

Gardens, games, and the anamorphic subject: tracing the body in the virtual landscape

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ABSTRACT: The undeclared visualist bias of contemporary theories of virtuality ignores the body/technology relation and restates the ontological assumptions of scopic Cartesianism. Virtuality is an embodied concern, however, and demands a critical/historical approach that acknowledges this. Based in phenomenology, and historically traced via eighteenth-century landscape, the embodied and affective character of interfaced being is articulated through the concept of the *anamorphic* subject.

KEYWORDS: electronic spatiality, virtual reality, virtual reality theory.

INTRODUCTION

The following argument bears witness, in part, to the ongoing significance of historical models of perspectival vision in contemporary theoretical approaches to VR and virtual space. The provenance of VR in Renaissance perspectival space is pretty much taken as a given [14, 17]; many assume, as Simon Penny does, [18] that VR is simply “a direct continuation of the tradition of illusionistic pictorial representation.” (2) But perspectival space supports a particular kind of virtuality and solicits a specific subject. The trope of the distanced, disembodied eye/I lingers, implicitly or explicitly, in twenty-first century notions of virtuality, and the subject of virtual space, by some accounts, differs little from its Renaissance predecessors.

Anyone who has ever experienced a simulation – or even set foot inside a video arcade – will be aware of the limitations of such perspectival schemas, but the same cannot be said of many of the theoretical models that are used to examine VR and virtuality. This ambivalent relation between the theory and practice of virtuality signals an even deeper and historically persistent problematic in the relation between the subject of virtuality and the body. Virtuality, as I will argue, is an embodied condition. In theory, however, it tends to be described as a mode of visual experience, whilst the body is cast as something distinct from the subject as such – as a limit to the experience of virtuality, a ‘natural’ object in need of control.

The ‘perspective paradigm’ is embedded in both historical and contemporary notions of virtuality not simply on a thematic or structural plane, but an ontological one. [8] It

shows up in descriptions of the interface as a mediator, a means of transacting, as Stone [22] writes, “between the human body (or bodies) and an associated ‘I’ (or ‘I’s).” (508) Such descriptions assume a self that can be pried apart from the body – a bias, I will argue, that also features in Lacanian accounts of subjectivity. Within such arguments, technologies of vision are taken up as tools or ocular metaphors, corrective or descriptive, rather than constitutive, of the difference between body and subject.

Interfaced being has more than one history, however, and I’m going to examine a historical discourse that points up the phenomenological complexity of the experience of virtuality. Under-represented in recent critical discussion of VR and virtuality, the discourse of landscape is a powerful historical and cultural trope and a catalyst in the persistence of the perspective paradigm and its subject. The Lacanian schema, as I will show, shares many of its key structural and ontological features with the landscape interface. In part, the latter’s strength lies in the subtlety with which it naturalizes perspectival vision, and constructs the body as part of ‘nature’. All of this is lucidly demonstrated in the eighteenth century English landscape garden. Perhaps more importantly, in the garden, we also find an ‘extravisible’ body – or an anamorphic subject, as I will term it – that consistently interferes with perspectival theories of vision and subjectivity, and a politics that insists on this body as mute. In the discourse of landscape, we find a historical precedent for something that more and more writers on VR and virtuality are coming to realize: that is, the failure of visualist histories and theories to come to terms with the experience of embodied virtuality, and the necessity for a more phenomenologically-oriented approach – both historical and theoretical – attuned to the complexity and paradox of interfaced being. The following is one of many possible routes that such an approach might take.

THE VISUAL AND THE VIRTUAL

Brunelleschi’s perspective demonstration of 1429 is generally accepted as one of the founding gestures of Renaissance perspectival space. This simple interface consisted of a mirror and a painted panel, pierced at the vanishing point by a small hole. To see the image on the panel the viewer looked through the hole on the reverse side of the panel, and observed the image in the mirror held in the other hand.

Brunelleschi’s viewer perceived the virtual space of a perspectival image. Technologies of vision, however, need not take the form of artifacts. Within a decade of its invention, Leon Battista Alberti had contrived a theoretical device that gave the same results as Brunelleschi’s apparatus. Alberti’s *costruzione legittima* links virtuality and its subject to *visuality*, assuming the subject as a monocular eye, and reducing the look to a narrative movement between viewing position and horizon line. [8] This system, as Romanyshyn [19] remarks, involves “the transformation of the eye into a technology and a redefinition of the world to suit the eye.” (33) Excluding the material world, Alberti’s circuit of representation differentiates between a ‘natural’ body and

a theoretical eye/I – a distinction which provides the Western subject's ontological footing. The perspective interface, in other words, is both a technology of vision and a *subjectifying relation*, it shapes both the look and the self that looks.

THE LANDSCAPE INTERFACE

The perspective paradigm appears, within the discourse of landscape, in the form of the *view*. Though not conspicuously mathematical, the virtual space of the Classical landscape view is highly systematic, sharing its fundamental elements – vanishing point and horizon line – with Alberti's *costruzione legittima*. Like perspectival space, the virtual space of landscape is both deep and homogeneous. It engages its subject in/as a *horizontal* movement of the gaze; a mobilization of the look which places the subject 'here' in relation to the 'there' of the horizon.

For the eighteenth-century subject, viewing a landscape was a highly regulated cultural practice requiring an educated eye and a disciplined body. Viewing was a gentleman's pursuit, and this privilege was inscribed on the surface of the body itself, in the form of correct dress, attitude, and deportment. [4] It was vital, however, that these virtues appear artless: effortless social fluency signaled not just the subject's competence as a viewer, but his good taste, good breeding, and 'natural' right to govern. Not only did the subject have to know the rules, he/she had to be equally adept at naturalizing this knowledge, and at disciplining the body. The latter was presented as a signifying surface, and its ability to function as a signifier distinguished it from a carnal or 'natural' body which was the emblem of the labouring classes. [15] Forging the body/subject distinction along class lines, [1, 2] the discourse of landscape naturalized the practice of viewing as an unaffected way of seeing 'nature' rather than a class-specific privilege.

The Lacanian schema shares some of its key structural and ontological assumptions with the discourse of landscape. As discourses of the interface, the two share some fundamental presuppositions about the character of vision, space, and the body, and about the disposition of subjectivity amongst these three terms. Concealed at its source and distanced in its effects, the power mobilized by the Lacanian subject depletes the actual and re-presents it in the form of an image. Within the Lacanian argument, as Borch-Jacobsen [5] points out, "no type of relation with the world or the other – except the specular, spectacular, scopic one... – is ever taken into account." (57) Subjectivity, for Lacan, is staged in a landscape where agency is a function of the *distance* between the subject and the objects of the look, and desire is a horizontal movement towards a loss that may be glimpsed but can never be recovered. Outside of this circuit, the individual is mere animal, caught up in the gaze of the world.

Lacan hints at the texture of this exterior in his discussion of anamorphosis. In Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533), the anamorphic skull in the foreground is little more than a meaningless shape when the picture is viewed from the

obverse position. To make sense of this odd apparition, the viewer must approach the frame closely and look along the surface of the canvas, from a point about halfway up the frame. Only from this oblique position, 'outside' of the circuit of representation, does the image of the skull resolve itself. But this disclosure exacts a price: looking from the 'outside', the subject also sees itself as annihilated, formless, adrift in the field of the *real*. [12] Here, the Lacanian subject encounters its originary state of nature: that which it renounces and that which nourishes its desire. [11, 12]

If the view is a closed circuit of vision, then the Shades – the enclosed sections of the garden, the places between views – can be understood as a different place, representation's other. [21] Superficially, this is the dynamic that is played out in the landscape garden. In the Shades vision was no longer the carefully regulated sensory modality that it was for the viewing subject, and no longer functioned to locate the self as such. In the absence of a precise point of view, 'nature' appeared in all of its chaotic sensual materiality, amorphous, unframed, unresponsive to the look. Here, the subject found itself not as/at a distance from nature, but in close proximity to it. This kind of propinquity to the material was disturbing both ideologically and ontologically. Beyond the limits of the view, the garden visitor entered a shapeless domain that had nothing to do with the eye/I.

Clearly, however, the subject was able to function, and its conduct in the Shades was as carefully managed as it was elsewhere in the garden. The Shades were intended for private reflection and the occasional romantic tryst. While the view invited the subject to put distance between itself and the perceived world, however, the Shades did not. In the Shades, the subject was no longer under the eyes of others, and if it was given the freedom to reflect on the self in the absence of vision, this was on the assumption that it could also muster the discipline to avoid dwelling on its baser impulses. If not, then the subject's own carnality threatened to show through as the degenerated subjectivity of the labourer. [21]

In its more radical form, this degenerated subjectivity takes the form of pain. Pain, as Scarry [20] writes, is the emblem of an incarnate, yet disabled, intelligence. Pain blurs the distinction between the rational mind and the 'natural' body. The subject in pain occupies a state that is neither comprehensive social agency nor brute corporeality. Pain, in other words, signals the presence of an *animated* body, one that is neither formless, nor decisively excluded from representation. Corseted, bewigged, and wearing shoes inappropriate for extended walking, the management of discomfort was an ongoing concern for the garden visitor. In the Shades, however, the subject is drawn towards the carnal body, teased by it, invited to test the limits of theoretical discipline against its own materiality. Failure was not an option. Pain was a disruptive force; it signaled the carnal affinity between the subject and its alleged social inferiors. The discourse of landscape depoliticizes this pain, and carnality more generally, by constructing the animated body as a natural

body, dysfunctional by nature and in need of management.

Holbein was quite specific about how he wanted *The Ambassadors* to be seen: the subject was meant to look at the picture first upon entering, and again, on leaving the room. His anamorphic picture is addressed to an embodied self, for whom the view is part of a broader environment. The Shades tempt the subject in a similar way; they address a subject capable of multiple modes of awareness. It is this transformativity that distinguishes the ‘anamorphic’ [24] subject from the Cartesianesque subject assumed elsewhere in the garden. Though never completely free of the determinations of the landscape interface, anamorphic subjectivity incorporates other possible ways of being. As a concept, it situates technologies of vision, and their operation – discursive, material, and ontological – within a wider environment. It recognizes technologies of vision as more than simple tools. Such technologies may favor particular ways of seeing the environment and the self, but they are designed by, and for, embodied subjects. This awareness is suggested in the Shades, and brought to light in VR and its discourses.

THE LANDSCAPE OF VR

Present-day virtual space is nonetheless a direct, and privileged, descendent of Renaissance perspectival space, [14, 23] and as such, it owes a considerable debt to eighteenth-century landscape painting. Both the view volume and the objects it contains are generated by means of geometrical techniques not much different from those used by Alberti. First published in 1963, the algorithm for computer generation of perspectival projections was derived from formulae developed in the eighteenth century. [17] Typically, virtual space is a deep space that extends outwards from a fixed point of view; like a landscape, it is engaged by moving serially from foreground to horizon. The realism of the VR environment is a matter of *effect*: appearance is everything, and realism – particularly the modeling of ‘natural’ forms – is a matter of conformity with, or variance from, perspectival norms. VR assumes a subject that is already thoroughly familiar with the perspective paradigm; it is designed for a technologically colonized subject, one that knows ‘instinctively’ how and where to find itself in the view. If eighteenth century perspectival visuality was an elite technology, and one still limited by the body, VR promises to dispense with these limitations. Where the subject of landscape could only gaze towards the horizon, VR allows the subject to fly through it. Situated within the visualist trajectory of Western science, VR is simply the latest and most sophisticated means of simulating reality for the eye/I.

Not surprisingly, the corporeal body has no place in this landscape. The technologically innocent natural body is held apart from the simulation event, and held responsible for its failure. Just as pain signaled the postponement of pleasure for the garden visitor; it can also intrude on the simulation. VR sickness – a kind of visually-induced motion sickness – is ostensibly an affliction of the ‘natural’ body. Caused by sensory conflict (‘perceptual

conflict’ or ‘cue conflict’), it occurs when signals from the various spatial senses, the eyes, the balance organs and the non-vestibular position senses are in conflict with one another and do not correlate with signals received in ‘past experience’. [6, 7] The actions of the subject in the simulation are distinguished from its ‘natural’ behaviour inasmuch as the latter is linked to the instinct, expectation, and habit that govern real world tasks. [10] These involuntary responses lack the cultural specificity and *direction* that is associated with subjective agency. They are associated with an uncontrollable and inarticulate body, a mortal body, held apart from the subject of the look, unable to adapt to its space. Holding the carnal body and its ‘natural’ responses responsible for the failure of the simulation event, the discourse of VR frames nature as exterior, and corporeality as pathology. At its most utopic, this discourse does away with the body altogether. The fantasy of the downloaded disembodied mind is technological optimism writ large; in this scenario, technology functions not through the body, but to replace it.

Simulations, of course, are rated not just on how they look but on how they *feel*. This is an issue in full-immersion VR, and also in gaming, and more recent discourses of virtuality are mindful of such practical questions, and approach the subject – body – technology relation along different theoretical planes.

PHENOMENOLOGY, VIRTUALITY, AND THE ANAMORPHIC SUBJECT

Immersion is a matter of simultaneous presence in both simulated and external worlds. Ideally, these two worlds remain effectively separate and don’t interfere with each other. Occasionally, however, gestures that belong in the simulated environment spill over into the outside world – the user exits the simulation and still expects to be able to fly by moving a hand, for example – a condition known as Alternate World Syndrome (AWS). Here, the behaviour native to one world finds itself in conflict with the other. AWD (Alternate World Disorder), a chronic variant of this condition, occurs when the reconfiguration of the senses from one world to the other no longer takes place at all. Here, the rupture of the kinesthetic from the visual senses of identity breaks down the integrity and balance of the kinesthetic body, causing lingering psychic effects. Caused by redundant neurological responses, both conditions involve a more or less catastrophic breakdown of subjectivity: an uncoupling of subjective models from actual experience. Where the eighteenth century subject took the interface on as a theoretical form, however, AWS and AWD are the effects of a more invasive technology of vision, and they signal the location of this technology within the broader context of the enviroing world. In VR, perception and functionality are reflexive concerns, virtuality, as we understand it now, would seem to beg a phenomenological approach.

Had VR existed in Merleau-Ponty’s time, he would almost certainly have written about it. Twenty-first century virtuality speaks clearly to his phenomenology, of which I can do no more here than sum up the most salient

points. Perspectival accounts of the subject, he tells us, [16] fail to account for the “variety of experience, for the element of senselessness in it.” (147) The event of seeing incorporates “an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness.” (147) Perception, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is more than the penetrative work of an I/eye, it is a *reflexive* and *embodied* engagement. The subject is incorporated in, and inseparable from, the world which forms the context and possibility of subjectivity. Bodily motility is part of intentionality and part of the definition of the subject as such. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is never simply an image or an engine, but a *posture*, an “attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task.” (100) Against the self as a product of a specular image, Merleau-Ponty proposes a subject that integrates itself and its parts in relation to its *projects*. Phenomenology, in other words, is concerned with the *proximity* of the self and the lifeworld.

This is precisely what is absent in the Lacanian schema. Lacan’s unwillingness to take into account the reflexive, embodied relation between subject and technology means that the latter always bears the taint of the ‘unnatural’ and the invasive. His technologically colonized subject is a paranoid subject: alienated from nature; alienated from, and persecuted by, the very instruments it creates. Technologies, however, are produced by subjects, and productive of them. More than simply tools, technologies are material parameters in the world, embodied praxes. It is this understanding of the *affective* character of technology that eludes Lacan.

Affect is about getting the measure of one’s environment; as such, it always comprises an element of the inexplicable. We focus on the world differently than we do a landscape, and the world, in turn, always maintains an opacity, a resistance to discourse. Functioning as an embodied agent in the world requires attention – maintaining objects within the confines of perceptual reach, holding them at the ‘correct distance.’ At the same time, however, it also calls for a certain kind of *inattention* – a persistent openness to the world, a subsidiary awareness that is different from reflection as such. [9] Inattention is not the same thing as distraction – a scattering or absence of attention – rather, it refers to the different distances at which we hold the rest of the perceptual field, including the body. Where the perspective paradigm conceals the working body in the interface, we don’t find the same kind of paranoia in VR. Here, the subject functions not just as a disembodied eye/I, but corporeally, with an instrument. Performing well in VR means taking on board the materiality of the technology of vision, and the affectivity of looking.

Video games may not match the sophistication of full-body immersion environments, but they occupy the same phenomenological terrain. At first glance, *Rez* – , released in 2002 – appears somewhat retrograde. Its wireframe visuals and tunnel-like spatial architecture are a throwback to *Tron* and other early depictions of cyberspace, and gameplay itself is not much different from the standard shoot-‘em-up. What is atypical about *Rez* is the kind of

response it solicits from the player. *Rez* is Sega’s salute to club culture, and affective response is key to ‘winning’ at this game – ‘Feel it, don’t think’ is the motto on Sega’s *Rez* website. The soundtrack, composed by leading DJs and house/trance artists, is directed by onscreen performance: locking onto a target or firing, for example, produces a sample that synchronizes with the background track and that feeds back, rhythmically, into the controller. The more levels you complete, the richer and denser the soundtrack becomes, and the more hypnotic the visuals. It’s not long before you enter the feedback loop that is every clubber’s fantasy: your actions create the environment, and the environment makes you dance. Being, in *Rez* means being (as) an instrument, being *in time* – engaged, entranced, and embodied in/by one’s environment. *Rez* requires an anamorphic subject, one whose rational sensibility is understood to cohabit with its affective presence in the lifeworld.

Cartesianesque technologies of vision may suggest a possible subject but they cannot describe the full measure of subjectivity. Brunelleschi and Holbein understood this. The condition of virtuality, as they demonstrate it, is irreducibly dependent upon a living, working body – a body, remarks Lefebvre [13], that combines “the cycles of time, need and desire with the linearities of gesture, perambulation, prehension and the manipulation of things – the handling of both material and abstract tools.” (203) Technologies of vision are part of the world we inhabit; they are embedded, materially, historically and ontologically – *incorporated* – into the fabric of subjectivity itself. Technology does not ‘come between’ body and subject, the three maintain a relation of mutual material and ontological proximity, a reflexive and multistable condition of *technological embodiment*.

The practice of VR may seem to have brought with it a change in theoretical approaches to the question of interfaced being, but embodied virtuality is not, itself, a new idea. It has its own history and its own politics of the body – a body that has been silenced, thus far, in the history of virtuality, and which will remain so if VR researchers, artists, and theorists continue to neglect this history. The foregoing brief account has shown only one of many possible forms this history might take.

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