THE AVATAR

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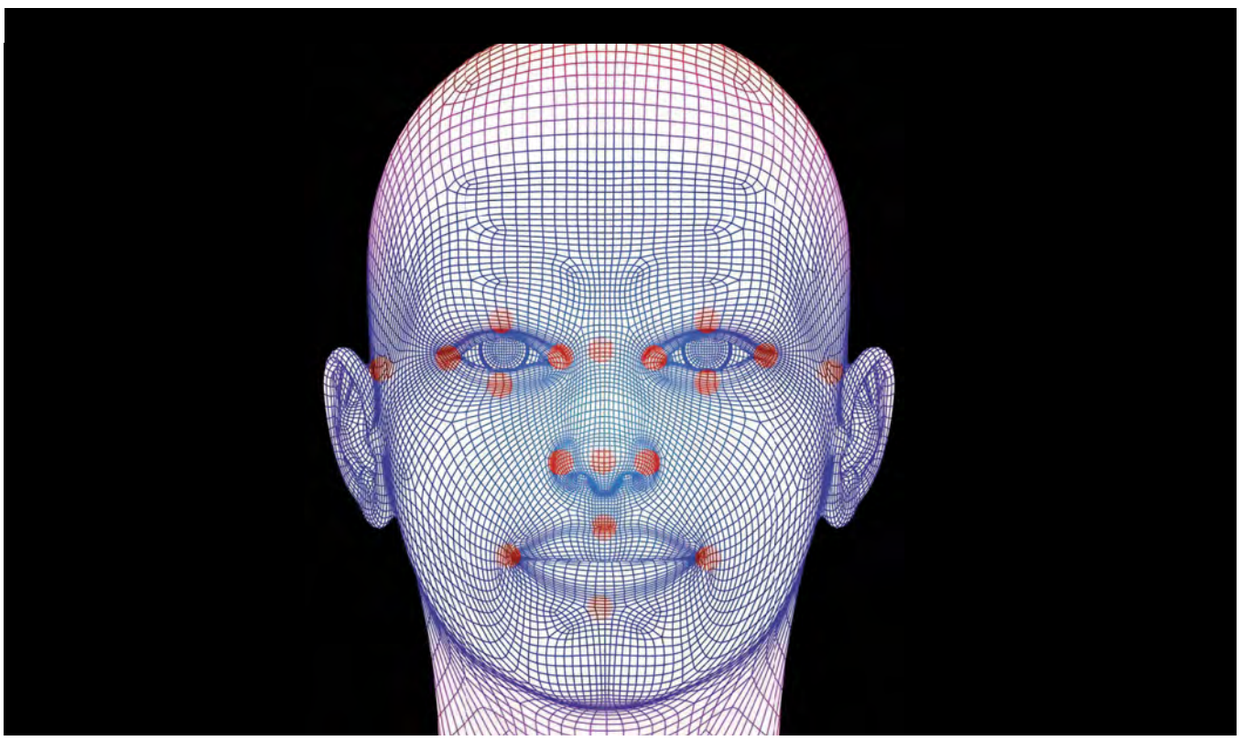

FIG. 1
THE AVATAR. A LINEAR MATHEMATICAL MODEL

The original "avatars" were intermediaries or messengers in Indian mythology, comparable perhaps to Hermes in Greek mythology. Heralds, they mediated between gods and humans, between immortals and mortals, for the latter did not understand the symbols of the former. The Hindu term—from Sanskrit, अवतार, avatāra—stresses the "descent" from the divine to the human, not in the sense of a fall, but in the sense of an emanation or transitionary figure. It denotes the transformation of the highest Brahma into the shape of a person or animal. The avatāra is on the one hand the divine power incarnate in the "soul" of all that lives, on the other hand it is the temporal evolution of the divine throughout the order of the world and its eras: the transition from the Treta Yuga (silver age) to the Dvarpa Yuga (Bronze Age) to the Kali Yuga, the present. Although texts on Vishnu sometimes distinguish between ten avatāri stages, ending with Kali Yuga, the great purification, analogous to Revelations in Christianity, others see this as a misinterpretation, because all ages must be regarded as coequals.

In his 1856 short story *Avatar,* an appropriation of the Indian Veden, other holy Indian texts, and other obscure doctrines of salvation as is characteristic of nineteenth-century European philosophy, Théosphile Gautier tells the fantastic tale of Octave de Saville, whose body is slowly being eaten up from within (Gautier 2011). A dialogue begins between

de Saville and a mysterious healer regarding the illness of the Occident and possible salvation by the gods of India, whom in *Avatar* were for the first time accorded a central position in European literature. It is also a story of wandering souls, of body switching and stand-ins, foreshadowing that which digital avatars of the gaming age in particular are supposed to do, as well as virtual assistants on the web that act as mediators between people, machines, and information media: the substitution of subjectivity. They are meant to replace the user's corporeality and intentionality with an "all-knowing" (as far as computable functions are concerned) simulation that has been freed of all material restrictions.

In 1992, Neal Stephenson popularized the technical adaptation of the avatar in his science fiction novel, *Snow Crash.* However it is important to distinguish between the mythological *avataris* and its artificial, technological counterpart. While the former acts as a religious metaphor for a transformation, the latter are design objects, graphic surfaces, or diagrams in a 3-D environment that were created by algorithms. They are completely different from classic tools, and also from mathematical surrogates of a persona. They are instead image-agents *(Bildagenten)* that exist in a universe that is entirely iconically defined. Their configuration equips them with characteristics that follow a logic of decision making that they can, within the framework of their program, navigate to hold conversations or chat on certain subjects or take on a number of everyday functions that can be useful for the operation of computers, technical systems, and internet communication. However, dematerialized figures, they can only exist in virtual Euclidean spaces. They also exhibit a strange indifference to their co-avatars. Asocial at their core, they are completely focused on their user. Increasingly, they are equipped with artificial intelligence, advancing to become automata able to execute processes on their own and make autonomous decisions regarding specific tasks such as translation.

It is possible, and also plausible, to characterize them as prostheses, in the sense of Marshall McLuhan's theory of extensions, but with the caveat that they do not extend our corporeality, but rather our actions and our wills into our monitors (Beil 2012). One can also, equally plausibly, see them in the framework of actor-network-theory as actors in a network of other actors, so that they form 3-D models of artificial Others, which interact with us, intervene in our environment, or substitute for us and take over social functions without themselves being social. They are like abstract Others without alterity.

They have been called "virtual bodies," (Klevjer 2006) "digital doubles," (Gunkel 2010) "puppet Homunculi" (Apter 2008) or posthuman "agents" that are beyond any differentiation between human and non-human. Like "desiring-machines," they conjure a dialogicity or proximity that is in the process of appropriating our powers of speech and expression, of understanding our mimicry and gestures, and in doing so shifting the meaning of both humanity and sociality.[1]

At the same time they are nothing other than images or icons in a limited virtual environment in which—it should never be forgotten—everything has been programmed. When we speak of "interaction," it must be remembered that this takes place without exception in the imaginary realm. We enter into contact with them as images in images, lending them autonomy and meaning, and sometimes even faked identities, like animated characters in a film or figures in a novel. Mystifications that see them as fully valid techno-phenomenological Others with their own personalities or as elements of a complex techno-social future are at best misleading. This is best illustrated by James Cameron's 2009 movie *Avatar,* which features two kinds of actors, digitalized actors who play "avatars" or people who turned themselves into "avatars" with the help of a transformation machine, and artificially animated figures. The two different figures illicit different reactions from the audience, in which no one, despite 3-D cinematography, believed the illusion that they acted on the same plane.

1 On desiring-machines see Deleuze and Guattari (1983). See also Harroll and Lim (2017).

The more important concept behind the design of technological avatars is the creation of virtual artifacts that make it easier for us to deal with the opacity of digital environments and allow us to move in mathematical environments in a similar manner as we do in our daily surroundings. They are therefore programmed to "learn" and "remember" or to "show emotions" and hence develop their own "personality," which is, however, as cybernetic as algorithmic storage and self-modification via feedback loops. In order to understand their "work," performance, and range it is necessary to take into consideration that their technical/mathematical construction as well as their digital milieu have a purely simulative character. Their only perhaps non-simulative element is that they emulate theories about human lifeworlds. The scope of their freedom is limited, just as these theories are subject to the scientific restrictions of their times, which reveal nothing but historical prejudices.

Avater "worlds" thus remain in the modus of *as if.* Their entire reality is appearance and similarity, including *mimesis* or adaptation, so that we are dealing with superficialities based on 'looking like' that imitate us or provide a historical snapshot of our being, but always miss their mark. Avatars, to put it another way, are first and foremost mathematical constructs made to engage with us in mathematical spaces that are likenesses of models of how we currently view our world. Their precondition is both the model and the modeling of these spaces, which have already quasi distorted and deformed the space of the real. In no way are these spaces identical with the environment we encounter, and even less so with the ambiguity and confusion of social worlds. Rather they are patterns of ordered structures, like an algebra placed over myriad fluctuations and spontaneously changing singularities. They make an attempt at equality but are more like maps lain over a landscape in an attempt to cover it. Even if the maps covered every point of the landscape, they would remain maps, for landscapes contain points no more than faces do "landmarks" that can be recognized or imitated. For this reason, the outward form of avatars as well as that which they do or attempt to express can never be more than a homology. They are imitations that are no more than imitations of imitations, because they are images that act in a world of imagery, like actors who impersonate a reality that is itself an act, so that it can function as a milieu shared by them and human actors.

Characteristics are faked on both sides: that of the avatars and their expressions and actions, and that of the environment, which only approaches human environments when it remains closed by a homomorphism. All of avatars' skills, including their facial expressions, are thus artefacts. We are confronted with a completely artificial system that is so concentrated that everything that is possible within it. It is not only part of an anthropomorphic game, but is itself already an image, or the projection of a ludification to which the human lifeworld has been subject from the beginning. Avatars mimic the perfect mimes in order to interact with that which human theories—themselves often no more than phantasms of the natural sciences—believe or think about them. That is why there can be no confusing them and us. Even AI avatars cannot be perceived or accepted "as" people, not even if they pass the Turing test. At most they prove to be the fictions or objects of a techno-imagination that invents them in order to embed them in a surface graphic world, just as VR glasses pretend to show something "real." But their adventures remain as foreign to our experience of reality as idealized Platonic bodies are to the pyramids of Giza.

In his philosophical essay *On the Marionette Theater,* Heinrich von Kleist (1972) examines the manikin and its manipulated play. They are simultaneously clumsy as well as moving and magical, because the marionettes, dominated by the "wire or string" of the "machinest" as the puppeteer is called, lack all self-consciousness. They follow the movement of their mechanics, which follows the laws of the center of gravity, so that puppet theater becomes a paradoxical "dance," which, Kleist writes, could not be more perfect because it is *antigrav,*

that is, it escapes the inertia of material. For that reason, there is "more grace in the mechanical manikin than in the structure of the human body," for gracefulness became "more radiant and powerful" as "reflectiveness became dimmer and weaker." (Kleist 1972: 984, 987). Only when knowledge has passed through the absolute and "consciousness" has become infinite does gracefulness reappear, so that humans are imperfect beings between manikins and God, ensouled only by their attempts at an unachievable perfection (ibid.: 987).[2]

This thought can be turned around and used to look at the avatar. Marionettes fascinate us because they have the charm of a clumsy, broken, and ungainly corporeality, like young children who cannot yet coordinate their movements. They form a caricature of human liveliness, whose partial grotesquery is literally deathly earnest, because it points towards the finality and fragility of existence and corporeality. In exchange, the figures can fly; effortlessly they jump in the hands of the puppeteer, defying gravitation and then suddenly striding with seven league boots to a change of scene. Their mechanisms control them like an alien god, so that drill, incapacitation, and the excessive desire for transgression all belong together. The marionette, like the mask, plays a game of similarity and dissimilarity, whereby the similarity first becomes visible through the dissimilarity, and one reflects the other. Its *imperfectum* is however is for humans *perfectum,* because its special potential, its creative leaps, stem from its imperfection. They are the true poetics of the puppet.

Digital avatars in contrast neither know anything of such reflections nor of such poetics. For them, it is enough to be simulation and surface, which are in turn nothing other than the completion of a mathematical formula. An avatar can never be more than an approximation, for its image is made out of a network of point-to-point connections and their geometrical rotation, as in facial "landmark" detection and in the "motion capture" functions used in animation. The closer together the points, the more exact the image. But photorealism and hypermimesis never achieve infinity; the forms created can never be more than approximations whose strange smooth surfaces—lacking the abrasions of real singularities—reveal the failure of identity. Aporetically, the mathematical function—and the geometric figure—creates nothing more than an idealization that has no counterpart in reality, just as mathematics always comes up against the wall of empiricism. The perfect sphere is not a part of reality, and so every mathematical simulation is incommensurable with the uniqueness of the living creature.

Nevertheless, imperfectability is also not unknown to avatars. It consists paradoxically in the impossibility of fulfilling their foundational will to perfectibility. The strange jolting, angular movements, the uncontrollability of every individual body movement alongside facial and vocal expressions—seen in particular in *Second Life* or when computer games change scenes and it is necessary to go from one room into another—result from the "logic" of chronic inconsistencies and programming that can perhaps never be perfect, because, finite, it can never have enough processing power. But this does not make us recall grotesquery, but rather the endpoint of the models, the algorithmic tools, the slowness of the processors, and the technical and physical limits of computation. They have no existential meaning, only a formal one. They therefore seem to be free of metaphors: no symbolic meaning appertains to them, at best only an informatical "not-yet"—the never-ending dream of the phantasm of mathematical identity.

Behind the mathematical opacity of the avatar is literally nothing but a hypermimetic projection, which can be distinguished by the level of its abstract perfection, but not its philosophical meaning. That is why an inexact sketch can be more interesting than the most precise copy. If a marionette is made of individual limbs with movable parts that are moved by an outside power, and masks of cavities and concavities with holes that hide rather than reveal, everything on an avatar is like a screen. For avatars possess no gaze and no voice, and also no motor function that could express the individuality of their actions. Individuality is not an attribute of avatars, at most they have idiosyncratic features. Their dull eyes act as

2 Translator's note: There are of course many English translations of this story, many quite good, but none that fit this essay. These, like all following uncredited translations, are mine.

a screen *on* which an image is *pictured* that comes from nowhere and looks at nothing, just as their mouths and lips seem to have a secondary sound imprinted on them that does not possess a true place and belongs to no one, or as their movements are not situated in and do not stem from any body and therefore have neither a center, nor gravity, nor a feeling for the environment, nor do they seem to act on purpose. The technological tools are obvious: using artificial intelligence and deep fakes, human voices, gazes, and movements are reproduced that make use of the unclear relationship between eye and gaze, between mouth and voice, and between body, motion, and intention to undermine the sensibilities of the observer and purport to be authentic. In this way, a synthetic expression is created, a "gaze" without shame, interruption, or focus, which cannot search for or observe anything, but looks through us, that finds no target, but loses itself. Simultaneously, we are confronted with spectral voices with neither source nor addressee, and therefore without the modulation of the alterities they are speaking to, for no voice speaks for itself, it *is* only when it addresses an Other. The same is true of movements that do not orient themselves, that neither mean something nor complete an action, but operate in sterile, geometrical environments built by probability theory.

And in fact, masks, puppets, effigies, and marionettes have a completely different genealogy than 3-D avatars and robots, despite recurrent attempts to interpret avatars as the "modern mask." (Rössler, Schmidt 2010) The two groups are separated by a technical caesura or disruption between myth and poetics on the one side and technology and informatics on the other. The former derive from a genuine incompleteness that is their fundamental anthropological and existential condition. They have a special relationship to death and absence, in stark contrast to technological artefacts, which have a positive relationship to perfection and infinity and bow to a hypermimetic constructivism. Hypermimesis does not however mean a heightening of the mimetic, for *mimēsis* in Greek is an ethical figure of moderation and modesty, since the *creatio (physein)* is reserved for the divine alone. For humans there is only "emulation" *(mimeisthai);* everything else is *hybris.* Hypermimesis is therefore already hubris, and immanent to it is not only sacrilege, but also failure.

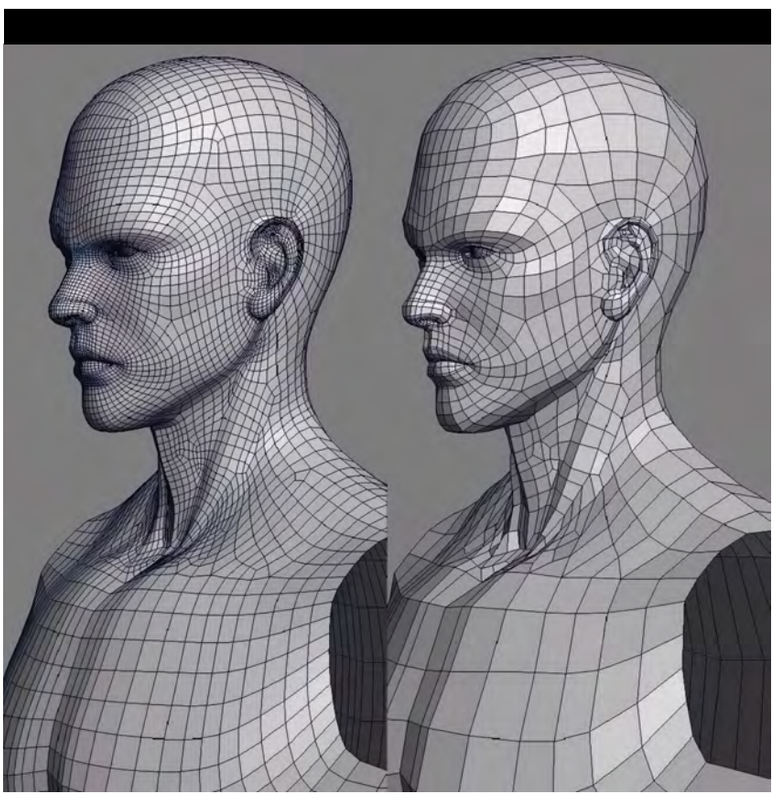

FIG. 2
THE GEOMETRY OF AN AVATAR MODEL.

The unavoidability of the latter is made clear by the utopias of the "as-if" and the idealization of appearance, which cannot be fulfilled. They flip the relationship of similarity and dissimilarity, manifest in the finite. For what is dissimilar is the wellspring out of which the similar draws its meaning, provided that comparisons and equivalences presuppose the incomparable and difference. It is only where we see differences that we can discover identities and make things become similar *(Verähnlichung).* Similarity and identity are first and foremost reflexive concepts. In contrast, simulacra whose calibrations are processes of mathematical models target equalities. Their ideal is congruency, equality of structure, and the identification of characteristics such as intelligence, creativity, intention, and expression. The entire theater of industrial technology, of which digital worlds are in the end no more than a descendent, is geared toward reproduction, that is to say toward the copy, both of which are in turn derivatives of a logic of representation. Making the absent present in an unending loop,

doubling the world and reproducing existences: this is the unspoken telos of the nineteenth century and of our present era, which seeks to escape death and finality through deceptively realistic illusions, but only produces an endless slew of kitsch.

The desire for the invention and spread of avatars is therefore the exact opposite of our cultural desire for masks and dolls, no matter what has been said (Calvillo-Gámez and Cairns 2008). They are the mirrors of our lack, which is a condition for our creativity. The term "lack," which denotes missing something, is however misleading, because that which seems to be a "lack" is an advantage and a gain. Correspondingly, avatars can never die—at most they are deleted—and they remain without tragedy or pain and therefore deserve neither empathy nor worry. To the contrary, they are cheap objects of a sado-masochistic diversion; embodiment of an unreserved desire for control and power that however, like all sado-masochism, tends to hit back, not because of inner resistance, but because of the necessary incompleteness of its construction, which also remains unforgiveable. They are the true "lack," which is why we do not shy from taking revenge on them. When that which we desire more than anything is fundamentally unfulfillable, then it must be destroyed. That is why avatars are not objects that we can love, but that we must hate. Their unfulfillable nature is built into the logic of their mathematical design.[3] Better models with optimized resolution or more precise skills might replace their predecessors, but they will invariably exhibit the same lack of unattainable completeness. This is in the end true of all artefacts, no matter how perfect, for we are always confronted with relative autonomies and the impossibility of consumation.

Furthermore, while ritual masks are part of performative cult and children's dolls belong to a poetics of transformation, the functions of avatars do not even touch the foundation of the social sphere but stand aside, so to speak, untouched and untouchable. The only social function they can fulfil is the substitution of instrumental practices—in caretaking, in consulting, as game counterparts, as the help function of human-machine interfaces, etc. But as Philipp Stoellger has recently stressed, instrumentality demands reliability, which is something quite different than commitment, trust, or responsibility, those underestimated foundations of social relationships that constitute its true *koinonia* (Stoellger 2010). We *rely* on functions, on the smooth workings of operative processes, but we *trust* in people, for the precondition of trust is "relationship," not "relations." That is why, no matter how successful the techno-social interactions between humans and machines or their iconic substitutes are, there is no human "bond," in the emphatic sense, or relationship to avatars, merely an employment or use.

That which legitimizes the sociality of the social sphere is the break or discontinuity, in one word: mortality. In return, we gain contingency and thus the chronic illegitimacy of trust, commitment, and responsibility, which have no norm or rule guaranteeing our belief in them making them in every moment vulnerable and subversive, because they force *revolvere*. The technological automatisms and their figurations, of which avatars are only one version, seem to make them redundant and to free us from them by replacing the unforeseen and the intrusion of events with ends-and-means operations that are controllable. But this implies putting repetition and identity and their fictionalizations at the center of social processes and thus privileging infinity, rather than putting difference and finiteness and with them time and history in first place.

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3 The topos of incompleteness is here a reference to Gödel's metamathematical incompleteness theorem, see Franzén (2005).