VIRTUAL REALITY: HOW DOES IT OPERATE THROUGH COMMUNICATION PROCESS?

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Abstract

Aside from the well known ideological features of the conventional media VR technologies and representations display a distinctive ideological characteristic. They have their own self-referential universe of representations. Under the illusion of a reality reflection with respect to simulations people are deprived of an original correspondence of reality inside the immersion of VR. Herewith virtuality would be identified as an ambivalent term which is inclusive of two almost oppositional meanings. Whereas one of the meanings is concerned with the negative connotations such as “illusion”, “fake” and “deficiency” the other meaning triggers the “potentiality” as opposed to “actuality” in general. In Lacanian approach about “the mirror stage” it would be implicated that the notion of the “I” as ego is the “image of the image” which constitutes a simulacra as the image of the human subject sets a virtual reality through a splitted self as “the referent”. According to this determinant it is uneasy to suppose an immediate process of communication since all communication process is mediated through a splitted and divided existence which lacks a complete subjectivity without the simulacra as the image and the referent as the body that together require a virtual constitution. Hence the understanding of the place of “virtual” in the communication process calls forth a requirement to examine symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and Lacanian analysis. In this paper the concept of mediated communication is analyzed in its relations with the process of reification and the notion of virtual reality with a relatively new approach to describe the conceptualization of social reality as an abstract notion within the position of the subject. This is an normative analytical paper where an analysis of virtual reality made in accordance with Lacanian analysis, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology.
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The use of language by human being with inadequate language competence should be dealt with as his/her organism he/she cannot totally control through his mind as well the feelings he/she cannot control, therefore as the foundation of his opinions and actions. All these elements emerge as an unconscious category in terms of positive thought while they are considered “unthought” by Foucault. How we can establish communication efficiency although we have a life not totally determined by mind? In fact, communication constitutes the most important part of our social life. For example, in the unconscious we know that the clothes we wear are not us, the patterns that we use as culture are different than ourselves and the communication technologies that we utilize do not correspond to the profound need of communication inside ourselves. What do the simulations and virtual reality surrounding us try to conceal? As our perceptions are conditioned by virtuality, we become alienated towards the real world around us and our own perceptions. Indeed, the real world is getting vaguer.

Is the real world a flag burned or a provoked angry crowd attacking some people having diverse opinions or a new verdict by European Court of Human Rights? The agenda of the media is full of such events and undoubtedly shapes our agenda as well. The spectres that are looked after in their contemporary manner are framed by the imaginary visions that are based on a return of the suppressed and are sourced back on our conditioned perceptions. Nietzche identifies what lies beneath the rise of nihilism in 19th century as the corruption of “higher values”, which are rather vague and that no reality matches them. According to him nihilism occurs when people start to give everything a meaning it does not actually have. In such a situation, a search for monism starts and during this search, human beings have a tendency to be dependant on something which they consider superior to them. I Personally perceive nihilistic features in the ongoing presence of the world condition and in this manner VR is considered to be a superior mean that provides an alternative horizon to the masses. Under given conditions it is inevitable to sacrifice individualism for the sake of the well-being of the whole but here VR acts as an example in transition where it serves to be a means of an utilitarian ideology in a showcase of individual autonomy.

Mass psychology is a social instinct and is defined by Nietzche as the instinct of the herd. Therefore, there is an increasing tendency to consider more people deemed to be elements of equations. The dominant feelings such as mercilessness, selfishness, doubt and a desire towards being a tiran begins to flourish inside the mass. Since the idea of the majority is important, to be an extreme feature in this crowd is a great mistake, which will also cause a social paranoia. Although individualism is sacrificed to the advantage of the whole, according to Nietzche, there is no such whole. Perhaps the most important point is one’s lost of confidence in his own values. Here the whole on which the person’s beliefs depend is replaced by the mass. This description may well be fitted into the description of virtuality also, since the world conception as an extension of the mass substitutes the perception of the whole but there lies a deficiency in virtual reality not a wholeness.

A real communication opportunity is the name given to the activity carried out between two people, both of which are the subjects. In fact, we generally do not establish direct communication as human subjects; rather we make use of certain notions to communicate, such as language, belief, ideology, media or in this case VR. This is a
tendency affecting our later stages of life at an increasing rate. When this is combined with a mass society life style, our means of communication turn out to have the characteristics of a virtual reality. What is aimed here is that indirect communication should have the most extreme quality. For example, others might enter our life as imitated, fake and reflected elements like the reflections on the mirror. Given in the modern sense, the term “virtual” sometimes refers to something which is considered, replaced and passed as an element rather than itself.

Although the perspective of “the other” and the subject blends in real communication there is no place in the manipulative code of virtual reality for this mutual agency. In the real world, the consciousness of the subject and the consciousness of the other are in communication, the perception of the world by the subject is not subject’s doing any more than its perception by other is other’s doing; in each case it is the “doing of pre-personal forms of consciousness, whose communication raises no problem” since it is blended in the very definition of consciousness, meaning or truth in a real and mutual communication setting (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). As far as I am a consciousness, that is in so far as something has meaning for me, I am neither here nor there, neither subject or the object since I am not distinguishable from the other consciousness, since we are in touch with the world and the world is laid down in a unique system in which all truths cohere. Under the illusion of a coherent and integral presentation of the world the VR covers and conceals this truth in an intrapersonal mode of communication.

All explicit experience of objects takes for granted a background of practices and relations to other objects that can be referred as the “outer horizon” of the object according to phenomenological inquiry. Moreover, the inner horizon of an object can only become an object with the surrounding objects becoming a horizon. This is another approach to understand the reality of perception that “objects form a system in which one can not show itself without concealing others” (Ibid, 2004). Nevertheless the computer screen reinforces itself like it is the only and mere horizon to look upon its auto-referred universe since it conceals the other reality surrounding itself. In virtual reality simulations this fact becomes more apparent and the screen becomes like an absolute horizon while you are using head mounted displays for instance. However Foucault refers to Kant in Order of the Things when indicating importance of the background provided with the experience that is ending man’s alienation by reconciling him with his own essence through the ways in which his horizon is made explicit (Foucault, 1973). On the other hand, as much as man deems himself as involved in the world as a sovereign being he enters into a strange relation with his involvements:

“His use of language that he does not master, his inherence in a living organism he does not fully penetrate with thought, and the desires that he can not control must be taken to be the basis of his ability to think and act. If man is to be intelligible to himself, this unthought must be ultimately accessible to thought and dominated in action, yet insofar as this unthought in its obscurity is precisely the condition of the possibility of thought and action it can never be fully absorbed into the cogito.” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982 ).

According to Foucault’s analysis of Husserlian phenomenology the unthought is the implicit, the inactual, the sedimeted, the non-effected that provides a background for reflection as what man is in his truth in a blurred projection. However this projection “...plays the role of a preliminary ground upon which man must collect himself and recall himself in order to attain his truth.” (Foucault, 1973). I propose that this unthought part
of the human experience constitutes some aspects of the notion “virtual”. Since virtual reality seems to correspond or answer the question of insufficiency of the body compared to mind where it refers another universe of becoming outside the body. In this manner the term “virtual” has two almost oppositional meanings. Whereas one refers to “illusion”, “fake” and “deficiency” the other meaning consists of “potentiality”. This ambivalent disclosure of the term stimulates new possibilities for theorizing communication as it creates difficulties at the same time. The implementation of unthought to the notion “virtual” can provide an exploratory disclosure that would bind together the concepts “deficiency” and “potentiality” since both of these terms implicate an obscured side of the human agency. Deficiency in its essential meaning refers to something that we can not conceptualize in its actual sense whereas the potentiality consists of something which has not been realized in actuality. So that these notions lead to something unthought compared with the cogito even if not they are related to it so.

When the concrete object is conveyed through media as a representation it becomes a fake copy of itself because the medium itself becomes the message which alters the nature of the transmission. This is an extension of a symbolic economy that emerges from a mediation of social via the medium. Nevertheless this process is related to the appearance of the notion society as an articulation of the social akin to a virtual other like a spectre. In fact the social is signified by the singular notions that do not constitute it as a totality but covered by itself. However it is emerged through a void of phantasms of magnitude appearing in this paradoxical relationship. This can briefly be called as hyper-reality. Here the object is not taken for granted in its relations with the other real objects, real world or any other context in this sense but it is deemed in a relevance with a code of structure relevant with signification that is not related to “a substance” in a flow of relations among signs. This code resembles a substitution that is inserted as the reality of media and the manipulative code of the medium (Baudrillard, 1998). Here we take it as the manipulative code of virtual reality. However, before indulging in this manipulative code it is necessary to look at the phenomenological presence of a given worldview as emerged from the image.

When an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene as sensory experience or become the “imago” of a whole segment of life (in contrast to the sentence given above) ? It becomes so when sensory perception establishes a connection with the real world and constitutes an unit of becoming what we call “experience”. In “Phenomenology of Perception”, Merleau-Ponty states that “All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from ‘some experience of the world’ without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). It is not my purpose here to discuss the validity or reliability of the science as appeared in the individual mind but I wanted to express the importance of “the experience” when constituting a weltanschaung or a particular point of view about the world. It is not easy to talk about the notion “experience” in scientific terms without making comprehensive acknowledgements to very different scientific disciplines such as biology, psychology, psychiatry or even sociology but as a part of our becoming process and from our eventual comprehension we can say that the process of communication is an experience of things and humans around us or at a distance through common understanding.

Ponty advances by asserting that “Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life.” So we can take sense experience namely perception for granted as a communication as we make a
phenomenology of perception. Also we deem the perception process as a primer source of and part of the experience (Ibid, 2004). We are much more familiar with above given notions as we always live with them except with a more intriguing concept “virtuality” or “virtual reality”. Within coming minutes I will try to describe and disclose what I understand from the terms “virtuality” or “virtual reality” through a phenomenal understanding. Again it is not here the purpose to make a phenomenology of virtual reality since it would have been a huge task but I would rather try to make an understanding of virtual reality from a phenomenal perspective which signifies a disclosure of this notion in a manner as it appears and represents itself as a phenomenon in our minds. So when the notion virtual reality used here it simply refers to a phenomenal presence namely as it represents itself in the mind. However it is also referred here within its particular dimensions and aspects that contain some elements of its tangible and technological appearance too. This is to mean that the virtuality and virtual reality are not being tried to be disclosed in a comprehensive account within all of their aspects but these are rather depicted within their presence through a communications setting as well as VR’s appearance in our minds as a phenomenon. This phenomenon initially consists of an intrapersonal mode of communication as it appears in the individual mind especially when offline operations are concerned. As we try to understand the phenomenal presence of VR it would be beneficial to look at the symbolic interactionism as well.

The model of symbolic society relies on formation and constitution. According to this, human as a social being has a formed and constituted presence. So that the natural forces that are in effect in society are not perceived as they are but rather as constituted or formed within the symbolic forms of culture. As Weber stated raw nature as understood free from formation is meaningless. Surely the physical nature was not created by our categories of thought but because of a mediated relation with the nature it has a specific effect on our lives instead of a general one (Sunar, 1999).

So our experience inside the society is not taken for granted as a reality within itself but it is formed or constituted as a symbolic interaction. Events that cause experience can be understood as elements of society in a system and our experience signifies a meaning inside the system only. Therefore experience carries or conveys a meaning only as determined by their places or locations inside the system. Hereto with the action or actuality gains a significance when they are perceived as parts of a particular context which is formed by a cultural system. This is to say that the actuality or action can be conceptualized as a reflection of the system. On the other hand cultural reality is not a mere concrete presence and does not have an existence within itself. Also it can not be perceived immediately. The events, things or different elements that appear fragmented and marked by interruptions are designated in mind together according to certain points of view and initiated as structures or patterns inside the consciousness but these structures do not always exist as material or actual forms inside the real life (Karacor, 2000). This is the extension of the nature of cultural reality which resembles virtual reality in this sense or we may say it has a significant virtual aspect aside from its concrete and actual aspects. This is the extension of the nature of cultural reality which resembles virtual reality in this sense or we may say it has a significant virtual aspect aside from its concrete and actual aspects.

Moreover actions and actuality in the system can be understood through an exchange of symbols that convey meaning as exemplified in the approach of symbolic interactionism (Ibid, 1999). According to this the society is constituted by an exchange of language or
symbols which stand for mental processes. Language and symbols transmitted or exchanged through a particular human action called “communication”. Communication is a notion that is understood on the basis of human mental processes “where each of the parties (involved) not only gives meaning to their own behaviour but understands or seeks to understand the meaning the other gives. So that this communication process would be perceived in positions where each of the parties place themselves according to each other as well as themselves (Waters, 1994, p.24). When the notion virtual reality on the other hand is taken to be the part of this process it would be deemed as to be the constitution of communicational reality in a certain way or from a certain point of view. This certain point of view would be perceived to be in a juxtaposition with a certain discourse or as this discourse itself which is the discourse of technology. It is possible to reiterate the concept “technology” as logic and the discourse (or the logos) of the Greek “tekhnē”. “Tekhnē” refers to “art” or “craft” in older Greek which also means the transformation of the world in order to make it beneficial (for the human). So that the essential term “tekhnē-logic” could correspond an instrumental or practical logic which also establishes the discourse of the technology where it is meant to be techniques and means that were made to be beneficial for human. Therefore it can be said about the VR as technology that it aims to be beneficial in an utilitarian way as a discourse since it is an extension of it.

The term “virtual” as it is exemplified in its contemporary uses refers to the main functioning of the computers as a product of technology. The main features that are displayed by computers are not given in their concrete existence. This is to say that the machinery as it is given in the tangible form can not perform any operation without the software or the memory that are recognized as virtual notions in essence. In other words the computer is a versatile machine and has no intrinsic action without virtual components (Ryan, 2001). The computer and software industry are promoting these products as “virtual technologies”. Although this technical meaning does not mean a lot for the public, the notion “virtual” stimulated the imagination of the masses as one of the most promising technologies that signify a progressive and fantastic turn in the scope of the technology itself. Eventually the term VR has become a hallmark of a new constitution of the reality itself too which is also called as augmented reality.

Etimologically on the other hand, the term “virtual” comes from the Latin “virtus” that refers to “strength”, “manliness” and “virtue” that caused the association of virtus with force or power in scholastic Latin through a philosophical implication. Within the same comprehension on the other hand the scholastic Latin “virtualis” corresponds to the potential: Something inside the power (virtus) of the force. Moreover there exists a dialectical relationship between “virtual” and “actual” which is a distinction initially made by Aristotle (in potentia vs. in actu). This is to mean that there is a potential in virtual to be present in actual existence. Nevertheless the recent usages of the term in 18th and 19th centuries associate the concept with the notions like “illusionary”, “deficient”, “fictitious”, “nonexistent”, “fake” or “double” in a negative connotation (Ibid, 2001).

In Turkish, the term “sanal” is referred to “virtual” in English. “Sanal” which is a relatively new term comes from the basis of “something supposed in mind” within a negative connotation that is associated with something imaginary. This is to say that the Turkish correspondent of the term virtual is recognized in a manner that which something virtual does not exist in actual experience but it is supposed to be so. This signifies an illusory experience of reality. If an example is required it can be said that the phrase “Economy is getting better virtually (sanal olarak)” in Turkish implies that
“Economy is in a bad shape actually but it is supposed to be good as false opinion by certain parties.” This could be deemed as the common understanding of the correspondent of the term virtual in Turkish except with the particular expressions of VR technologies and rare usages of the term with more positive connotations like “potential forces”. However when more positive usages like potentiality used other different Turkish terms are used in general like “gucul”, “zahiri”, “zimni” “bilkuvve”. Although my understanding of the term relies both English and Turkish it should be stated here that in Turkish “sanal” establishes a slightly different conceptualization which does not corresponds whole of the multivariated aspects of the term virtual. Different terms are used in Turkish for a single notion called “virtual”. However the term “sanal” has been used as an independent notion in Turkish critical studies and it has a particular place in our scholarly studies that would eventually mean that a the word “sanal” is still in progress. So what is going to be mentioned here would sometimes be slightly different from the common comprehension in English. Since this part was originally prepared in Turkish.

Aside from the well-known ideological features of the conventional media VR technologies and representations display a distinctive ideological characteristic. VR has its own self-referential or auto-referred universe of representations. The relation of the media with hyper-reality in its virtual dimension requires new descriptions about the ways in which the communication functions in entirely mediated settings. Under the illusion of a reality reflection with respect to simulations (that are designed to correspond “the real” reality) people are deprived of an original or authentic correspondence of reality inside the immersion of VR.

According to Ergur, simulation technologies as emerged through augmented or virtual reality are not limited to their concrete presence as technological means but they also institutionalize an ideological formation that aims to frame a basis for its social legitimacy (Ergur, 1998, p.138). On the other hand, the progress of virtual reality technologies relies on an appropriation of human perception that seeks to find the most approximate means that resemble what human perceives. So that VR has an aspect that mean to treat the human senses in certain ways. In this sense VR is a strategy that has been constituted through the ways in which the current ideological system of information transaction operates in accordance with the available political economy. This is to say that the VR and virtuality as given in contemporary society together set a technocentrical world conception from a certain utilitarian ideology. This ideology calls forth a certain power of determinance over a comprehensive process in cultural production. Ergur asserts that the virtual reality technology “seems to present exclusively all technical requirements for a global dominance throughout its ability to be integrated with the individual’s mind.” (Ibid, 1998, p.160). So that the VR can be evaluated according to a certain political economy or ideology and its social implications should not be separated from its certain point of view. Eventually there exists a potential in the immersive features of VR so that a possible transformation of mental functions in accordance with differentiating sensory perception through a systematic incorporation of the social sphere into virtual environment will be literally possible in the near future. Nevertheless this would cause “genesis of a certain integrated consciousness in which individuals can lose their specificity while constituting a micropart of this matrix consciousness.” (Ibid, 1998, p.160-161). Since human as a social being has a formed or constituted presence, the new telepresence of VR immersion can forge the trajectory of becoming that is issued from and undergoing together with this technocentrical world conception. In this manner VR can be deemed as an counter-example of the nature since VR is constituted within auto-referred
representations of the symbolic forms of culture. Hence the experience of the individual through virtuality could be recognized as a post-symbolic interaction. Hereto with transactions that cause experience can be understood as elements of a certain technological discourse in a given system.

In accordance with its given discourse our experience here signifies a twofold meaning: The first is given inside the technological system of VR and the other is given in the system of discourse (or the ideology) that made VR possible. Thus VR experience as similar to symbolic interaction carries or conveys a meaning only as determined by its places or locations inside the VR system. However the agency of VR which also means actuality in the system gains a significance when it is perceived as a part of a particular context which is formed by given ideological discourse. This ideological discourse of VR has four main features (Ibid, p.161):

1) It can inverse and intertwine the components of the world that it creates, this renders “things” unrooted appearances without any coherence or any conjunction of causality (of real world).
2) Its representational level is largely auto-referred, a fact that reinforces the process of unhistoricity.
3) As a consequence of both strategies virtual reality serves to evacuate the meaning as ideological reliability, figuring in the factuality emerging from the conception of “reality”.
4) Due to the fused use of this strategies virtual reality initiates an unmeasurable system of total manipulation over existing socialities, while presenting this operation in a showcase ornated with a discourse on the rise of individual autonomy.

This ideological discourse in the VR system stands for mental processes within and outside the individual mind (that stands for the social level). It is associated with the inward and outward individual mind since a manipulation is initiated in a showcase that pretend to give rise to the individual autonomy where it also operates over existing socialities at the same time. The discourse and representations inside the VR are transmitted or exchanged through a certain form of communication in an intrapersonal level initially in the beginning. However this intrapersonal communication is an isolated one in a sense that there does not necessarily exist other parties if offline interaction is taken to be the basis of a given VR operation.

If the intrapersonal level of communication is examined it would be observed that this process is largely a phenomenal one. Because there exists a mediation within the self through VR operations and VR operates on the basis of rendering a set of communication in a self reflection. The Lacanian analysis can be deployed here in order to understand the significance of reflections as simulacra that are taken from VR. According to Lacanian analysis “the mirror stage” that provides an initial step for self reflection is the level of individuation that is also transitional. It is this stage that promises a transition from the imaginary level to symbolic one. Although Jacques Lacan did not apply the notion of virtual into his analysis there exists many aspects in his theory which would be applied into this notion. It is in his approach about “the mirror stage” it would be implicated that the notion of the “I” as ego becomes present in “the image of the image” which constitutes a simulacra as the phenomenal image of the human subject that already sets a virtual reality through a splitted self as “the referent”. According to this determinant it is uneasy to suppose an immediate process of communication since all communication
process is mediated through a splitted and divided existence which lacks a complete subjectivity without the simulacra as the image and the referent as the body that already require a virtual constitution. “The mirror stage” in Lacanian theory implicates the importance of “imago” or “simulacra” in a process of intrapersonal communication. This is where an object perceived (as the image on the mirror) can concentrate in itself a whole scene as sensory experience or become “the imago” of a whole segment of life as experienced in a subjective level. The imago or the simulacra in the VR is the avatar of the subject that are reflected on the computer screen and the subject as user has a reflection of himself/herself from the screen. This can also be deemed as a reification of the subject or the subjects involvement which is in contrast with his embodiments in real life.

Reification refers to a recognition of the categories of thought as the things existent in the concrete or actual reality. In its negative connotation as imaginary virtual reality on the other hand would be referred to the notions that does not exist in actual reality but only designated inside the categories of thought or that are contemplated in mind. This means that if one level of reification would be deemed as simulation the other would be designated as virtual reality. When the categories of thought are only designated in mind where they do not have a correspondence in actual reality but recognized as the things existent in the actual reality this constitutes a virtuality and virtual reality. The reification about VR consists of potentiality and counterfactuality with a contrast to materialistic presence it is actually based on mental traits of human. It has not a concrete presence but abstract notions are considered to be the basis for virtuality. They have deterritorialized and plural telepresence and depends on information not the knowledge or the matter. Instead of presence the absence is recognized (Ryan, 2001). Also the fact is replaced by fiction. All of this classification about the reification characterize the four main stages virtuality that is identical with the simulations as suggested by Baudrillard. According to this:

1-“It is the reflection of a profound reality.”
2-“It masks and denatures a profound reality.”
3-“It masks the absence of a profound reality.”
4-“It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: It is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1998).

Nevertheless this simulacrum of VR should be understood truly according to the absence of the truth inside it. In the context of contemporary replacement of the signifiers and the signifieds, the truth that should have been the fundamental signifier is replaced by the post-symbolic means of the virtuality that is substituted inside the system instead of the real world. Here the signifier X is replaced by something that pretends to resembles it which once was a signified and the X becomes a virtual X’ as a signified. When the alteration or the transformation of the reality incoherent with the coherent truth that is shared commonly by parties involved entropy turns out to be the fundamental element in this process. This renders the spectres that are looked after in their contemporary manner but framed by the imaginary visions that are based on a return of the suppressed and are sourced back on our conditioned perceptions as false consciousness and the world becomes ultimately vague.

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