THE VIRTUAL VAMPIRE
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The major part of the factors determining our lives is, in fact, virtual: memories, expectations, dreams, visualizations, phantasies, experienced or shared fiction: the past, the future and parallel, imagined worlds. In the future virtual spheres of experience are to be multiplied, and intersubjective access is to be offered by technological means. When reading a novel or listening to a story, I am, in fact, in an artificial virtual world but I use my imagination to produce all the images and sensations. These virtual worlds are intersubjective only to the degree that linguistic contents can be communicated. The technical production of virtual worlds, however, externalizes the imaginative process and thus the experience becomes objective: it comes from outside. Reality is no longer being evoked but simulated. Promoters of these technologies pride themselves on the fact that the consumer no longer remains passive as he/she had been before in the virtual realms of the media but that he/she can take an active controlling and creative part. As compared to visions created by language communication the balance of active and passive participation remains the same: in the latter instance the imagined visions are "made" by the consumer, whereas in technical simulation the flow of exterior images is being controlled and reception remains passive.

Up to now simulation was limited to acoustic and visual stimuli. The eye and the ear lend themselves well to producing illusions and the distinction between virtual worlds and actual reality, between fiction and truth, seems to be clearly discernible, not withstanding the occurence of individual deception. If we try to extend this distinction to the other senses, we realize its vagueness. The scent of pines which I can smell when walking in the woods or when taking a bubble bath is the very same sensation to the mucuous membrane of my nose. Is the almond cake without almonds that I am eating perhaps virtual?

Which is to say, it is not the sensations as such that can be called virtual — the sonar waves and the photons of simulated worlds are real after all — it is the worlds that are constructed from these stimuli when they are experienced imbedded in the real world, that can be called virtual. Recognizing simulation as a simulation is not yet a problem. Due to the flatness of the reproduction and especially to the fact that various dimensions of the senses (touch, smell, taste) are not addressed, enough information passes through the chinks of these worlds, to root us in or take us back to reality.

Technically speaking, the inner virtual worlds, especially the dream, are superior to the technical ones, because we forget that we are dreaming (or hallucinating). Only upon waking up and remembering the dream — in retrospect -, we declare our experience to have been a dream, an illusion. It is the knowledge of the source of the experience that decides what can be called virtual, judgement is passed by our common knowledge, which is the home base for our adventures into the virtual. When experiencing artificial virtual worlds, we always know that we are in the realm of illusion. We are in two or more worlds at the same time. Even in dreams we may have this lucidity. Though we may be deceived and may confound the worlds, as in dreams when we think or rather dream that we have just woken from a dream and instead have entered the next dream — which we realize only upon waking from that dream. This experience makes us wonder about our judgment of reality. Is our waking everyday common knowledge capable of distinguishing ultimate reality from permanent illusion? Is there any solid ground to our world? After all, the rumour persists that we may one day wake up from this reality to another more real one …

Virtual and fictitious are not the same. What ever we are not immediately aware of in our here-and-now, including our own history and all parts of the world we know of without perceiving them, can be called virtual. Even in our everyday life, processes happen in our consciousness on various tracks simultaneously. Apart from being aware of my immediate

environment, of my own movements and inner body processes, parts of my consciousness are at the same time "absent" in phantasies, memories, expectations, daydreams or in some other way. Who, after all, is always "fully present" — like Eastern mystics! Our consciousness is obviously laid out in a multi-track pattern, a fact that is utilized by the worlds of books, of the media and of electronic simulation. The increasing supply of the media and the artificial virtual worlds promised by electronics industry for the coming decade obviously intensify this "split-mindedness"; a sort of electronic tourism will lure us from our present into virtual adventures.

It is interesting to note that the development of electronic entertainment industry takes a course directly opposed to that of contemporary art. It is the achievement of modern art to have turned away from the concept of representation as illusion or simulation. A picture is no longer primarily the representation of an imaginary object but rather an object alongside other objects in the real world. If it has a special aura, this is not due to any virtual object presented but rather to its own presence and effect in the here-and-now.

The choice between the worlds I want to spend my time in, can be considered a choice between quantity and quality as may be expected in the sphere of surrogate and simulation. Density and depth of the virtual world, that is the quality of its reproduction will always be inferior to reality. And we shall never be able to let ourselves be fully captured, as part of our consciousness will persist in the actual world. On the other hand, we often experience the latter in our half-awake state of the habitual as a flat, vapid everyday world; we only experience a small part of the potential of reality unless our attentiveness is intensified by something extraordinary.

Thevirtual sphere offers a choice of the extraordinary.There, it seems, we can experience "more". The impact — or depth -of an experience, after all, does not only depend on the (technical/material) density and depth of the world experienced but equally on the degree of our openness and attentiveness. My experience can only run as deep as I myself am.

Being sceptic of progress (and superstitious too) I'd like to remind you: We may multiply the virtual worlds in which we live; however, we cannot experience "more" (than in reality and fully attentively), because we cannot multiply our lifetimes in the same measure. The Fatal Sisters or whoever measures out our lifetimes, will not be deceived by any virtual world. If we enter the sphere of simulation, we sacrifice part of our lifespan for an experience that ultimately must remain shallow and in which consequential action is limited. The virtual track of our consciousness is always derived from our actual consciousness. Not only our lifetime, the capacity of our consciousness also cannot be doubled. We can deal with potential worlds only at the cost of the real one. The virtual is pars sitica to reality; it can become a vampire who -quite enjoyable for the victim though -robs us of the blood of our lifetime.