

VIRTUAL WORLDS and AVATAR: BODY and VIRTUAL IDENTITY in FILM

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ABSTRACT

The film *Avatar* is a distinct example of the representation of the virtual/actual body dualism and can provide an understanding of the matter through the use of phenomenological approach to address the issues of virtual identities and nature/virtual binary opposition. As we identify the position of the virtual body and its position in society, it might be possible to understand how society functions in individual terms in virtual space with their experiences and identity formations. The study will help identify key actors in the process of virtual body/identity construction and also look into the disguise of the binary opposition of virtual vs. natural as evident in the film itself.

Keywords: Virtual, Virtual Reality, Identity

JEL Codes: L8, L82

SANAL DÜNYALAR ve AVATAR: FİLMDE BEDEN ve SANAL KİMLİK

ÖZET


Avatar filmi, sanal / gerçek beden düalizminin temsilinin önemli bir örneğidir ve sanal kimlikler ve doğal/sanal ikili karşıt konumu fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım kullanarak konunun ele alınmasına olanak sağlamaktadır. Sanal beden konumunu ve toplumdaki yerini belirlerken, deneyimleri ve kimlik oluşumlarıyla toplumun sanal alanda bireysel terimlerle nasıl işlediğini anlamak mümkün olabilmektedir. Çalışma, sanal beden / kimlik inşası sürecindeki kilit aktörleri tanımlamaya yardımcı olmakta ve aynı zamanda filmin kendisinde olduğu gibi sanal ve doğal olan ikiliğe dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sanal, Sanal Gerçeklik, Kimlik

JEL Kodları: L8, L82

INTRODUCTION

The representation of the world around us in cinema forms the aesthetic construction of reality for the viewer. *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) with its introduction of a new animation technology was one of the big success stories of the late 2000's (Box Office Gross: \$2,782,275,172 (Worldwide))¹. The immersive imagery along with the intriguing plot forms a good example for analyzing the concepts of virtual/actual, industry/nature binary oppositions that are supposedly natural and unproblematic. The 3D technology that

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¹ Internet Movie Database (2012). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>

is made possible with the IMAX theatre system, allows the audience to focus on the fictional world. The narrative and the virtual 3D experience combined allow the film to have a unique feature for analyzing certain elements of perception, which forms the basis for our understanding of the world we live in. Looking at the film *Avatar* in terms of its understanding of the virtual/actual body this article aims at connecting these concepts to today's experience of a virtual self. This article analyzes the film in terms of its positioning of the body in a virtual context and its transformation to a natural context, with a praise to nature. This paradox of finding nature through the virtual will be one of the focuses of the research. The paper is composed of three parts; phenomenology of perception, virtual/actual body (virtual identities) and the position of nature in contrast to virtual.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW and CONCEPTS

1.1. Basic Concepts

Phenomenological approach applied as a theoretical framework, provides the backdrop for the film analysis since it dwells on the arguments of perception, experience and the body. Therefore Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Lacan's ideas about these concepts shape the basis for analysis to exploring the virtual world of *Avatar*, namely Pandora. The film being released in 3D adds to the audience's experiences as well as the characters experiences the audience face through the identification process. The discussion mainly centering on these aspects can also extend to Virtual Reality and virtual spaces.

An analysis of the film *Avatar* will be conducted through, scenes, characters and the narrative and their connections to the above-mentioned topics. As the scenes from the film will provide the grounds for how characters and narratives unfold according to certain understandings of individuals. It will constitute our understanding of how we perceive images and how it might be thought of. As the phenomenological approach is applied to the film narrative and its representation of the virtual body vs. actual body, it will help identify key concepts in the visual field.

1.2. Phenomenology and Cinema

“Phenomenology thus has particular resonance in relation to cinema. The intentional directedness of subjective consciousness toward its intended object demands a description of the film experience that includes the “spectator” as well as the “text” – that is, it presumes an active (rather than passive) viewer and calls for focus not only on elements of the film viewed but also on possible modes of engaging and viewing it.” (Sobchack, 2009:436)

As this quote suggests, the approach has a special significance in terms of cinema and cinematic experience. It combines the two in a unique manner, forming a bigger and yet more detailed picture for the whole process of filmmaking and consuming.

As explained by Littlejohn & Foss, phenomenology tradition focuses on the individual experience of the world. “The process of knowing through direct experience is the province of phenomenology” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:37) The idea behind this theory is that, individuals are limited to their sensory experiences when it comes to knowledge. What I learn therefore is dependant on my experience; I cannot know anything that I have not experienced. This part of the theory is seen as its weaknesses and will be discussed later on. Key elements in this approach are listed as follows: “First knowledge is found directly in conscious experience... second, the meaning of a thing consists of the potential of that thing in one's life... Third assumption is that language is the vehicle of meaning.” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:38)

The second part of this quote highlights an important aspect in the theory when we think of it in terms of media objects. A film, a book or any other media artifact has a being only in terms of its potential to influence or in its potential relation to the individual. Without this connection it is not possible to talk about meaning or influence, which are essential parts of the communication discourse. It has been viewed as such by Martin Heidegger as he explains the situation of the “being” and its “thrown into-the-world” and his concept of “ready-to-handedness”. (Heidegger, 1962) However without the realization of these bonds it is not possible to draw an understanding. “The process of interpretation is central to most phenomenological thought.” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:38) Reality is inherent in interpretation, without it we would not understand the world as it is. It is an active process where the individual has to think and elaborate on its experiences to have an overall understanding of the world. To underline the importance of this process:

“Interpretation involves going back and forth between experiencing an event or situation and assigning meaning to it, moving from the specific to the general and back to the specific again, in what is called a *hermeneutic circle*.

We construct an interpretation of an event or experience and then test that interpretation by looking closely at the specifics of the event once again - a continual process of refining our meanings.” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:38)

It is thus, crucial to understand the process of creating meaning through interpretation with the help of the visual. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology coincides with this very notion of the perception approach. According to this theory, humans are a whole and they understand the world through interpretation and they affect the objects that they interpret as they affect them at the same time. This view means that there cannot be an object apart from the individual that exists out there but it depends on its interpreter.

2. MERLEAU-PONTY’S NOTION of PERCEPTION

The phenomenology of perception is the first attempt in the phenomenology approach in philosophy to place the body and the bodily experience into the theoretical framework in order to 'place' human 'in' the world. To explain this a little further we must first understand the influences of previous phenomenologist’s on Merleau-Ponty's ideas. Husserl, Hegel and Heidegger form the foundation of these influences and also Sartre and Saussure adds to the notion. Before going into the details of the phenomenology tradition, the connections of Saussure's theory and Merleau-Ponty's ideas will be analyzed, since semiotics has been one of the founding traditions that shaped film studies, it is important to note the similarities between the two approaches. Without realizing the connections it is impossible to understand the relations between the two fields and also its possible influence on film studies.

“The first published discussion of Merleau-Ponty's work with Saussure occurs in the *Reveu de Metaphysique et de Morale* in 1977, in an article that appeared in *Sense and Non-sense* as 'The Metaphysical in Man'.” (Watson, 2009:50)

The relation between the two traditions also point to the close proximity of cinema with linguistics, finding an aesthetic language. “Language has an organismic character: surrounding the speaking subject with an instrument having its own inertia, its own demands, constraints and internal logic... Merleau-Ponty

states, 'Saussure's linguistics legitimates the perspective of the speaking subject who lives in his language (and who may in some cases change it)' (Watson, 2009:51)

One of the unique points of Merleau-Ponty's arguments is how film is always a becoming and not a means to an ends or a closed and finished product and yet at the same time focusing on the position of the subject. "... Emphasizing consciousness as *embodied* and always *situated* in the world in an ongoing process of "becoming," Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us in *Phenomenology of Perception* that "the greatest lesson of the [phenomenological] reduction is the *impossibility* of a complete reduction." (Sobchack, 2009:438) The audience, identifying with the characters on the screen but yet also aware of their being-in-the-world, is the description of the phenomenological subject. Interacting with its environment and aware of its being in the present yet as in the sense that it is always a becoming, not a complete and closed being.

"Behavioral processes are to be understood in terms of their internal organization instead of trying to find in them the result of an external combination of simple and universal processes. by so doing we are led, it is claimed, beyond the classical dichotomies of subject and object, existence as thing and existence as consciousness, and invited to conceive knowledge in a new way: no longer as a way to break down these typical ensembles but rather as 'an effort to embrace them and to understand them by reliving them'." (Watson, 2009:50)

This suggests that the relation the subject has with its environment is affecting them in both ways and combining them into a greater and bigger form of being. This is best explained by using the example of language:

"What can be said about the role that linguistics, and Saussure's work in particular, plays in the revolution that has been discovered in Gestalt theory? Saussure is cited specifically for recognizing that the sort of being that language has is not susceptible to a casual analysis that would 'link each fact with a previous fact and thus spread language before the linguist like a natural object'." (Watson, 2009:51) Gestalt theory, taking things as a whole, is very important for the phenomenological tradition as "... phenomenological work included differentiating cinematic perception from other perceptual productions of consciousness such as dreams, memories, and illusions, describing spatial and temporal perceptual gestalts such as the perception of movement and depth, and investigating spectator identification and affect." (Sobchack, 2009:439) So it is therefore, important to also look at the identity of the characters and the relation of the audience with that character in terms of the process of identification through the cinematic image.

3. LIMITATIONS of THIS THEROY

Rhetorical theory addresses the problem of the authenticity as " a dangerous myth; [hence] good communication must be artful, strategic." (Craig, 1999:134) Semiotics also claim that the "self and the other are semiotically determined subject positions and only exists in/as signs." (Craig, 1999:134) Although this position is true, phenomenologist's would argue that since knowledge is only derived from experiences there cannot be any objective positioning of the self and the other. Cybernetics argues, "Phenomenological experience must occur in the brain as information progressing," (Craig, 1999:134) and not as anything else. Sociopsychological tradition on the other hand places the emphasis on the intersubjectivity that is produced by social processes, which the phenomenological tradition fails to explain. (Craig, 1999:134) Critical theory claims, "...individual consciousness is socially constituted, thus ideologically distorted." (Craig, 1999:134) The phenomenological approach is generally attacked for its

simplistic ideas and ridiculed for its unscientific methodologies.

“To many scholars the phenomenological tradition is naive. For them, life is shaped by complex, interacting forces, only some of which can ever be known consciously at anyone time. You cannot interpret something by consciously looking at it and thinking about it. Real understanding comes from careful analysis of a system of effects.” (Littlejohn & Foss 39)

Although these arguments are strong and have valid points, the theory still holds a place in its unique way of understanding. The hint of a “more than what it seems” claim has still something to offer, in my point of view.

4. ANALYSIS of THE FILM

4. 1. Defining and Situating Body: Virtual/Actual

4.1.1. The Body/ Mind Dualism

The Western thought had always undermined the body while praising the mind. “... the body had generally been regarded as an affront to the intelligence, an obstacle to both thought and action.”(Shaviro, 1993:256) As the body is associated with such terms, it was often disregarded and forgotten. Yet with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze along with other philosophers whom offered a new way of perceiving the body, the dualism turned into a parallelism. “...it affirms the powers of the body, and sees the very opacity and insubordination of the flesh as a stimulus to thought and as its necessary condition.” (Shaviro, 1993:256) With the entrance of cinema to the stage, the body becomes emphasized more than ever. The postures and movements set forth on the screen emerges the viewer to think about the body. Body is ritualistic. It performs certain daily activities, possessing life. “Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life.” (Deleuze, 1989:189) The body situated among the experience, now anchors thought into another direction. With this approach to the body, it gains freedom from the dualism and sets itself into a new layer of thought as holding a key to the understanding of the self.

4.1.2. The Body In and Between Virtual Reality and Real Life

Virtual Reality (VR) can only be experienced with a reference to Reality or the Real Life (RL). What connects the two is the body, which is both in Real Life and in Virtual Reality. These two dimensions are interwoven with the body that serves like a passage. Before going into detail about this role of the body, we should first look at how the body is constructed. The body can be perceived from outside and from the inside. The outside body is an experience about an image that one sees of the body in the mind. This body is in a disembodied form. To explain this with an example, as stated in Ihde’s article, he asks his class to describe an experience that they in fact have not experienced before. Upon the raised question the students describe flying as an illustration. When he asks further questions, they describe a scene where they are jumping from a plane and seeing the earth coming closer, feeling the vertigo and also they describe a scene where they see an image of themselves from a distance as jumping from the plane. (Ihde, 1998:350) As it is in the example given, the body can be seen in two major parts: one is the virtual body and the other here-body. Ihde continues to argue that the Real Life is associated with the here-body. (Ihde, 1998:350) The image of the person viewed from a distance where s/he is jumping from the plane is the Virtual Body.

Taking these two terms, and applying them to the cinema, the Here-Body becomes the body of the spectator that is seated in the theatre and the Virtual Body is the body on the screen that the spectator has identified with, the protagonist. The relation between the virtual and the actual is experienced through the relations between these two bodies.

Virtual body introduces itself into the cyberspace via a profile or an avatar. Signing up to a website, or a game demands that you create a profile or an avatar of yourself that will serve as a sign, that signifies your presence on the virtual space. What is experienced in this space is similar to the Virtual Body with the disembodied vision of oneself.

“In most VR programs, a user experiences VR through a disembodied gaze - a floating, moving "perspective" - that mimes the movement of a disembodied camera "eye." This is a familiar aspect of what may be called a filmic phenomenology, where the camera simulates the movement of perspective that rarely includes a self-referential visual inspection of the body as the vehicle of that perspective. The disembodiment of the eye is accomplished through the manipulation of the camera to approximate the height and angle of the point of view of an eye; the body of that eye is repressed, in that it is rarely shown (revealed) and never felt.” (Balsamo, 1993:125)

This lack of feeling is where body is placed: experiencing the VR but feeling the RL. The body is present in both of the realms in different forms. Without the presence of the body the here-body and the virtual-body would not exist.

4.1.3. Creating the Avatar: The Ancient Greek God Janus of the Modern Day

The divided body -virtual-body and here-body- comprises the VR and the RL, constructing itself a new identity and a new body that consists of two sides. Identity construction in the virtual space happens with the help of avatars. As the person first creates an avatar, a virtual body to stand for him/herself and looks at it for the first time, s/he experiences what Lacan calls, *Aha-Erlebnis* (Lacan, 1949:1), the recognition of the image on the mirror as one's own reflection. As the virtual body emerges before them, the identity construction process had already started. The creation of the avatar, as a virtual other (a)', which has a relation to the ego of the person. S/he creates an avatar emphasizing features they believe are important. The avatar appears as a Gestalt before them. And knowing this is the VR, and they also possess a body in RL the person is divided, having two bodies. Just like the two faced ancient Greek God Janus the modern day subject encloses two bodies. The subject as in Lacan's theory is divided. As the Avatar enters the virtual space it inevitably creates an identity for itself in this world. This identity constructed with the help of Gestalt, holds attributes from the RL or the here-body that has created it, where as the here-body borrows attributes from the Virtual-body, the two work interchangeably. The Body, therefore, holds in itself both of the features from the two sides and becomes more than them taken one by one. A similar process takes place in cinema, Shaviro suggests that "... these two realms [cinematic apparatus and the life of the body] are not alien or extinct to one another: their more-than-marriage, their symbolic and parasitic interpretation, is an inescapable feature of post-modern culture, which is to say of late capitalist social and technological relations.” (Shaviro, 1993:263) In this respect the cinematic apparatus is the virtual body and the life of the body is the here-body. The identity construction process further on continues with the assurance of Gestalt in the VR as the subject views the virtual body (for example in games the player is provided with the option to view the whole image of the avatar during and after its construction). The relation of the here-body with the virtual body or the avatar can be explained with the

help of Lacan's Schema L.

As it can be seen, the Subject (S) is formed in relation to the other (a)' and Other (A). Applying this graph to the construction of the identity of the virtual-body, the a' that is in the imaginary order, that reflects the here-body, constitutes the avatar, which is also done unconsciously with the relation to the Other.

Gestalt is important for the phenomenological approach especially in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as explained earlier. The experience of the film worlds, can be seen as a combination of the two selves as well as the connections between the VR and RL.

5. OPENING THE BOX of PANDORA

After explaining the way the body and identity is constructed in the virtual space, we should identify the characters position in this relationship: Jack Sully, who has a physical disability, which affects his way of living. This is the here-body of the character, the human form where he has to face the limitations of his body. He used to be an ex-marine, meaning he was physically very active. His body is week and the film makes explicit, the feeling that his here-body is having difficulty to function. Yet in most of the scenes Jack Sully controls his own body very effectively. He pulls his legs and puts them in good position without asking for help. This points to the fact that he is in charge of his here-body.

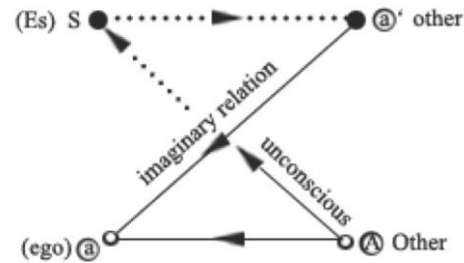


Figure I, (Evans, 1996:3)

As the character is introduced to the new setting, he receives warnings that the natives are violent. This violence is depicted with the visual aid of three deep scars in the Colonel's head. The physical violence takes on a body form as the camera moves closer to the scars. This tactile surface, which the audience can almost feel, enhanced with the 3D technology, create the closeness and actuality of the violence experienced in Pandora. This bodily image is addressed each and every time the Colonel appears on the screen, reminding of the mortality and fragile nature of the here-body.

The first moment that Jack sees his Avatar inside a tube, is the moment of the first recognition of his mirror stage. Just as the mother tells the baby, "this is your image", Dr. Grace tells Jack that this is his Avatar. As Jack views the body in amusement, the connection with the Avatar starts, Jack begins to build an identity looking at the other (a)'. He cannot touch it, its contained in a jell like sphere, he views it from a distance. The Avatar is presented to him as the Gestalt, suggesting that the body of the Avatar is a whole that he will become this body. Considering the condition of his here-body, Jack accepts the Avatar as the Gestalt, still aware that he also has the here-body. Here the dualism appears and the subject becomes a divided subject. As Jack connects to the Avatar, through his neural system, he than changes his body and enters into the body of the Avatar. He can now walk and even run, which are the first things he experiences with his Avatar body. To talk a little of the physical differences of the Avatar body to the human body, the Na'Vi's are taller than humans, they have blue skin, and have a tail. These features of the body build it as the other. It is not familiar to the human body experience.

Applying the Schema L to the situation, Jack becomes the Subject (S), the Avatar is the other (a)' and the Na'Vi's are the big Other (A). The other takes attributes from the Other since the Avatar looks like a Na'Vi. And all the process functions for Jack to form a body that experiences both the here-body and the Virtual-body or the Avatar. As he builds himself an identity that is in relation to all the elements (such as

(a)' and (A) etc.) he explores a unique body that is in and above the two bodies. This body views the two body and experiences the two in different ways.

The protagonist struggles to understand which body he belongs to after a while just as the audience forgets about their here-bodies as they watch the film. He tells that he doesn't understand which one is the dream and which one is the real and concludes that the Virtual-body now feels more real than his here-body. After the battle, he is given a choice; to stay in his here-body or become his Avatar and transform his virtual-body and turn this virtual self into his here-body. Jack chooses to risk the transformation and he wakes up in his Avatar's body in the last scene, becoming his Gestalt and getting over the dualism.

The audiences experience in watching the film in 3D is similar to Jack's experience. Although the here-body is comfortably seated, they are given an image to identify with, with a similar process the audience goes into the Virtual-body, seeing the viewpoint with the protagonist. After the introduction of the Avatar a similar process, yet including two layers of identification this time, takes place and now they are looking to Pandora from the Avatar's point of view. As they assume the body of the cinematic apparatus as a default body experience, there are three layers of identification that takes place: the camera, the protagonist and his Avatar. Contrary to Jack Sully's experience of becoming the Gestalt, the audience wakes in their here-bodies.

6. FINDING NATURE in THE VIRTUAL

From the beginning till the end of the movie, the narrative takes the audience through layers of industrialization and show the consequences thereof. The very reason for humans trying to find a new planet is because of the environmental condition of the planet earth. This is due, as we are told, to the technological advancement leading to the over use of natural resources. As the natural resources become scarce, the balance of nature is broken resulting in an uninhabitable environmental condition. The interesting part here is how the characters reach this natural, virgin land, Pandora and how the audience gets to experience it.

The characters, living in the future, have access to technology that enables them to travel between planetary distances. This helps the scientists as well as the military to explore Pandora and interact with the natives. Jack, as the protagonist, is the character that we are introduced with, what he sees the audience see too. As he witnesses the marvelous landscape, the audience experiences the same feeling. In most of the scenes, the camera angle is held in a way to enhance the perfect view for the audience. The flying mountains, the luminescent forest in the night, riding of the flying animals, all are rendered in such a way to enhance the audiences reception to the level (with the 3D technology of course) of experience that is not possible for the normal human eye to capture in reality. The nature is praised throughout the film, from the dialogues to the emphasis on the scenery. However the characters can only reach this pure state of nature through the help of technology.

If we consider this claim for a moment, it becomes evident that there are a priori assumptions attached to it. First, creating the narrative in this way suggests that technology is the ultimate tool to use to reach a pure, natural state. So there is a price to pay, even if the natural resources has to be exploited to the level of destruction of the whole planet, this is just a necessary step to be taken for the human kind to reach the level of technology to simply return back to nature once again. Exploitation of the resources and the companies doing so are thus not evil. Secondly, if the companies or organizations or governments who exploit the resources do so, they will also provide the answer to the problem. The plot suggests that it is possible to find another (even prettier) world for the humans to live in. So, even though these companies

seem to be doing evil, they might also be the only saviors. Thirdly, to reach this pure, natural way of living, the subject has to go through a technical process (similar to the one Jack goes through to connect to his Avatar) and only then can she reach the non-technological, un-industrial, pure level. These assumptions clearly show how the plot hides the actual world relations and manipulates the situation in the advantage of the conglomerates.

The way the audience can experience this nature is through the technological apparatus where a virtual world is projected. Again the audience has to go through the industrial, technical process, just like the character, to experience this pure nature. This creates the dilemma between the nature vs. industrial/technological frame the film portrays.

CONCLUSION

Phenomenology of perception theory helps understand the ontological differences between the bodily interpretations experienced by the audience. The bodily experience is closely related with how the body is perceived. In order to gain a better understanding of the body, therefore, the perception of the body by the individual becomes a key factor in understanding the body. The body in the modern day experience has two sub categories that helps it function. These are the here-body and the virtual-body. The body creates an identity for itself regarding these two aspects. In this process, the virtual body serves as the other which resembles the image seen on the mirror, in Lacanian analysis. After this first viewing and acknowledging the image as ones own (Ah-a Erlebnis), the image is viewed with the notion of a Gestalt. As the virtual body stands before the here-body, the identification process takes place, the body relates itself to the image as well as knowing it has two parts. The double bodies before each other creates a dilemma similar to the one the protagonist experiences in the film Avatar. As the protagonist builds a relation to the Avatar (virtual-body), it is at the same time aware of the fact that it has a here-body. Similarly, the body encompasses both the virtual and the here-body therefore creating an experience entangled in both. This is not simply saying that the body experiences two different sensations it has two different bodies that have two different sets of experiences. The body forms an identity regarding the relations of all these. The formation of this identity in the movie is shown where the protagonist questions which body is the real one. This being raised the ending of the film gives him a choice to live in the body he chooses to. The here-body of the character being disadvantaged physically is the one that he lets go. He wakes up in his Avatar body, becoming the Gestalt. As the audience views the film seated in the theatre, they experience a three-layered identification process, where they experience a virtual body with the camera, the character and his Avatar. Further research should examine the possible phenomenological connections through other films.

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