lowest common

denominator (both technically and aesthetically speaking) of 3D sword and sorcery games. If this were truly the extent of the poetic possibilities of virtual reality, it would not present any particularly interesting challenge to the phenomenologist's concept of imagination.

Certain aspects of cyberpunk and postmodern fiction suggest, however, that these sorts of applications might represent simply the crude beginnings of a genuinely different realm of fiction. In his novels *Count Zero* and, most notably, *Neuromancer*, William Gibson has quite convincingly — it might even be said, in the less prejudiced sense of term "realistically" — sketched out the possibility of a consensual, communally constituted realm of cyberspace. In *Count Zero*, this realm of virtual reality is dubbed "the (capital M) Matrix."

In the not-especially-distant world that Gibson describes, virtual reality has come to constitute a self-sustaining, public domain of fiction. At the mundane, technical level, participants enter the Matrix using the same sort of hardware that we associate with the inflated video games that pass for virtual reality today: headsets, sensor gloves, terminals and so on. This array of instruments is incorporated into the body in the same way as such mundane cases as wearing eyeglasses or driving a car (or even, as McLuhan would have it, extending the foot by means of the wheel) which is to say, in the way described by Merleau-Ponty. At the conceptual level, however, Gibson has identified an important respect in which things will, perhaps inevitably, be different.

Adepts participate in the virtual reality Matrix perceptually — that is by means of their senses, their bodies — but, rather like Sartre's Being-for-itself, they are not free of their own accord to determine the extent or the conditions of their involvement. Whereas Sartre assumed that whatever limits Being-for-itself, and therewith our projects of imaginative freedom, must be some aspect of the realm of objective relations, Gibson identifies another equally important constraint — the cumulative activities of our fellow participants.

At the risk of skirting the issue of metafiction, consider the example of a book. In *The Psychology of Imagination*, Sartre quite rightly maintains that if we imagine ourselves to be reading a book in a dream or reverie, we cannot, in a word, actually be *reading*. As we scan the pages in our mind's eye, as they say, we cannot locate a specific passage in a specific place, we cannot check to see if a specific word occurs in specific sentence, unless we are in fact recalling the image of a particular actual book that we have previously seen "objectively." In Sartre's terms, our inspection of the imagined book is a "quasi-observation" rather than an actual one. According to Sartre, "the object of the image is never more than the consciousness one has; it is limited by that consciousness; nothing can be learned from an image that is not already there" (1948, 12). Consider, on the other hand, a book which we might encounter in Gibson's Matrix. As far as perception is concerned, the situation is completely different. We can pick up the virtual book and actually read it. We can, should we choose to do so, count the

pages; we can learn from it. Presumably, anyone who has become adept at a reasonably advanced computer game has had a similar experience: discovering previously hidden information, or new aspects of the game at an advanced level of play.

With respect to Gibson's Matrix, however, it is crucial to notice that this difference is *not*, to use the computer scientist's terminology, equivalent to the difference between random access memory (RAM — what the user put into memory) and read only memory (ROM — what is put there by the original programmer). It is true that the efficient cause of the virtual book that we can actually read is a programmer who left it in cyberspace for us to find. We could, however, pick up our virtual pencils, so to speak, and mark up the found text, or add another text of our own. As Gibson's work suggests, cyberspace is a public domain.

In his conception of the poetics of imagination, Sartre suggested that the imagined world is necessarily a *nothingness*. With the advent of poetics of virtual reality, however, we can begin to see how imaginary worlds can be both structured and pervasive. At least potentially, the imaginary world of virtual reality is accessible and capable of being inhabited and affected in a variety of ways. Certain modes and relations of the body and its instrumental environment are transposed into the imaginary cybernetic playground, which, to repeat, should not be thought of as a species of private theatre, but as a shared three-dimensional world. In contrast to the novel, virtual reality equips its public with a fully furnished, determinate realm of imagination. The interaction of Gibson's "cowboys" and the Matrix that accommodates them is not exclusively or even primarily *verbal*, but it remains an open question as to whether this fact constrains its poetic power. After all, as structuralist critics used to contend, every novel or poem exists within a kind of (small "m") matrix; at a minimum, the conventions of narrative, enplotment, and characterization are always at work, even in their transgression.

In the end, however, it would be foolish to deny that Sartre has a point. We ignore the realm of objective relations at our peril: the "real" world (in some pragmatic sense) does exist, our imagination is constrained. It is in this respect that the most radical kind of enthusiasm for a poetics of virtual reality — namely the palimpsest upon palimpsest, hall of mirrors metaphysical perspective that marks the limit of postmodern fiction — is literally and perniciously utopian.

On the other hand, as we have tried to show, it no longer makes sense to assert, with Sartre, that in order for imagination to be existentially free it must be somehow wholly *other* than perception. A poetics of virtual reality suggests rather a *dialectical* relation between the existential and objective realms. As Merleau-Ponty's work illustrates, this dialectical relation is mediated by the body, as simultaneously an instrument of and a constraint upon our imaginative freedom.

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