

The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for the Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments

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**Kris Pint,**

**"The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for the Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments"**

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Thematic Issue ***New Work on Landscape and Its Narration***

Ed. Sofie Verraest, Bart Keunen, and Katrien Bollen

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**Abstract:** In his article "The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for an Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments" Kris Pint proposes a theoretical framework for the analysis of environments which cannot be entered physically because they are fictional, inaccessible, or destroyed. As phenomenology has already emphasized, the analysis of space has to take into account the bodily involvement of the researcher. Pint introduces the notion of the avatar to compensate for the impossibility of actually accessing the aforementioned spaces. Borrowed from game design, the avatar allows us to include this bodily aspect in the exploration of virtual environments, without neglecting the specific characteristics of an immersion in a virtual space. The aim is to make the avatar operational as a research tool by combining Roland Barthes's use of fantasy in his theory of reading with a reinterpretation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notions of the conceptual persona and the aesthetic figure. To illustrate this research method, Pint uses a number of avatars related to the fantasy of not-belonging to explore the virtual environments of modernist architecture, literature, and painting.

**Kris PINT**

### **The Avatar as a Methodological Tool for the Embodied Exploration of Virtual Environments**

There is a wonderful remark about a staircase in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*: "What joy for the legs to go up four steps at a time!" (26). This seems a curiously limited and self-evident way to describe a staircase in an analysis of (domestic) space. There is obviously much more to a staircase: in addition to the evident purpose of connecting two floors, it also has an important semiotic function. In "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture," Umberto Eco defines the staircase as a sign that primarily denotes its purpose: "According to an immemorial architectural codification, a stair or a ramp denotes the possibility of going up" (185). The staircase can also be interpreted as a demarcation between the more public living room from the private bath- and bedrooms, which introduces the important opposition upstairs/downstairs – with all its social implications. Structuralist semiotics has drawn our attention to these different codes that together form the system with which we literally make sense of our environment (see also *Sémiotique de l'espace*; Hammad). Structuralism has made us aware of the fact that the space in which we dwell functions as a text, a system of signs that produces meaning by means of binary oppositions (including urban/rural, public/private, and men/women) and a series of culturally encoded scripts that determine the actions and the actors that are possible or allowed at a specific location. Even if I am perfectly capable of ascending a specific staircase, social conventions can prevent me from actually doing it. The use of this semiotic framework provides a common ground for the analysis of both architectural and literary space. Similar to the way in which spatial descriptions define characters in a novel, the environment in which the events of our daily lives take place provides us with a sense of who we are (or are supposed to be). Both in novels and in real life, specific places can also function as Bakhtinian chronotopes, a set of spatial and temporal features that are linked to specific actions and events (see Bakhtin 84-258).

Yet, regardless of how insightful and relevant such a textual approach undoubtedly is, some aspects of space remain under the radar if the metaphor of the space-as-text becomes too dominant. Bachelard's casual remark reminds us of the fact that a staircase can also be used as a device that, in connection with a fast-moving body, quite simply generates the experience of physical pleasure. The point that Bachelard makes here is that even minor bodily sensations are essential aspects of our relation with our environment, just like the fleeting affects, associative thoughts, and memories that are evoked by being in a specific space at a specific time. These individual experiences are all too easily overlooked (or dismissed as irrelevant) in a purely textual analysis of space. It is thus no surprise that, in reaction to this problem, recent architectural theory has shown a renewed interest in phenomenology, as the latter stresses the fundamental bodily involvement with the environment in which we exist (see Holl, Pallasmaa, Pérez-Gómez; Pallasmaa). The nature of this relationship is succinctly formulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them" (94). The environment envelops us entirely, and gradually unfolds itself in interaction with our senses and projects. This is a basic assumption that we encounter in many canonical texts on architectural phenomenology. In a more rhetorical and hermetic vein, Martin Heidegger expresses the necessary situatedness in his famous notion of *das Geviert*, the fourfold of sky and the earth, the divinities, and the mortals to which man must relate (Heidegger 141-60). In a similar fashion, Christian Norberg-Schulz develops the notion of existential space to define the complex spatial image that is created by the interaction of our individuality, based on our past and present experiences, and the spatial and socio-cultural structures of our environment (17). Norberg-Schulz revisits the Roman notion of *genius loci* – the spirit of the place – to designate the specific character of an environment. Only when we reckon with this *genius loci* and personally connect to it, an understanding of a specific space becomes possible. A similarly personal participation is required in the "topoanalysis" that Bachelard develops in his *Poetics of Space*, in which he explores images of dwelling, and, more specifically, "the quite simple images of felicitous space" (xxx). Bachelard's topoanalysis is propelled by the researcher's imaginative involvement in the (domestic) spaces that s/he analyzes: "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the

surveyor" (xxxii). In recent scholarship, this phenomenological approach is again brought to the fore as an alternative way to analyze dwelling. Indebted to the work of Merleau-Ponty, Tim Ingold argues in his *The Perception of the Environment* that one can never analyze an environment from a supposedly external point, as the observing self only emerges in interaction with the environment, in his "active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world" (42). For Ingold, it is thus a fallacy to believe that a scholar can ignore his own immersion: "scientific activity is always, and necessarily, grounded in a poetics of dwelling" (110).

This type of immersive approach, however, poses important methodological problems for the analysis of spaces that we simply cannot inhabit, including those that are inaccessible, destroyed, or virtual, as is the case with places described in works of fiction. Merleau-Ponty states that, in such cases, our own experiences and memories of actual environments allow us to create a virtual body, and to immerse ourselves in a virtual environment: "This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle" (291). However, this projection onto a virtual space becomes less self-evident when the spectacle is not imagined by the subject alone, but emerges in interaction with a work of imagination created by someone else. Therefore, when Pallasmaa's *Encounters* (2005) defends the author's use of works of art in his phenomenological analysis of dwelling by stating that "in a work of art we encounter our own 'being-in-the-world' in an intensified manner" (130), this claim is not so obvious. What we encounter in the virtual environment of a work of art, be it a book, a painting, or a film, does not completely belong to our "being-in-the-world": the depiction or description of this environment is the materialized expression of the imagination of another "being-in-the-world," and as such cannot be fully "embodied" by the reader or the spectator. Pallasmaa ignores this epistemological problem when he writes: "I do not experience the feelings of the gloomy protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*; I do not borrow his feelings. I lend Raskolnikov my feelings and my waiting: Raskolnikov's agonized waiting is *my* experience of *my* own frustration of waiting" (130; emphasis in the original). The exchange that takes place here is far more messy than Pallasmaa's metaphor of lending and borrowing suggests. The experience of frustration in *Crime and Punishment* goes beyond the specific situatedness of the reading subject: the initial feelings of the reader are altered in the process, and although these new experiences emerge from the body of the reader, he or she cannot claim that they are solely his or her own. Although Raskolnikov, as a fictional, textual character, obviously cannot feel for himself, the formulation of his "agonized waiting" by Dostoevsky (slightly or drastically) changes the reader's outlook, even after the book has been put back on the bookshelf. I want to argue that a more fruitful approach to this immersive interaction with a virtual space can be found in the work of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Like Merleau-Ponty, these scholars stress the importance of the body as an epistemological tool, but they interpret the body in a more Nietzschean sense, as a dynamic collective of different affects, perceptions, and thoughts, which together form a force field of sensations that is in a process of constant transformation. The feeling of self-awareness ("my experience") is only one of the forces that create a body. I will discuss Barthes's and Deleuze and Guattari's Nietzschean interpretation of the body respectively as a potential alternative to Pallasmaa's phenomenological analysis of virtual (literary) spaces.

After the publication of *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes tried to integrate bodily sensations into his theory of reading, without ignoring the crucial role that language plays in the mediation and codification of the heterogeneous amalgam of forces that create the reading body. Barthes wrestled with the methodological implications of the interaction between the body and the text, until his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977, during which he introduced the concept of the fantasy. The fantasy, a notion that Barthes borrowed from psychoanalysis, reveals itself in a theme, a character, an image, or even just a phrase or a word that triggers a strong bodily response every time the reader encounters it in a text. In *Comment vivre ensemble*, the first of Barthes's lecture series at the Collège de France, the fantasy "crystallized" in the word "idiorythmics," found in a passage about Greek monasteries on Mount Athos in Jacques Lacarrière's *L'Été grec*. This term designates a way of dwelling that could reconcile the desire to follow one's own rhythm in life with the need to form a community (Barthes, *Comment* 37). In his lectures, Barthes brought together and discussed different

texts, both fictional and non-fictional, in which he had encountered the same fantasy. The word "fantasy" may conjure up associations with fancy and illusion, especially in English, but for Barthes, the exploration of a fantasy is never gratuitous. The fantasies that haunt the act of reading are strongly connected with the reader's personal life, his "existential space." The fantasy can thus be used as an epistemological instrument that allows the reader to reflect on some of the obsessions or problems that structure his existence, by studying texts in which he encounters traces of some of these fantasies.

What makes Barthes's phantasmatic reading strategy especially useful for the analysis of virtual environments is that it stresses the importance of space in the activation of a fantasy. Or, as Barthes succinctly puts it, "A fantasy requires a scene (a scenario), it therefore requires a place" ("Pour qu'il y ait fantasme, il faut qu'il y ait scène (scénario), donc lieu" (Barthes, *Comment* 37; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). The phantasmatic space that readers construct in their reading seems to dovetail with Bachelard's quest for images of felicitous space, but Barthes's phantasmatic reading differs from Bachelard's topoanalysis in a number of ways. Unlike Bachelard's daydreamer, Barthes's reader does not consciously control, let alone choose, his fantasies. However intimate they may seem, they remain fundamentally alien to the subject. It is not the subject that structures his bodily sensations through the construction of fantasies, but the fantasies, as external interpretative schemes for these subjectless sensations, that allow the subject to emerge and to reflect upon these sensations. This external nature of the fantasy itself makes clear why those fantasies can be shared with a group of other readers. Fantasies could be regarded as impersonal structures that traverse our cultural discourse and, in a particular situation, can become "charged" with the desire of an individual or a group. This line of thought enables us to interpret the canonical concepts of architectural phenomenology (Heidegger's "*das Geviert*," Norberg-Schulz's "*genius loci*," Bachelard's "felicitous space") as the formulation of such fantasies. This does not in any way discard those concepts as merely the respective authors' private preoccupations. The fact that so many readers, the author of this text included, are seduced by these notions, shows how they appeal to us by revealing a kind of malaise in our actual dwelling that provokes the desire for and hence the fantasies of alternative ways of living. But it is important to keep in mind that the spaces evoked by those phantasmatic concepts should never be mistaken for real (or realizable) places. Even if the discussed places actually exist, we must be aware that a fantasy always distorts, deforms, or ignores some aspects, and exaggerates others. Therefore, when Barthes describes the set of images he associates with Mount Athos, a place he had in fact never visited, he lucidly adds: "in the fantasy, one effaces: here, filth, faith" ("dans le fantasme, on oblitère; ici la crasse, la foi" (Barthes, *Comment* 37). It is the same obliteration that we encounter in Heidegger's eulogy of the German countryside or Bachelard's praise of the solitary dwelling, far from the busy environment of the modern city. Effaced are the xenophobia, alienation, violence, and loneliness that form the downside of the rural and domestic places both Heidegger and Bachelard idealize in their analysis. Thus, while the presence of a fantasy is necessary in order to establish a personal relation with a specific site, the phantasmatic gaze separates us from actually fully belonging to that space. The fantasy creates a virtual scene that does not coincide with the actual space that triggered it. When Barthes writes "I see myself there, at the edge of a terrace, with the sea in the distance" ("Je me vois là, au bord d'une terrasse, la mer au loin" (Barthes, *Comment* 37). This imaginary scene, this virtual Athos evoked by his lecture of *L'Été grec*, obviously does not express the same being-in-the-world as that of the orthodox monks. This is not only because Barthes has never been to Athos. Heidegger lived in a rural house in the Bavarian countryside, but, still, his existential space as a notorious philosopher was not similar to that of the German peasants with whom he shared the landscape. With his notion of *das Geviert* Heidegger created a philosophical fiction, projected into a landscape that was as virtual as Barthes's Athos. What Merleau-Ponty called the "inhabiting of the spectacle" is thus impossible: the phantasmatic gaze that creates the spectacle is also the alien object that invades this spectacle and turns it into a virtual, inaccessible space. This is illustrated by a quote from David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, in which the Arab leader Faisal mockingly says to the English colonel: "I think you are another of these desert-loving English ... No Arab loves the desert. We love water and green trees, there is nothing in the desert. No man needs nothing" (Bolt 26). Faisal only knows the real desert, the politically and ecologically precarious territory that he and his people need to survive. For Lawrence, the actual desert is merged with the virtual desert. His gaze is charged with

a desire for self-destruction and oblivion that finds its expression in the inhospitable vastness of endless sand dunes under a burning sun. But this "virtualization" of the desert does not imply that Lawrence's view on the desert is merely a romantic illusion. It is precisely because Lawrence remains a stranger, an outsider, that he can actually use the image of the desert to create a phantasmatic space that allows him to explore these desires. More than an illusion, Lawrence's virtual desert is a powerful expression of his being-in-the-world. The example of Lawrence also makes clear that a fantasy is never purely personal: other historical characters, such as Arthur Rimbaud or Isabelle Eberhardt, were seduced by the same fantasy, and projected the same European desire to leave everything behind onto the deserts of the Near East. And these figures still appeal to the public imagination because, in a way, they incarnate a collective fantasy, allowing us to experience it from a safe distance, reading their books in a comfy armchair or watching Peter O'Toole's bright blue eyes gazing into the desert. The example also shows the important role that characters play as mediators in the phantasmatic construction of a virtual scene. It is always via the virtual body of a character — Raskolnikov, the orthodox monk, the peasant, the daydreamer in his home, or an English colonel — that a reader, a spectator, or a visitor can project him/herself onto an environment that he/she will never inhabit in reality.

Unfortunately, Barthes's theoretical discussion of the fantasy does not pay further attention to the character's crucial, mediating function. Therefore, I complement Barthes's theory of the fantasy with the notion of the avatar, a term borrowed from video game design (see also Ryan, *Avatars*). Through the manipulation of a character in the game universe, a gamer can "incarnate" in cyberspace, and is able to perform a set of actions in a world he cannot physically enter. In a similar way, the fantasy connects the subject to an avatar in a virtual space. This avatar can be an image of oneself, as in Barthes's example of Mount Athos ("I see myself there"), but it can also be a fictional (Raskolnikov) or historical character (Lawrence). The only condition is that something in the description or visualization of the avatar must appeal to our fantasy and pull us into the virtual world that it inhabits. This, in fact, is what happens when we read a book or watch a movie: by identifying with the characters or actors, we plunge into another universe that makes us forget everything around us. In her *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan calls it an immersive experience: "In the most complete forms of spatial immersion, the reader's private landscape blends with the textual geography. In those moments of sheer delight, the reader develops an intimate relation to the setting as well as a sense of being present on the scene of the represented events" (122). For Ryan, however, this immersion is necessarily passive. An interactive approach, which transforms the text and explores different possible interpretations or plot outcomes, creates a critical distance: the conscious manipulation of the text breaks the spell of the imagination, the illusion of a three-dimensional environment (193). But in Barthes's phantasmatic reading strategy, immersion does not exclude a more active exploration of the virtual universe. As the fantasy is often a response to one of the subject's existential problems, the avatar makes it possible to experiment, try out alternatives, and reformulate the initial problem by projecting the subject onto a phantasmatic space and altering parameters (as is the case for the religious factor and the dirt in the example of Athos). What the Barthesian reader does, resembles the acts of children who create virtual worlds with their toys and are entirely absorbed by the game, yet never forget that they themselves have created these play worlds: they know they can intervene at any time, change the scene, rearrange the toys. Therefore, even if the reader identifies with a character, the latter, at the same time, remains nothing more than a relay that connects the body of the reader, through the virtual body of a character, to a set of thoughts, perceptions, and affects that cluster around a specific fantasy.

To further explore how the avatar functions as a relay, I borrow two notions that Deleuze and Guattari discuss in their *What Is Philosophy?*: the conceptual persona, which belongs to the domain of philosophy, and the aesthetic figure discussed in the realm of art. The conceptual persona is a character that expresses a philosophical concept, with examples including Socrates in Platonism and Dionysos in Nietzschean philosophy. These characters are more than just rhetorical devices to illustrate an abstract line of reasoning: in a way, they perform the philosopher's thinking. It is through them that his philosophy is created: "the philosopher is only the envelope of this principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors, the real subjects of his philosophy ... The destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae, at the same time that

these personae themselves become something other than what they are historically, mythologically, or commonly" (Deleuze and Guattari 64). What conceptual personae are for concepts in philosophy, aesthetic figures are for affects and "percepts" in art. In literature, they are blocs of sensations that unite a character and the environment in which it exists to form an affective and perceptive assemblage. In Deleuze's and Guattari's terms, "Characters can only exist, and the author can only create them, because they do not perceive but have passed into the landscape and are themselves part of the compound of sensations" (169). This process implies more than just "borrowing" a character's sensorimotor apparatus to perceive a virtual landscape. The landscape itself is part of the character and vice versa. To illustrate this, Deleuze and Guattari give the example of Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "Ahab really does have perceptions of the sea, but only because he has entered into a relationship with Moby Dick that makes him a becoming-whale and forms a compound of sensations that no longer needs anyone: ocean" (169). Deleuze's and Guattari's aesthetic figure, therefore, goes well beyond the "virtual body" as Merleau-Ponty interprets it. The figure is an amalgam of sensations that is not limited to human agency and the supposed subjectivity of the literary character itself. That character is only a temporary assembly point in which subjectless "percepts" and affects "crystallize" and move this character along on a line of becoming. The latter also affects the reader: Ahab's becoming-whale involves the reader's "becoming Ahab." This dynamic transference is lost if we only see it as a mere projection of our delineated body onto a virtual scene.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the concepts of philosophy and the aesthetic sensations (affects/percepts) belong to the different realms of philosophy and art. This distinction, however, does not exclude interaction. Conceptual personae indeed do more than just dramatize thinking. They are "philosophical sensibilia, the perceptions and affections of fragmentary concepts themselves: through them concepts are not only thought but perceived and felt" (131). Likewise, art can establish a conjunction between aesthetic figures and conceptual personae: Deleuze and Guattari argue that there are "hybrid geniuses" such as Hölderlin, Kafka, and Pessoa, who are able "to install themselves within this very difference" between art and philosophy (67). It is my opinion that the avatar may be regarded as such a conjunction of concepts and sensations. Sensations force us to think, to conceptualize, similar to the way in which concepts can create new ways to feel, sense, and be affected. The conceptual persona of the monk in Zen-philosophy allows one to enter the universe of the haiku, of the singularity of the event as sensation, similar to how the aesthetic figure of Hölderlin's poetic imaginary gives shape to Heidegger's concept of *das Geviert*. If we return to Bachelard's example of the staircase, we could, depending on the context, interpret the avatar of the "figure on the staircase" as a mythological conceptual persona (the shaman ascending into the realm of the spirits) and an aesthetic figure (expressing an erotic affection — see, for instance, Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier n°2* — or a joyous perception of fast movement, as in Bachelard's description). Art, philosophy, and history provide us with a near-endless reservoir of potential avatars that allow us to link fantasies to spaces, and to simultaneously explore the concepts, perceptions, and affects that these fantasies mediate.

To illustrate the use of the avatar to explore spaces, I start from the fantasy that can be formulated as "I do not belong here." This affect of not-belonging is inherently linked to many artworks of modernism. The fantasy expresses the existential problem that one can never fully coincide with oneself or with the group to which one belongs, that held opinions and beliefs are contingent, and that life as a whole has no meaning. One feels like an outsider, cut off from ancient traditions and ways of living. The space of modern life is no longer a hospitable shelter for our being, but a strange, alien scene in which we play an indeterminate part. In what follows, I link this fantasy to the experience of space in modernist art and architecture by briefly discussing some cultural artifacts that can provide us with useful avatars. These avatars not only give us a set of sensations to explore the virtual space of modernism, haunted by different variants of the fantasy of not-belonging, but also present us with some concepts to elaborate on this existential problem. There are, of course, many possible avatars that come to mind: examples of conceptual personae, for instance, include Karl Marx's alienated worker, or the hysterical and obsessional patients of Sigmund Freud's case studies. In literature, we could recall Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, with Mersault as the conceptual persona par excellence of existentialist alienation and absurdism. But Mersault is also an aesthetic figure who epitomizes the affect of emotional indifference and combines it with the percept of a flickering knife, a

sandy beach, a sea breeze, a burning sun, and a gunshot. In painting, we see how this fantasy is activated by Giorgio Morandi's seemingly meaningless compositions of empty bottles, or indeed, avatars that turn the affect of solitude-in-company into pale hues of light earth tones, green, and grey, as is the case in *Still Life with White Bottle*. Whereas Morandi's work illustrates the passive, contorted aspect of the fantasy, Frank Lloyd Wright's avatar demonstrates how the fantasy of not-belonging can be turned into a creative force. For Wright, this break with tradition takes the form of a spatial flight away from his wealthy Chicago clients, to Europe and Japan, only to end in the desert with the construction of Taliesin West, the winter residence and studio that the architect started to build for himself in 1937. Wright's persona, as it appears in his autobiography, becomes an avatar that is both a conceptual persona and an aesthetic figure. This avatar is the conceptualization of an architectural way of thinking that expresses the complex and tense relationship between individualism and capitalism based on mass-consumption, between technological progress and a devotion to unspoiled nature. At the same time, Wright's avatar opens up a virtual landscape of modern architecture in which a burning fireplace comes together with the lines in Japanese woodblock prints and the sound of desolate winds in the Arizona desert.

In literature, the existential space of modernism is well-described in the works of Thomas Stearns Eliot and Witold Gombrowicz (on Gombrowicz and modernity, see, e.g., Goddard). Eliot's *J. Alfred Prufrock*, too, is an avatar who, in the opening lines of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* evokes the skyline of a modern city by combining the evening sky outside with the interior of an operating room. In this image, the realm of airy spirits that surround the mortals is reduced to the volatile, sweet smell of anesthesia: "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table" (lines 1-3). The reader follows Prufrock out into the smoky city. For Prufrock, tradition is not something to be overcome in an act of creative genius, as Wright claims to do, but a heavy burden: in comparison with the great biblical and mythological figures and the great artists of the past, his life is too prosaic and dull to make any lasting impression. In a desperate attempt to make meaningful contact with other people, he creates a new Lazarus, only to let him fall silent in the stifling atmosphere of a ladies' parlor: "To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' - / If one, setting a pillow by her head, / Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all'" (lines 95-98)

The avatar Prufrock shows how the incapacity to cope with the passing of time can be metaphorically represented by the insignificant presence of a bald spot, not as a symbol of decay (as a classic hermeneutic reading would have it), but as an unbearable, shameful sensation, felt and shared by the reader as he follows the avatar in his gloomy way down: "Time to turn back and descend the stair, / with a bald spot in the middle of my hair - / (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')" (lines 39-41). This descent is by no means spiritual: Prufrock is not a shaman returning from the ethereal world of the spirits, not an angel descending from Jacob's ladder. What is more, his descent inevitably ends at the ground floor: modern space has no cellar, no hidden world beneath the surface, no fairy tale sea of wonders to submerge oneself in - only in daydreams can Prufrock temporarily hide from plain, dull reality - but there is no ether left that could keep him from awaking: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (lines 129-131).

Another writer who provides useful concepts to structure the unsettling experience of modern space, is Gombrowicz I mention above. His *Ferdydurke* is the absurd story of a writer, Joey, whom a sadistic professor forces to behave like a schoolboy. Gombrowicz introduces the *mug/pupa* opposition, which literally gives body to the concept of alienation: social interactions force us to play a role, a role that sticks to us the more we try to escape it, and thus give us an unbearable "mug." The opposite of the "mug" is the abject, chaotic, shameful, infantile, and formless "immaturity" of our *pupa*, the "butt" that we also cannot escape. *Ferdydurke* is the perfect illustration of how a concept is also a physical sensation, and becomes part of the space in which we live. This becomes clear in the part of the story in which professor Pimko leaves the narrator to the care of the Youngbloods, a family that proudly identifies with all aspects of modern life. The narrator falls in love with the daughter, but as Pimko ingeniously gave him the "mug" of an old-fashioned poser when he introduced him to the Youngbloods, the girl considers him old-fashioned and uninteresting. Joey's attempts to show off his modernity only reinforce his awkward "mug" in the eyes of the Youngbloods, which, in turn,



grotesquely reinforces their own: "the more old-fashioned, insincere, and affected I became, the more they developed a sense of modernity, sincerity, and simplicity" (134). Frustrated, the narrator tries to sabotage the family's modernity by means of absurd actions, such as secretly performing a silly solo dance in the parents' bedroom, asking a beggar to stand motionless before the house with a green twig in his mouth, or removing the legs and wings of a fly and placing this "suffering, dolorous, frightful, and metaphysical little ball" in the daughter's tennis shoe to spoil this emblem of her unassailable athletic beauty" (157). However, despite these perverse spatial interventions, the narrator is unable to overcome the stifling atmosphere of the Youngbloods' house.

Gombrowicz provides another, more joyous concept: the concept of "bemberging," represented by the conceptual persona of Leo Wojtys, a side character in *Kosmos*. This novel, which seems to be a parody of the detective story, begins with two students who journey to a pension in the Polish countryside to prepare for their exams, and who discover a dead sparrow that has been hanged in a roadside thicket. Determined to solve this puzzling, eccentric crime, they decide to rent rooms in a house nearby the "crime scene." The landlord of this house is the retired bank manager Wojtys, an avatar that presents us with a more successful way of dealing with the feeling of not-belonging. With his eccentric behavior in the novel, Wojtys demonstrates how, even in a dull, boring environment, one can "resort to minor and almost invisible pleasures" (126) — he discovers an infinite bliss in performing small, unnoticeable acts, such as humming, making little bread pellets, twisting an egg-shell between his fingers, wiping a pince-nez, or sticking his tongue in the holes between his teeth (127, 150). Awkward, meaningless bodily gestures without tradition, without sense are thus turned into secret, highly sophisticated pleasures — modern absurdity defeated on its own grounds. Unlike Prufrock and the narrator of *Ferdydurke*, Leo is able to "bemberg" his way out of the dulling atmosphere in which he has to live: "I take my place quietly at the family dinner table, talk to the family and the lodgers, and nevertheless manage surreptitiously to enjoy some of the pleasures of Paris. And no one will ever find me out" (127). Each of these different avatars, which appeal to us because we recognize in them the fantasy of not-belonging, opens up another route into the space of modernism. They function as alternative gateways into the landscape of which they are the emanation (the prairies and deserts of Wright, the Polish countryside of Wojtys, the industrial city of Prufrock, or the interiors of Morandi). We could even try to connect the virtual spaces that these avatars evoke: would it be comforting or horrendous if Leo Wojtys whistled funny tunes on Morandi's empty bottles, or if Prufrock tried to be Lazarus at a party at one of Wright's prairie houses?

Although I use the concept of the avatar as a tool to explore virtual spaces, I cannot claim that the thoughts, the perceptions, and the affects that these spaces evoke are my own, even if this avatar should be a projection of myself (as in the virtual space of childhood memories). They are the sensations and thoughts of another body that are linked, by means of a fantasy, to those of my own body. At this point, the use of the avatar as a tool to explore spaces differs from a phenomenological approach, because these thoughts, sensations and affects do not have my body, my "situatedness," as the only point of departure. They originate from an encounter with another virtual body that transforms me as much as I transform it. By following the routes that avatars open up in art, literature, or cultural history, we are able to leave the well-trodden paths of a more orthodox cultural analysis of virtual spaces. Using the fantasy as a compass, the avatar allows us to draw a different kind of cartography, in which minor sensations and idiosyncratic concepts suddenly reveal an unexpected landscape.

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