Riding Tools and Spiritual Excursion: Modes of Human Presence and Tool Usage

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Abstract *Tools, can they build space for human consciousness to dwell? This article discusses a semantic expansion of immaterial worlds, through tools functioning as symbolic indicator of 'another world.' Comparing ritual objects as ancient mediator models of an immaterial world, and Virtual Reality (VR) tools as a new alternative reality generator, we will argue how they help transport our mind and body to unknown spheres, generating different frameworks of belief, and ultimately fashion accommodation for multifaceted posthuman presence on our conceptual world map.*

Keywords *Perception of reality; tool; modelling of immaterial world; production of belief; human presence*

Introduction

Late afternoon, July 2017, a shaman stepped down from blades known as *Jack-dou* after his last performance in a daylong ritual. As if returning to Earth, two persons held his arms in help. In a small room, he washed his face with a towel, flopped on the floor, and showed us his bare feet, unwounded. In Korean shamanist tradition, it holds proof of the *General* spirit's miraculous efficacy. To me, this performance recalled the scene of a male gamer running on a Virtual Reality treadmill, gripping "pistols" with two hands. He was shooting monsters in virtual space, to cast them out. For a shaman, *being possessed* is a term commonly used by third parties, as might *being immersed* for the gamer. Apparently and chronologically so disparate, what common points can we gather?

Being, from here to there

As the anecdote hints, this article aims to discuss the mode of *presence*—a provocative subject since the pandemic—as Latour suggested, one year before his passing,

that we think about our planetary experience of the "world after," yet to be (Latour, 2021). Taken as a philosophical issue, we want to unfold its essential prerequisites, unpack various modes of presence as mediated by humans' use of tools. In what follows, I will discuss how this process changes and *frames* our notions of what is real and constitutes the real world. However sibylline, "being here" posits those first two preconditions of presence: a being and its environment. If, in anthropological focus on the interaction between mind and body, which generates our sense of self, the "being" is inevitably human, by the second term "here" we refer to its surroundings: the "*lived world*" where a "*lived body*" considers itself to be psychologically located.[1]

As perceived reality "*here*" can be no mere space-time variation of physical surroundings. It also implies subjective interpretation of given context, as a background where continuous internalization and exteriorization of mental and physical activities would occur and intertwine with each other. Merleau-Ponty regards *space* as a means by which the positioning of things becomes possible, and lays stress on its "*universal power*" enabling all things "*to be connected* (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 281)." In other words, the context "*here*" is continuously being woven through mutual interchange of all inputs and outputs between *self* and *world*, in which a never-ending narrative of human *presence* is established. It may be understood as an *Umwelt* construction within the *Lebenswelt,* that is to say, of a self-centered world in intersubjective life-worlds (Husserl 1989, 93).

This process of engagement of the human with his environment is surprising. Beyond the passive form of self-presence in a perceived environment, mankind has been involved with its surroundings in more direct and active ways. Tim Ingold sees building activity as "*part and parcel of life in an environment that is already given in nature, and that has not itself been artificially engineered*" (Ingold 2000, 180). His observation on the "*construction of environments and making worlds*" gives an idea of how this context is naturally made and modified in physical existence. Comparing mankind's with beavers' ways of building dwelling space, he characterizes intentional design, particularity of human constructions, as enacted by a "*self-conscious decision process*" (Ibid. 173–75). This would acquire more evidence when we consider the amplitude of human toolmaking—made, or *co-opted* according to Ingold, prior to the material realization, as we find a functional quality in its use. Tools serve a purpose and become a created part of the physical environment.

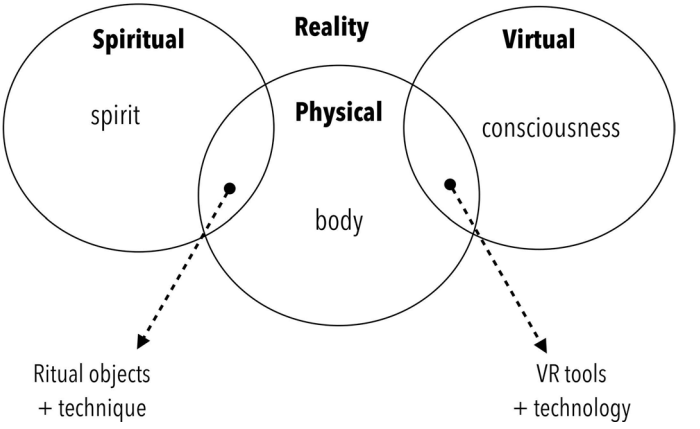
Going further, no doubt with desire for immaterial emancipation from our physical body or bodily experience, man has endeavoured to extend the contextual background of his world. In backing away from physical reality as the basic notion of perceptible environment, we easily run across cosmological ideas of a spiritual world,

1 The lived body, as described by Merleau-Ponty, is distinguished by an objective and physiological presence, and would refer to "the body experienced in a non-objective way" such as connects the self to the world.

oldest archetype amongst immaterial worlds, occasionally labelled as illogical, heteroclite or unjustified (Servier 1994, 22). Whether ritual techniques or their material supports, to the very tools chosen for functional quality and solid construction as intermediaries with the spiritual world, are assigned metaphoric significations covering over or containing their 'irrational' structure.

If such archetypes of an immaterial world persist in human imagination and belief and broaden conceptual life-fields,[2] these denominators may be applied in search of a contemporary immaterial version by which to extend our physical world. That explains the parallel position of a virtual sphere, digitally cybernated, as legitimate counterpart to religious notions of spiritual reality [Image 1]. Especially when its tool is *Virtual Reality* gadgetry, which creates photorealistic surroundings only through digital language, this comparability regards a genuine and more concrete way of constructing intangible environments.

Image 1: Three semiotic spaces, as context of our experience, connected by use of tools. (Diagram by author.)



Even though potentially dismissed as mere artificial illusion created by digital equipment or irrational credence vis-à-vis the mythical phenomenon, these tools assume an equivalent role as "mediator" for each conceptual sphere, that help provide access to each immaterial universe. From them can be deduced a map of *semiospheres* comprising three conceptual spaces as inhabitancies of neo-humanity.[3] The latter

2 As for Taussig, "this strange world of reality-copy" (Taussig 1993, 103) "extends out"—to borrow Chapin's words—"in all directions."

3 The Semiosphere is certainly not a physical or imaginary space, but a "world of signs and constant communication processes" which affords a "condition for the construction of a world-image or of a world-narrative" (Pier 2018, 267–74). Also, it opens up "the possibility of a spa-

is mediated by "animated inert objects"—ritual and technological—which create a new model of *biosphere* allowing the *noosphere* of human consciousness to install, even attempt union with and be constantly renewed, in relation with such tools.[4] This comparison may let us discover diverse modes of presence of human "being," moving back and forth between two worlds, both intermediated by tools. Named spiritual reality and virtual reality, those immaterial spaces are to be understood as extending the physical dwelling.

Then how do we get there?

The physically enlarged lived world spheres follow no exceptional pattern to be found in traditional conceptions of spiritual world or virtual reality. For example, retracing ancient Pavlov cartography engraved on a mammoth's tusk (25000 B.C.) through the very first mappa mundi atlas of the oceans, then aerial maps and astronomical geographies, one can easily understand the progressive extension of our image of the world, where the physical presence of humans has remained consciously located (Rooney 2018, 11).

Regarding such fearless attempts to discover unknown environments, those expansions in multiple directions were inevitably accompanied by surpassing inventions in means of transportation and relevant equipment. For example, locomotive tools such as ships, air- and space-craft all contributed to iron out atmospheric discrepancies, and effect a change in orbit regarding the use of time and space. If, for Denègre, cartographies define the "accessible world," they also imply a saturation of discovery and pose spatial limits (Denègre 2005, 36–7). Through the custom of repetitive constructions and deconstructions of architectural habitats, so-called modern man has early understood from toying with its plastic globe, the impossibility of further relocation of the body from the soil.

In the same vein, a new generation of mappa mundi [Image1] provides a habitat where the immaterial presence of our modern selves may be settled by tool usage, that Leroi-Gourhan interpreted as "domestication of space and time" (Leroi-

tial modelling of concepts that don't of themselves possess a spatial nature" (Lotman 1973, 310). If narrativity is an important cornerstone that underpins the semiotic structure of each culture's 'spiritual world,' it is also clear that virtual environments built by digital language constitute representative space made purely of "signs and communication." The term "semiosphere" juxtaposes itself with other conceptual spheres such as "biosphere," "geosphere" or "noosphere." Nevertheless, I borrow this term as "sphere of commonality," pertaining to three worlds: spiritual, physical and virtual, which can be verbally conceptualized but remain heterogenous in terms of material aspect.

4 The biosphere indicates the sphere of living life and the term noosphere, developed by Vladimir Vernadsky and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, refers to the 'world of human consciousness and reasoning.'

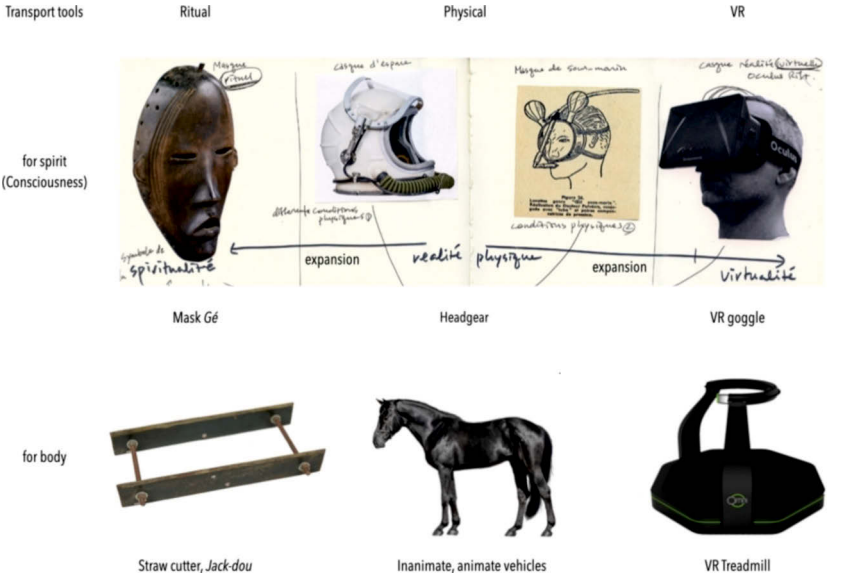
Gourhan 1965, 135). A corresponding series of implements appropriate for each world sphere, indicates in chronological order each symbolic human characteristic, such as consciousness of spirituality, physicality, and projected rationality.[5] As in the first row here [Image 2], a group of head coverings, objects symbolically linked to each other under "headgear," represent such triple perspectives focused on the human spirit, the physiological brain, and cognitive processes of a VR user.

From among them two objects, the ritual mask of Dan tribe and VR goggles were selected for comparative study, as contrasting tools, which nevertheless both engage human consciousness for "immaterial expansion." Ostensibly two of the headgear are useful as "tools," assuming polyvalent social functions such as entertainment, religious ritual and community welfare. For example, in the Dan tribe culture of Ivory Coast, one can consult *Ge*, a term which signifies both their ancestor spirit and the mask itself. Individual masks of multifarious persona can be endowed by their intermediary genu spirit, not only for religious rites, through different types of *Ge* mask: a highly sacred *Gegbadë* deals with sorcery and healing, while *tano ge* (singing ge), *tankë ge* (dance ge), and *trukë ge* (comedian ge) provide entertainment, and the mask of wisdom, *gegn* is known to tutor and direct young people in their behavior (Reed 2003, 76–82). On the other hand, a wide range of modern VR technology applications can be found in practically equivalent domains: medical treatment, entertainment, religious worship, and education, by revamping the way we engage with related activities. Beyond VR's initial usage for indoor entertainment, psychologists, neurologists, and surgeons apply its tools for therapy and operational training, and some churches have even initiated VR worship.[6]

5 Henri Corneille Agrippa's idea of "triple worlds" also classified the world according to planes: celestial, material, and intellectual (Servier 1994, 21).

6 The Life.Church in America is a multi-location TV-based mega-congregation which initiated a VR service, offering online worship through the World Wide Web since 2016.

Image 2: In a conceptual division of body and mind, those objects placed in chronological order represent each contextual sphere of human presence, such as in spiritual, physical, and virtual environments. (Diagram by author.)[7]



Attention however should be given to "*what individuals experience through those tools,*" often overshadowed by their functional use: as *medium* for the afore-mentioned *Ge*, *media* for the latter. In focusing their mental shift towards extended reality, the ritual mask and VR headgear should be considered as representatives of multi-semantic objects, engaging particular cognitive states of *beingness* beyond their social functions, to be distinguished from headgear used only for physical protection in specific environments [Image 2].

Firstly, whether regarded as vehicle of spirit possession, or as a mimetic « faithful copy » reproduction of a spirit image (Taussig 1993, 52; Merril 2004, 23), the ritual mask is not only a figurative representation of a spiritual existence, but also an embodiment for the wearer who "*becomes*" and "*is*" what is represented (Pernet 1992, 116). As a *Ge* bearer describes, in an interview that I had conducted: "*The mask receives information and transfers it to people, it comes in the form of winds, in the form of reverie…,*" in the Dan tribe's culture, sacred mask bearers are supposed to embody ancestors and sometimes even fall into a trancelike state, even of wild and occult atmosphere, to the sound of shamanic taboret drumming.

7 Image from 'reality and tools' project [https://jyeon.com/2017/02/02/realite/].

If a mask effuses a stereotypic sense of *persona*—the shielded veritable character and face of a person—(Mauss 1938, 277) this appears also through visual representation and the continuous phenomenon of *human becoming* (Ingold 2014, 20; Haraway 2008, 244) in virtuality, equally intersected on a VR headset. An individual user, replicating *autogenesis*, may experience union with his avatar, as a digital version of the self that exists 'within' the interface (White 2006, 120), through 360° optical immersion in graphically realistic *trompe-œil* imagery, enhanced by multi sensorial effects. This alliance, based on the stereoscope principle, establishes the physiological mechanism of binocular relief perception which creates the sensation of being in a three-dimensional virtual space (Cahen 1989, 8).

Nevertheless, ponderous bodies, in pursuit of such dematerialized worlds, oblige us to seriously reflect on human ontology. If those headgear were to liberate the human spirit from the materiality of the body, the next group might activate translocation, or transcendency of bodily presence from its materiality [Image 2, p. 62]. The pursuit of locomotion in physical reality, using living tools such as in horse culture, can be considered the very first geographic transfer of the human body, that facilitated early extension of territory, and rapid advances in successful adaptation to any inhospitable environment (Kelekna 2009, 2–3). For equivalent functions, a ritual *Jack-dou* object and a VR treadmill both meet a semantic purpose in extending physical environments that illustrate the following question: "*how escape laws of gravity and materiality?*"

Jack-dou on the left [Image 2], for example, which had been traditionally used as an agricultural implement in Korea, also serves as a ritual object in shamanic performances. It is composed of two sharpened blades, on which the shaman walks and dances without injury to his feet, due to protection afforded by the incarnated spirit. The more we see phenomena that defy laws of physics, the more the shaman's credibility and spiritual power is justified. Shamanic experiences overlap presences of spirit and self. The shaman's physical presence, feet weighing down on two blades, pertains not to physical properties of their sharpness, but to a liminal state where his bodily presence can be governed by the incarnated spirit's will. The ritual itself demonstrates the powerlessness of flesh and blood, and the limits of physical being.

Virtual reality has been criticized for its nuance of Cartesian duality, somehow reinforced by replacing the experiential body by a virtual body supposedly governed by the mind (Murray and Sixsmith 1999, 318). Although precursors such as *Sensorama* targeted total immersion,[8] VR technology has focused mainly, to control the mind, on the faculty of vision. However, since reliance on visual information has proven incomplete, VR technology adds hearing and touch (*Ibid.*, 317). Going further, flexible

8 Invented by Marton Heilig in 1952, Sensorama is considered the first "cinema cabin" closest to current VR principles to attempt the creation of a new environment by amalgamating multiple sensorial stimulators.

sensors and exoskeletal devices are now used to develop fuller potential, to reproduce the whole body or its parts in virtuality. Haptic gloves, but also a VR surfboard or omni-directional treadmill [Image 2], are representative VR accessories for synchronization of a player's and an avatar's body represented on Immersive screens. Also, this cultivation of a "virtual ground" through VR treadmill or vibrating floor is an innovative change that confers spatial-dynamic quality such as we experience in physical environments.

Spatial quality of environment

These brief observations bring us back to the physical object itself: tools, although tangible as wooden, steel, or plastic artefacts, manifestly encourage us to imagine hypothetical spaces through multi-sensorial experiences. First, how might these intangible worlds acquire spatial quality as environment? By analogy to human construction, we apply what Ingold calls *building perspective* and *dwelling perspective* (Ingold 2000, 185), whose congruity can be found equivalent on closer inspection to notions such as "built environment" and "embodiment as mode of dwelling." While the former requires, as in shamanism and VR technology, the spatial permanency of habitual surroundings, the latter would imply temporality and a migratory propensity as possibilities of being else (Malik 2019, 561–63). How then would these immaterial worlds perdure as a built environment shared by multiple *dwellers*?

Building

> "In my Father's house are many mansions" John 14:2

In his opus "*Milieu and technique*" (1945), Leroi-Gourhan fundamentally distinguishes between two milieux—external and internal—in which technique would be "*implicitly retained*." While the value of the first, external, can be understood as "*everything that materially surrounds man: geological, climatic, animal and vegetable environments*," the second, internal, manifests itself at the moment of technical execution and is confined to "*what constitutes the intellectual capital… an extremely complex pool of mental traditions*." (Leroi-Gourhan 1945, 333–34.)

However, the famous allegory of a cave represented in Plato's *Republic* implies that our perceptive interaction between external and internal milieux can be controlled by a framework placed between them. It tells a story of prisoners, living in caves, who cannot see anything happening behind them, merely the shadows cast on the cave wall in front of them. Shadows become the prisoners' sole "reality," so long as they stay inside. The dialogue, between Socrates and his interlocutors, im-

plies the vanity of a world view relying on man's sole perception through his senses (Plato 1933, 144–49).

This epistemological reflection evokes what users detect in VR goggles whose universe also resembles a miniature cave, where our eyes are enchanted by the reflection of images imitating a physical world. In this phantasmal space, the two environments are practically super-imposed: the internal milieu is shaken through our vision and consciousness, inasmuch as it is encased by the digitalized external milieu. In other words, photorealistic images in graphic pixels offer a space mechanically integral to the object, but semantically placed as external milieu, nevertheless extraneous to actual physical surroundings. The internal consciousness of man, psychologically charged in the virtual performing of the task, is therefore experiencing layered realities, firstly in the virtual space and secondly in the external physical surroundings.

Both VR and even shamanic embodiment denote this bifold structure of "environment within environment" as a metaphoric cave. In other words, it consists of an enclosed inner space wrapped by outer space, constructed like other human architecture. As Ingold writes, "*the forms that people build arise within the current of their activity… as a practical engagement with their surroundings*," this division gives VR a theoretical quality, as radical phenotype of human constructions, built for psychic activities (Ingold 2000, 186).

How about inside? The panoptic view of interior structures could be explained by the famous phrase of Clifford Geertz: "*Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun*." In both *Ge* and VR, the first step starts by preparing a scenographic field with metaphoric objects, to make a creative ritual framework (Goffman 1974, 21), suspended as liminal phase between physical and immaterial realities (Turner 1987, 107).

Symbolic scenography and technical mediation as requisites of visual interaction follow a pattern of theatrical performance, also defined in social ritual (Brandstetter 1988, 38). As in theatrical scenography, objects are distinguished according to their level of metaphoric sense: displayed and nominated, fantasized, subject to semiosis, etc (Pavis 2008, 172),[9] to create narratives and invoke the *yinan* spirit. Likewise, the *Ge* apparition requires semiotic props, such as throwing kola nuts, a square tin plate, or a short sword half stuck into the ground. A dramatic space starts to unfold by ritual authorization and such manipulation of meaningful objects, while the

9 Pavis classifies objects in theatre from "displayed objects (focused in materiality)" to "evoked objects (focused in spirituality)" as following: natural elements, non-figurative forms, legible material, concrete objects, displayed and nominated objects, those only nominated in-text, fantasized, sublimated or subject to semiosis. In ritual, objects display more of the last 4 to 5 characteristics, inclining them to be understood as "evoked objects."

Ge wearer waits for an appropriate moment to leave the sacred house after music is played to solicit spirits.

Similarly, developments in *Jack-dou* ritual also display identical features. Prior to the main *Jack-dou* rite (*Jack-dou-gut*), a ritual enactment of hunting through storytelling (사냥굿, *Sa-nyang-gut*) originating from *Hwang-hae-do* region, is performed. To begin with, a plate filled with dishes or animal sacrifice to feed carnivore spirits is placed in a retired dark spot of the room, since according to scenario hunting has not yet begun. From this collective web of symbolic props emerge the boundaries of dramatic liminal space, as mentioned, symbolized, and articulated by predicative narratives (*Ibid.*, 142). In such a context spectators follow the performance passively throughout.

In a technical perspective, many VR games are supported by the algorithms of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Mainly based on autonomous methodologies such as Machine Learning (ML) or Deep Learning (DL), they create user experiences from path finding to variable context generation.[10] On closer examination, VR reproduces reality as a rendering of familiar objects from real life through graphic components and 3D modelling. The setting-specific meaning demands symbolic decoding: such as, in its commonsensical use, a ball to be thrown or a button to be pushed. With synchronous sensory feedbacks, based on eye- and head-motion tracking sensors, users can actively engage in each scenario. Hence, to follow the algorithms' open narratives, spectatorship is considered as bilateral and critical, compared to ritual performance or theatrical spectacles, since VR users are simultaneously performer and spectator in interactive mode, communicating mainly by visual recognition (White 2006, 115). For this reason, representational design and interactional design—actions and subsequent reactions required for players with represented information—are considered key points, as with other non-immersive interactive contents (Sedig 2004, 1030–32).

Could then VR technology also cater for multiple performer-spectators? Public ritual is known to enhance commitment and shared belief between participants (Etzioni 2000, 45), as the co-presence creates a perception of consensus, a sense of social validation and confirmation (Knottnerus 2010, 41–2). If the early use of Internet technology as "collective ritual" has been considered to inevitably influence levels of focus in attention, pace and interdependency (Ibid. 50–5), AI based on VR technology has been oriented to understand complex systems of collective human intelligence, using virtual or robotic simulators (Cipresso and Riva 2015, 177).

10 Anonymous author, "AI in Virtual Reality," The New Frontier of Intelligent Reality(IR), IEEE International Conference of Intelligent Reality (2022), [https://digitalreality.ieee.org/publications/ai-in-virtual-reality].

Image 3: Recent versions of fully immersive VR contents are offering collective activities in shared virtual space. (Photos © by courtesy of BackLight – Studio VR)

The VR goggle interface, generally dedicated to one individual, is markedly limited in perspective and restricted in quality with regards co-spatial environments.[11] However, recent VR content also offers collective experiences in virtual space, comparable with spectators of ritual who affirm their conviction vis-à-vis mystic phenomena, not only with virtual AI avatars, but also with other co-present human witnesses. *Eclipse* [2017] for example, created by French VR contents developer Back Light Studio – VR, is a hyper reality game in 4D,[12] characterized by collective full body immersion [Image 3].[13]

Four players embody spaceship crews and collaborate talking and moving around between cockpit, hangar, and spacewalk in an area of 15m² (323ft²) which can appear 10 times bigger in virtuality. That demonstrates that virtual space can offer similar levels of interdependency, bonds of sympathy, quasi-physical and emotional co-presence as can be experienced between physically co-present collective users, through verbal communication in the flesh.

11 Interview with Frédéric Lecompte, founder of Back Light – Studio VR, 8th Nov. 2022.

12 4-dimensional Virtual Reality digitally incorporates the user's physical body within a virtual environment. If images in VR goggles create a 3-dimensional optical illusion, 4D adds physical synchronization with devices such as VR treadmill, VR motorcycle, or vibrating floor which help users to experience the physical sensation of body movement with haptic feedback.

13 http://eclipsegamevr.com/en_us /eclipse/

Dwelling

I.

> "Remain in me, as I also remain in you."
> John 15:4

If the VR device's dependency on "*external sources of power*" places it in the machine category which "*do require human direction*" to perform (Mitcham 1994, 162), the reliance of ritual objects on the external energy of spirits to operate through a shaman's bodily techniques certainly establishes a comparably interesting analogy.

The meaning of *dwelling* therefore embraces a broader Broder sense through a performer's spiritual or cognitive embodiment, and a sense of presence or co-presence. In this former, a shaman's body can be seen as an environment "built" for the spirit's "dwelling," which implies putting his own personality in abeyance.[14] Meanwhile, the *Ge* mask wearer tells of his experience as of a sensorial architecture: "*Once you are designated, the force which is given, there is a feeling which is particular, not like the others, the wind which you receive and the information which you receive, there is a technique which is developed in you to receive it*."

To receive such *dwellers*, a Korean shaman begins a summoning process for the *Jack-dou* ritual. Ahead of the ritual his drummer explains: "*When he shows us the performance, it is not he who does it, when he dresses in this costume here, and through that the god-spirit will make a gang-sin* [강신:降神, overshadowing], *it will enter his body…*." He changes into another costume, in order to summon a specific ancestor spirit. The *Gu-gun-bok,* a costume the interviewee shaman wore, had made of him a *Satto* official.[15]

One of the well-known stages to be performed beforehand, is called *coaxing the Jack-dou*. Dangerous moments occur when the shaman strikes his arm or leg with sharpened blades, announcing the arrival of a spirit, its protection over his body and implying the divinity of *Jack-dou*. At the moment of the possession, it becomes more intense, as described by Daniel Kister: "*An initiatory shaman, dressed as the Spirit General and in some degree of trance, "rides the blades"…*" (Kister 1997, 17). The Korean shaman interviewed by your author also recalled his very first experience of losing bodily control: "*I still had all my head, but I started bouncing frantically for no reason. I thought, jumping up, 'Say, what's happening to me? This is no joke*'."

In relation to VR, the state of being possessed can be a symmetrical designation of technological embodiment, where users feel body ownership, a sense of agency in

14 Or, as Malik pleads, accepting the "possibility of a multi-dimensional, porous, permeable, fluid identity, self, even 'no-self' or self as 'no-thing'." (Malik 2020, 566.)

15 The 'Satto' is a transformation of "Sa-do [사도 ; 使道]." It generally designates the former title of the Governor of the commune who was responsible for collecting taxes.

the synchronous avatar (Ehrsson 2012, 783). The corporeal representation on screen becomes an element of construction in a virtual arena. Embodiment of an avatar can therefore signify "*framing the body*" (Murray and Sixsmith 1999, 322), as bounded by the limits of virtual activities. It is the injection of human intelligence to an avatar's body, and of artificial intelligence to ours, that combine to create a humanoid of digital spirit.

The level of integration to a virtual body has been through different phases of development from non-immersive, semi-immersive, to fully immersive (or full-dive), until VR achieved highly realistic simulation for users, mobilizing all their movement-enabled sensors. This latest version allows total immersion with detection of users' corporeal movement and their avatar replacement. If a shaman simply chooses a costume to summon a specific spirit, a VR jumpsuit such as *Teslasuit* [2016-] uses an electro-tactile haptic feedback system to allow tracking of articular body movements and synchronize entirely with its avatar.

VR therefore takes the concept of *dwelling* in an opposite direction. If the techniques of ritual possession deprive a shaman's body of its independence (Cohen 2008, 246–47), and he becomes the physical habitat of a spirit, the disembodied consciousness of the VR player submerges him in an artificially replicated body in imagined space. As the *posthuman,* referred to as a 'cyborg manifesto' eroding the boundary between machine and organism (Haraway [1985] 2016, 5), is defined as "*a coupling so intense and multifaceted*," where "*the biological organism*" *and* "*the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed*" are indistinguishable (Hayles 1999, 35), the body, formerly subordinated to spirit, becomes a catalytic agent or even *imago dei* creator of its virtual self.

According to Frazer, this idea of "*god incarnated in human form*" was an early alternative apparent in religious history of the man-god notion "*in which gods and men are still viewed as beings of much the same order*" (Frazer 1929, 92). By contrast, in the humanoid of virtuality armed with Artificial Intelligence, we see the superhuman retrieving his title by going back to men "*before they are divided by the impassable gulf*," maybe indeed thanks to all those human inventions which made the impassable passable.

After all performances, the shaman regains his own consciousness and comes down from the *Jack-dou* platform. Just as his limbs have been protected by spirits from the sharpened blades, so the VR user himself invests his avatar, receiving no physical injury despite the fierce battle raging in virtuality.

Here, regarding the symmetrical positions of spirituality and virtuality in a *dwelling perspective*, we even find converse patterns of translocation regarding evolutionary beings in nomadic nature between worlds, through the technique or metaphor of embodiment: a spiritual being penetrates a physical body, and *vice-versa* this physicality embodies the virtual avatar. Does it demonstrate world expansion through imagination, or does it imply repeatedly hierarchical reincarnations of

an evolutionary being, from the god-spirit, through humankind, to an autonomous virtual creature? Wherever the truth may be found, it seems clear that man places himself as the core subject of those three worlds, as a quasi-divine liberal mediator who can change his state of beingness, by using reproduced mediating tools. Thus, the mode of human presence in a digital era cosmology seems to have inherited both visions: the exploratory spirit of earlier centuries and a 'neo-shamanic' concept of incarnation are thus condensed in a single gadget. Then, how do both world views—expansive or convergent with respect to immaterial environments—allow *homo deus* to persist in their extended world?

II.

What makes the *séjour* longer? Traditional cosmology, comprising the notion of a spiritual world, gives us a hint in the notion of "belief" for a second such condition of *dwelling* in immateriality. Convictions, anchored in personal experience of mystic phenomena and its cultural transmission, certainly fertilized the formation and persistence of a contour-less universe.

What we see in the scenographic context of ritual performance would fit Geertz's analysis of religion: "*A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic*" (Geertz 1973, 91–119). Although anthropology will never offer any clear convictions as to the truth or not of spiritual phenomena or religion (Bharati 1971, 231), and since it's been a relatively short period that technology has emerged as a new foundation for belief systems (Lewis 2003, 659–61), it seems that shamanic ritual and VR technology ultimately find their convergence on utopian ideals in a common aim "*to be realistic*."

Whether relying on tailored systems or not, enticing a person's belief seems therefore to be essential for the "realistic" persistence of these worlds that semantically signify *dwelling* for a digital humanity. Naturally, the technique and technology of both ritual and VR tools involve the formation of belief, engaging supernatural or sensorial verisimilitude.

Sperber categorizes belief as factual or representational (Sperber 1982, 74), comparable to Van Leeuwen's division between factual and religious credence (Van Leeuwen 2014, 698–99). While factual beliefs are "*simply things we know*," representational beliefs correspond to what are called "*beliefs, opinions or convictions*," mostly of mental representation. Nevertheless, both can be co-present in one circumstance and also considered "*apparently irrational belief*" with respect to each other, in factual or symbolist approach (Sperber 1982, 149–80).

To give here an example, the ritual mask predicates belief through its two faces—obverse and reverse sides—with both performers and spectators as third

parties. The mask wearer would go into trance and spectators observe what is happening. Both start with factual belief in perceived facts—the sensorial feeling of mask wearer through performance, and visual observation by the spectators. But sooner or later, that belief tends to revert to the representational, solicited in a religious perspective (e.g., I felt wind = spirit came to me). This composite of two different characters of belief can collide in a person's mind causing a confusion. It may generate "*disbelief in belief*," that Van Leeuwen finds in religious credence, manifest in imaginative play such as ritual performance (Boudry and Coyne 2016, 6).

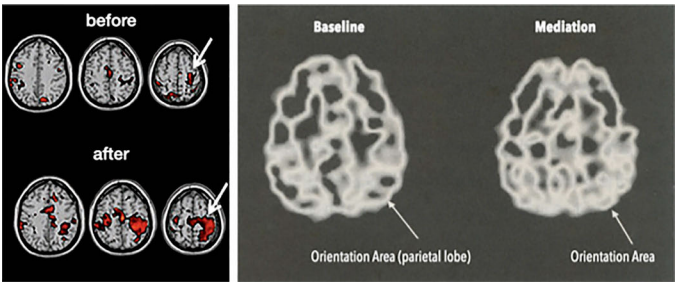
Then what does the "act of believing" mean in virtual reality, causing "disbelief in belief?" In most VR contents, the designed "state of immersion" comes after acquaintance with an interactive structure between contrived representations (avatar, objects, structures, path, etc.) and actions required of the player (Sedig and Parsons 2013, 85–8). User consciousness starts to conduct tasks using stored factual beliefs as data-base to interpret symbols (e.g., monsters are enemies) (Sperber 1997, 68). Once accustomed, it continues with automatism (e.g., use fist to hit monster) in a range of symbols, also uniquely realistic to consciousness, where the confusion may begin.

Another episode demonstrates that the evolved technology can sprout belief in such disbelief : In 2019, I met the developer of re-educative VR therapy contents in collaboration with a university hospital in South Korea where, due to cerebrovascular accident (CVA), patients with hemiparalysis are practicing with VR games.[16] Contents consist of playful exercises such as hammering or catching a ball, obliging patients to move upper limbs for the task. Such simulation is not photorealistic, but once absorbed a patient's brain overlaps the scene and appropriates those simulated graphic hands as their own. These optical illusions are based on motor imagery (MI) that involves activation of the neural system while a person imagines performing a task or moving the body without physically performing the movement. The principle of mirror therapy (MT), a well-known example of MI, demonstrates the effects of an image perceived in the mirror, and shows the ability of vision to be so misleading as to be restorative of cerebral function [Image 4].[17]

16 Interview in Dong-guk University Hospital, 2019.

17 MT is often used for one paralyzed or amputated limb when the other remains normally functional. Placing a mirror box between legs or arms, one reflects the image of the healthy limb. Seeing the reflection of his healthy leg, the person enjoys an illusory perception, as if the damaged leg is functioning.

Image 4: A cerebral scan that shows plasticity of the brain: a zone activated by robotic re-education is coloured in red. (Image source: www.materic.or.kr)



Such that, with the simple task of catching a ball, a single user in their first-person optical perspective can throw it or catch it using hand controls, synchronized with graphic VR limbs. While playing, the sight of a ball coming suddenly towards the user induces an unconditional reflex of instant illusion. Patients are fully aware of their hemiparalysis, but the optical stimulus of the visual hands and ball coming towards them generate a new and momentary belief: forgetting their physical disability they try to catch it by hand, and surprisingly, such brain-deception activates the regeneration of nerves. In just a few years of such therapeutic practices, VR was justified as being effective on brain plasticity and restoring damaged brain parts (Lee et al. 2019, 258–61).[18]

Even so, the momentary "belief" activated by virtuality, that we might call an "illusion," is not regarded as possessing the same quality of "belief" as that generated by cerebral stimulus interacting with our conscious mind, which "disbelieves" the realness of VR and considers VR experience only as a therapeutic tool, not a real event.

While ritual objects or VR tools are not intrinsically objects of belief but remain mediators, the efficacy of both nevertheless establishes each belief system. The only difference, in technology and science, would be that such accumulated beliefs establish their own with verifiable criteria, open to testing (Eddy 2004, 53–4). That system can even serve as another ritual tool, in the sense that our interviewee evoked: "I think God is using me through [VR]…, I'm only a tool."

On this discordance between beliefs regarding what is real, we nevertheless find directions branching out by way of demonstration, which attempt to adduce ontological evidence of two endemic realisms. Simply put, shamanic ritual strives to

18 Brain plasticity refers to a capacity of neuronal brain cells to restore a damaged part. When stimulated at a certain level, the neuronal cells around it will replace the role of the damaged part.

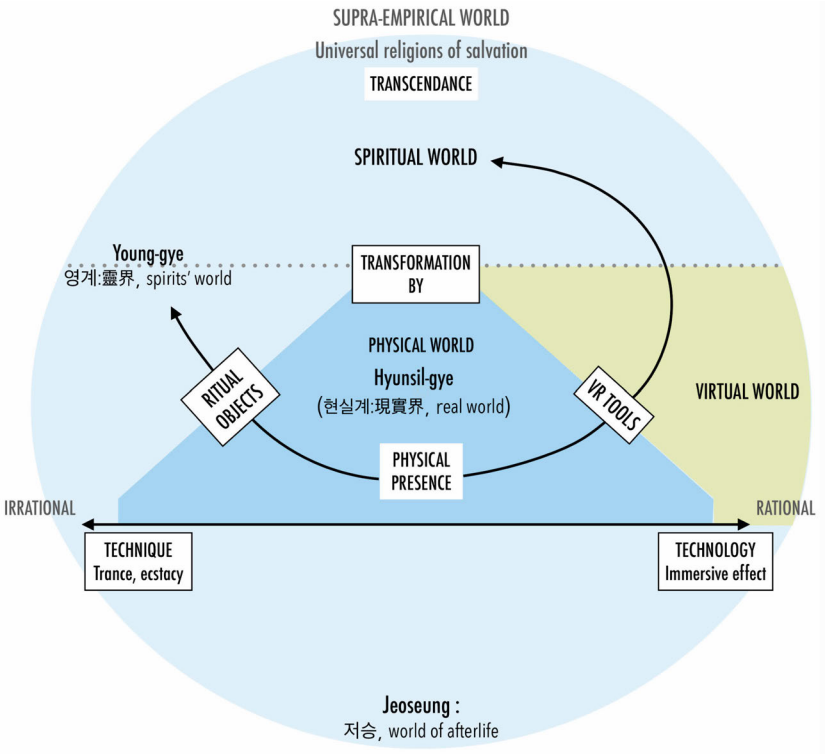
overcome the laws of physics—inasmuch as the shaman showed us his bare feet unwounded after his performance on the Jack-dou—whilst VR technology takes an opposite direction, aiming to duplicate attributes of physicality in virtuality.

Corporeal boundaries of individual and society

We must reckon then, with *what individuals and society experience in belief of an extended reality*, since establishing one's belief system on an invisible world is bound to condition any subordinated taxonomy of beliefs, such as world view, paradigm, or model of reality (Eddy 2004, 53).

Through numerous supernatural phenomena, a shaman's lifeworld range seems to embrace spiritual reality as *fait accompli*. To our question on the eventuality of quitting his profession, our interviewee answered in firm manner with a belief common to shamanic culture: "*There'll be misfortune, to me and also to my family, we can even die. It's the spiritual punishment one can never know*." As Geertz points out regarding the matter of suffering as a religious problem, we learn "*paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer*" or how to make bearable, supportable and sufferable (Geertz 1973, 104). The shaman's belief in the spirit-possession of his body, potentially implicating misfortune, predicates another system with which to treat his fate (Perrin 2017, 88). His life relies on punishment feedback, such as limited life choices, just as VR gamers follow positive and negative feedback loops to determine the final outcome.

Image 5: An overview of South Koreans' general conceptions, regarding lifeworld ranges and their geography, illustrated schematically. (Diagram by author.)



In a broader view, confrontations between religion and science, tradition and modernism, are surely worldwide phenomena. Presented as "riding tools," these semantic excursions into parallel environments combine the two, revealing a paradoxical phase at work in South Korea.

It is observed, in a schematized concept of lifeworld ranges in traditional cosmology, that the spiritual world [영계:靈界: *young-gye*] is distinguished from the afterlife [저승: *jeoseung*], and disposed on a higher or same level as the physical world [현실계:現實界][Image 5].[19]

Even though traditional outlooks—shamanist and Confucianist—are considered officially obsolete, they are still strongly central to those upper and lower

19 Conceptual geography of the spiritual world has complex features. The Upper level would show them identical in Christianity or Buddhism, defined as religions of universal salvation by Karl Jasper. Meanwhile, the mixed position in parallel or on a higher level can be seen in the appellation of *chun-ji-sin-myoung*, which signifies the god of sky and of earth.

worlds. Within a fatalistic conception of the human condition, shamanism subsists by way of reasoning on causality. On the other hand, Confucianism still seems to govern the social system in physical reality, with hierarchical classification according to gender, seniority, as still revealed in parental, social, and professional relationships (Kister 1997, 35).

On this basis, a technological innovation of *Extended Reality* (XR) is changing the conceptual plan of an immaterial world, infiltrating the sphere of spirits by man-made artefact.[20] During the pandemic period some Korean Protestant churches initiated VR online Sunday worship, and the number of participants has continuously increased since 2021. On the other hand a female shaman, designated as intangible cultural asset by the *Hwang-hae-do* region, recently reproduced her ritual performance of *Man-gu-dae-tak* [만구대탁:萬口大擇] as VR content, accessible by VR headset.

Image 6: In South Korea, a shaman riding Jack-dou blades compares with VR players surfing on VR boards. (Photos by author.)[21]

Progress in technology and capitalistic success abetting, opposing such technological ascension to the shamanic idea of a spiritual world should be somewhat ontologically and ideologically ironic for Koreans. By sustaining its adherents' practical aim—prosperity in a mundane lifeworld—Korean shamanism has been able to survive until now, [22] with considerable cultural influence on the general religious

20 Extended Reality (XR) refers to all environments combining physical and virtual functions generating human-machine interactions through digital technology.

21 Images extracted from field research report video [https://jyeon.com/2020/12/28/2197/].

22 Korean shamanism went into a downward trend since the nation adopted Buddhism as its national religion in the 4th century. After losing its political function at the end of the Goryeo dynasty, the banishment of shamanism was initiated. From the 16th century, the Joseon dynasty, established on Confucian ideas, continued expulsion of shamanism, especially through the neo-Confucian faction of philosophical lineage called Sarim [사림파:士林派]. Shamanism even lost its social position, but retained adepts for personal consultation un-

mind-set of Koreans, even those of other confessions: yet maintaining the pursuit of earthly prosperity, and mystic empiricism. On the other hand, recent technological progress and productivity may find their roots in the « *Silhak* (실학:實學, practical studies) » fraction of 17th century neo-Confucian lineage, doubtless opposed to shamanic ideas. Considering this background, the use of technological tools to revive consciousness of a spiritual world reveals a compromising encounter between two ideological counterparts. While rationalist and scientific thought informs the glazed surfaces of skyscrapers, projecting that new image of the country, the individuals sitting at their desks oscillate consciously or unconsciously in the face of these residual survivals of the past: superstitious thought and futuristic-oriented goals in dominant hierarchical relations which, seen from the outside, pass for irrational and contradictory to their perceived image. Surfing on VR boards in a *VR Experience Store*, they might hardly recall *Jack-dou* blades, on which shamans perform the ritual elsewhere in the same peninsula [Image 6].

This reveals a polymorph mode of human being, incubated in multiform surroundings, fashioned by vestiges of their shamanic tradition, in a Confucianist-dominated culture, under technology-oriented social policy (Seo et al. 2011, 33). It neatly explains the progressive switch of values from the polytheism of shamanic spiritualism, through Confucianist atheism, to the technocratic scientism of *homo deus*.

Back to the rashly drawn conceptual world map [Image 1], how should we cope with this co-habitation of apparently incompatible ideologies? The *metapattern* construct, used "*in the Batesonian spirit*" as biological scientist Tyler Volk confesses, could provide evidence for the parallelism of three realms. Bateson's actual term seeks "*pattern of pattern*" (Bateson 1979, 16).[23] Ritual objects and VR tools may help only to discover the latent *metapattern* which would link those conceptual constructions of immaterial space. There, an axis, or absolute standard of one's experience of presence is no more limited to materiality, or tools positioned at the core of indispensable context-making processes, than our preconceptions of tools in the physical environment, rather auxiliary and subordinated. Here, our *god-human* regards tools as vehicles for transcendence, driving back and forth the semantic conversion of spatial self-context from here to there, from physical reality to an immaterial one.

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til now. Scholars find the reason in the fact that it is the only religion claiming prosperity in the mundane lifeworld, whilst Confucian ideas criticized shaman ritual as unreasonable, wicked, treacherous and futile [cf. Sejong-sillok, 1426, see bibliography]. Nevertheless, Korean Confucianism met with a second ideological collision, initially "Silhak faction [실학 : 實學, practical studies]" from the 17th century, and latterly with present generation rationalism, which favors productivity and technological progress.

23 The meta pattern can be understood as an art of bilateral symmetry, which connects crab to lobster, our hands to a crab's claws, between brassica or all living creatures, as a base plan which is "so wide-flung that it appears throughout the spectrum of reality."

The validity of such 'dereistic' reasoning, which may seem overly speculative, hinges inevitably on how and in which perspective we examine them. Those two worlds, seemingly in diametrical opposition, co-exist however in our society, expanding the apparent borderline of a perceived world, as conceptual model structure of what *homo deus* calls a hyperphysical scene of *reality*, where the *self* may play the leading role behind his social *persona* (Turner 1987, 145). As such it becomes the new mappa mundi for "those who believe," a represented space where we oscillate between habitual loops of discomfort and relocation, to settle down and assert our volatile presence.

Conclusion

> "The true 'spatial revolution' of the twentieth century is the explication of the human sojourn or residence in an interior via the dwelling machine, climate design and environmental planning, but also… cosmic space and virtual space." (Sloterdijk 2016, 469)

On a vast meadow in Mongolia, I vaguely remember that, instead of using a fixed post, a dog's leg was folded at the knee and tied up with a string, to ensure that the animal didn't escape. Such direct means of bondage shatter a quadruped's equilibrium and make it think of nothing else than lying down on the grass, gravity-bound. Bodies are obviously vulnerable to tools, even to a such tiny string, no doubt to any 'dwelling machine,' that determines their scope of possibilities.

The conceptual birth of two worlds, spiritual and virtual, without matter and without gravity, would then be a real uprising against physical restriction. Likewise, the separation of human spirit from body would have been first to trigger this projection of a second world. Nevertheless, in our reality extended by the latest technologies, we discover more active trials of reconciliation with the body, and much radical intervention through tools. Body, considered as passive host to spirits, is kindly invited to recover its forgotten rights to 'dwell' in its virtual host, as learnt undoubtedly from former guests. In this excursion, surpassing three worlds, humans may lose their place as creator, but are connected as links in a chain of 'tools.'

This paper is no hypothesis of existentialist philosophical perspective, concerned with the threat or favour of technology, sometimes inclined to "engulf its creators" (Feenberg 2004, 12–3), nor does it make pretense of rigorously scientific or theoretical conclusions. Rather, its proposition is to re-view through a poly-scope a new origin of species, an era where our neo-biosphere is defined via such animation of

inert objects, and ponder over further genesis, in a chapter where multi-substantial organisms attempt co-presence. However ambitious the title, what remains vividly captured in my brain is individual interlocutors' testimony, and how they framed their lives in fusion with such tools as "belief generators." Beyond the purpose of my thesis,[24] I believe that these testimonies merit commitment to record, as the valid basis of all source-related and discipline-based extrapolation. Just as with the leg-bound dog, humans are aware of an incapacity to release ourselves from our built reality, and wherever we celebrate the art of tie-up in another firm belief, we call upon our tools.

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