

Disclosing the (Temporal) World of Depression, by Means of Audiovisual Media: An Exploration between Cinema and Virtual Reality

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Abstract

Individuals suffering from depression often experience a condition of isolation, which relegates them in a separate and neglected world of their own. In light of this issue, could audiovisual media contribute to drawing attention to the world of depression, and make it more familiar to the general population?

The first part of this paper provides an extensive and in-depth description of depression. More specifically, by combining the psychiatric account of Thomas Fuchs with Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt*, it frames it in terms of a 'psychopathology of time', and introduces the notion of a self-enclosed 'temporal world' that is usually home (or rather cage) to depressed people. In turn, the second part of this paper discusses some media strategies that may actually *disclose* the temporal world of depression. After taking into account a cinematographic option and showing how it succeeds in making this world *visible*, it further examines a VR-based alternative in order to assess whether it can make the same world not simply visible, but fully *accessible*: that is, affording an up-close, first-person grasp of depression to ordinary, non-affected spectators.

Introduction

Mental health issues have been spreading at an increasing rate during the last decades: among them, one of the most prominent is depression.¹ In several contexts, depression is still associated with a strong social stigma, which frequently results in depressed people refusing to seek professional help. As stigma is based on prejudice and misrepresentations about a given condition, better information concerning the nature of depression may reduce stigma. In turn, this may encourage help-seeking attitude in affected people.²

¹ World Health Organization, *Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2017). According to this WHO report, the total number of people living with depression worldwide amounts to 322 million, and this number has increased by 18,4% from 2005 to 2015.

² On the notion of stigma and its consequences, see for instance Klara Latalova and others, 'Perspectives on Perceived Stigma and Self-stigma in Adult Male Patients with Depression', *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 10 (2014), 1399–405. Studies have demonstrated that

Given this scenario, one could ask whether audiovisual media, based on their representational tools, can contribute to unveiling the world of depression and promoting awareness about this disorder among those who do not have any direct experience of it. This paper proposes a starting exploration of such broad and complex issue, based on two selected case studies belonging to two specific domains of the audiovisual mediascape.

The first of these two domains is cinema. Indeed, cinema has often been employed to make visible what normally is not: dreams, phantasies, hallucinations, and —precisely— altered mental states.³ Therefore, it may be sensible to explore how it could make visible the depressive condition more specifically, and whether this could make the disorder more relatable. At the same time, the ongoing developments in the contemporary mediascape invite to push the boundaries of cinema itself, and to take into account new immersive media, like virtual reality (VR). By using the latter, the current debate suggests, it may be possible to make the world of depression not simply *visible*, but more radically and fully *accessible*.

The first part of this paper provides one of the possible conceptualisations of depression. The second part discusses whether, how, and to what degree different media options across cinema and VR may convey the experiential traits of the depressive condition to non-affected spectators.

The Temporal World of Depression: a Multi-disciplinary Approach

When describing depression, it may be advisable to start from the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatry. Depression, however, is not the object of these disciplines only. Therefore, a multi-disciplinary approach may reveal advantageous to provide a scientifically solid yet multifaceted description of the pathology.

‘approximately half of the general public is convinced that people with depression are weak, responsible for their own condition and unpredictable; and nearly a quarter considers them to be dangerous’; and that information campaign can contribute to change public perception of depression (Elisabeth Kohls and others, ‘Public Attitudes toward Depression and Help-Seeking: Impact of the OSPI-Europe Depression Awareness Campaign in Four European Regions’, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 217 (2017), 252–59.

³ For an exhaustive and quite updated catalogue of movies about mental issues, organized by disorder types and including a chapter on ‘Bipolar and Depressive Disorders’, see Danny Wedding and Ryan Niemiec, *Movies and Mental Illness. Using Films to Understand Psychopathology*, 4th edn (Boston: Hogrefe Publishing, 2014). For a more recent and more critical view on Hollywood depictions on mental issues, see Erin Heath, *Mental Disorders in Popular Film: How Hollywood Uses, Shames, and Obscures Mental Diversity* (London: Lexington Books, 2019).

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The DSM-5 Description of (Melancholic) Depression, and Beyond

For practitioners in clinical psychology and psychiatry, one of the main references is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.⁴

According to this source, major depression can be diagnosed when five or more of the following symptoms are registered during at least two weeks: 1. Frequent and persistent depressed mood, comprising deep sadness and 'hopelessness'; 2. Loss of interest or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities; 3. Significant weight loss or gain; 4. Recurring insomnia, or hypersomnia; 5. Frequent and persistent psychomotor agitation, or retardation; 6. Frequent and persistent fatigue, or loss of energy; 7. Recurring and excessive feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt; 8. Difficulty to focus and/or to take decisions; and 9. Recurring thoughts of death and/or suicidal ideation. At least one of the observed symptoms must be depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure.⁵

As it constitutes the specific sub-type of the pathology described in the next paragraphs, it is worth complementing the above description with the characterising features (i.e. 'specifiers') of *melancholic* depression. These include at least one among: 1a. Loss of pleasure in all or almost all performed activities; and 2a. Diminished or absent reactivity to normally pleasurable stimuli. Furthermore, they comprise three or more of the following symptoms: 1b. A distinct quality of depressed mood, expressed by 'profound despondency, despair, and/or moroseness or by so-called empty mood'; 2b. Peak of depressive mood in the morning; 3b. Recurring morning awakening before usual time; 4b. Marked psychomotor agitation or retardation; 5b. Significant weight loss; and 6b. Excessive feeling of guilt.⁶

Undoubtedly, the description of (melancholic) depression derived by the DSM-5 is operationally valuable. On the other hand, precisely in light of its essentially operational scope, it may result quite scant and under-detailed. This observation is consistent with the criticisms raised by some contemporary psychiatrists. For instance, Kenneth S. Kendler has observed that 'focusing solely on the symptoms and signs in DSM risks producing an impoverished view of psychopathology'.⁷ To mitigate this risk, he suggests to draw from

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013). For a critical history of the Manual, which is acknowledged here to be 'considered *the* reference for characterisation and diagnosis of mental disorders', see Shadia Kawa and James Giordano, 'A Brief Historicity of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: Issues and Implications for the Future of Psychiatric Canon and Practice', *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, 7.2 (2012). For a discussion of both the relevance and the limitations of the Manual, see Lee Anna Clark and others, 'Three Approaches to Understanding and Classifying Mental Disorder: ICD-11, DSM-5, and the National Institute of Mental Health's Research Domain Criteria (RDoC)', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 18.2 (2017), 72–145.

⁵ Ivi, pp. 160–61.

⁶ Ivi, p. 185.

⁷ Kenneth S. Kendler, 'The Phenomenology of Major Depression and the Representativeness and Nature of DSM Criteria', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 173.8 (2016), 771–80 (p. 771).

phenomenology, and phenomenological psychiatry more precisely. Indeed, these disciplines have historically devoted great attention to mental disorders as they are experienced by patients, thus building richer accounts than those summarised in the DSM-5. Kendler's opinion resonates with that expressed by Aaron L. Mishara and Michael A. Schwartz, who have followed closely the development of the latest version of the Manual. Even more radically than Kendler, these authors stress the inescapability of a collaboration between a DSM-oriented and a more phenomenologically grounded view of psychiatry.⁸

Complementing the DMS-5 descriptions with phenomenological materials might help better specify the symptoms listed in the Manual for given pathologies. However, and most crucially, it might as well lead to unveil new experiential traits characterizing them.

Depression in particular has indeed been the object of in-depth phenomenological studies. Interestingly, some of these studies have highlighted the importance of one particular facet of the experience of depression, i.e. its *temporal* facet.

Depression as a Psychopathology of Time: around Thomas Fuchs's 'Desynchronisation'

Depression has often been addressed in phenomenological psychiatry by bringing to the fore its temporal dimension.

Most notably, Eugène Minkowski maintained that essential alterations in the relation with time lie at the core of the depressive condition.⁹ Building on previous work by Erwin Straus,¹⁰ Minkowski proposed depression to be grounded in a suppression of the human original propulsion towards the future. Such suppression is connected to a discrepancy between 'world time' (i.e. the shared temporality of a group of individuals and their environment) and 'ego time' (i.e. the temporality experienced by a given individual, in this case the depressed one). More precisely, since the others keep moving towards the future while the depressed individual loses this propulsion, her/his own 'ego time' detaches from the shared 'world time'. As the latter seemingly proceeds at unsustainable speed, the depressed individual conversely experiences a progressive slowing down of her/his own 'ego time', or even its total arrest.

⁸ Aaron L. Mishara and Michael A. Schwartz, 'What Does Phenomenology Contribute to the Debate about DSM-5?', in *Making the DSM-5*, ed. by Joel Paris and James Phillips (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 125–42 (p. 126).

⁹ Eugène Minkowski, *Lived Time. Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, trans. by Nancy Metzel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). The book was originally published in French in 1933.

¹⁰ Erwin Straus, 'Das Zeiterlebnis in der endogenen Depression und in der psychopathischen Verstimmung', *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*, 68 (1928), 640–56. Both Minkowski and Straus were at the same time theorists and practitioners in phenomenological psychiatry. They belong to the 'first wave' of studies in the discipline, preceding the contemporary wave of studies of which —for instance —Fuchs is representative.

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These ideas have been retrieved by the contemporary psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs. Fuchs picks up the basic notion of a temporal slowing down. At the same time, he reframes it within a more markedly relational approach. The result is a conceptualisation of depression —and melancholic depression more precisely —as ‘intersubjective desynchronisation’.¹¹

Human life, Fuchs claims, is regulated by an essential and normally unnoticed synchronicity. Indeed, human beings tend to acknowledge the rhythms proposed by the world they live in, and to conform to them spontaneously. This concerns both environmental aspects regulating human physiology (e.g. the alternation of day and night, and the ‘synchronic’ drive to match the former with activity and the latter with sleep) and social aspects (e.g. the institutionalised ‘proper times’ to find a job, have children and so on, and the ‘synchronic’ inclination to organise life accordingly). Against this background, desynchronisation is defined as ‘an uncoupling in the temporal relation of organism and environment, or of individuals and society’.¹²

Desynchronisation is not necessarily pathologic. On the contrary, it often characterises ordinary life as well. Periodically, indeed, subjects experience minor delays or misalignments, which normally can be dealt with in different ways. However, in melancholic depression, desynchronisation cannot be managed effectively. Hence, it becomes unbearable and —most crucially—irreversible.

Such drastic result is the product of a detrimental loop between social and environmental (thus physiological) uncoupling. Most often, a social delay occurs first. The subject prone to depression would mostly be inclined to make up for it, but she/he fails to do so. Importantly, among the key factors contributing to such failure is an abnormal sense of guilt. Indeed, the subject prone to depression typically over-emphasises both the scale and the irreversibility of her/his assumed mistakes and faults. This contributes to anchor her/him in the past, at the same time undermining her/his present and future-oriented actions.¹³

As a consequence, a physiological delay adds up. Indeed, in the urge to regain synchronisation, the subject pushes her/his daily routine, which may affect her/his sleeping habits or other relevant physiological patterns. With re-synchronisation nonetheless not being achieved, discouragement and exhaustion increase. Ultimately, this results in ‘a reaction of the entire organism, namely

¹¹ Thomas Fuchs, ‘Melancholia as a Desynchronization: Towards a Psychopathology of Interpersonal Time’, *Psychopathology*, 34 (2001), 179–86; Thomas Fuchs, ‘Temporality and Psychopathology’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 12.1 (2013), 75–104.

¹² Fuchs, ‘Melancholia as a Desynchronization’, p. 3.

¹³ The urgency experienced by the subject prone to depression to stay ‘in synch’ with others is equally described in Fuchs’s 2001 and 2013 papers already referred to here. As for the mentioned feeling of guilt and its consequences, they are devoted special attention in two additional papers in particular, which are not discussed at length here as their focus is more on the (inter)corporeal than on the temporal dimension of depression: Thomas Fuchs, ‘The Phenomenology of Shame, Guilt and the Body in Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Depression’, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 33.2 (2002), 223–43; and Thomas Fuchs, ‘Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interactivity’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 20.7–8 (2013), 219–38.

a psycho-physiological slowing down or *stasis*' that is described in Husserlian terms as a 'fundamental loss of conation' (i.e. intentional drive).¹⁴ At this point, the loop is activated: the inability to act aggravates the social uncoupling, which aggravates in turn the bodily slowing down.

In such essential stasis, the depressed subject becomes unable of even conceiving a future in which she/he will experience the same temporality as others again: hopelessness arises, stasis aggravates. With the intersubjective delay increasing exponentially, the impression of living within a slower temporality of one's own arises. Eventually, 'the depressed drops out of shared time, he lives in an "anachronistic", slow-moving time of his own'.¹⁵ Desynchronisation translates into exclusion.

The concept of exclusion immediately points at a subsequent one: namely, that of isolation. It is certainly true that depressed subjects isolate themselves in the first place, due to their perceived inability to take part in the events surrounding them. On the other hand, their isolation may also be fostered by non-affected people, who may consider the depressed subjects' experience too distant to be grasped. Hence, providing appropriate tools to break through the (temporal) world of depression may constitute an important step to reduce the gap between subjects suffering from this pathology and non-affected people around them.

Depressive Time as a Temporal World: Re-working von Uexküll's 'Umwelt'

The notion of a different world generated by peculiar experiential conditions is reminiscent of some concepts put forward by the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, and particularly of his concept of *Umwelt*.

The concept of *Umwelt* is introduced most clearly in von Uexküll's booklet *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*.¹⁶ Imagine, the author suggests, to take a walk in a meadow populated by animals and insects, and to draw a bubble around each of them. In von Uexküll's words: 'The bubble represents each animal's environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject. As soon as we enter into one such bubble, the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured. [...] A new world arises in each bubble'.¹⁷

¹⁴ Fuchs, 'Temporality and Psychopathology', p. 96. Fuchs's entire framework is rooted in Husserl's thought and Husserlian phenomenology more broadly. In relation to 'conation' more precisely, Fuchs explains in a footnote: 'This "energetic" or affective side of intentionality is hardly present yet in Husserl's earlier writings, but it comes increasingly to the fore in his later works, especially as regards the role of affection for attention (cf. Depraz 1994, 1998). The pre-reflective experiential directedness means a (self-)affection which Husserl also refers to as "awakening of an intention" and "drive-intentionality" (Husserl 2001, p. 198)' (ivi, p. 78).

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 97.

¹⁶ Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans. With a Theory of Meaning*, trans. by Joseph D. O'Neil (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). The booklet was originally published in German in 1934.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 43.

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Each organism, the author maintains, lives in a world of its own, which is created by the organism itself based on its perceptual and motor skills. It is well known that distinct species differ — for instance — in their visual abilities. Dogs can see fewer colours than humans, yet humans cannot see in the dark as cats do. In von Uexküll's view, these differences concretely project onto the world as a whole, fragmenting it into as many perceived *worlds* as the types of organisms inhabiting it: in this case, a dog-world, a human-world, and a cat-world. Unless they develop further perceptual and motor skills allowing them to expand their experiential horizon, organisms normally cannot step out of their own worlds, which is what makes them bubble-like.

Importantly, in addition to visual and other sensory features, the temporal features of a given environment as well can be modulated based on the organisms' specificity. Von Uexküll recurs in this regard to the example of the tick, which can wait for food for as long as eighteen years. Such extended waiting period would be unsustainable for a human being. Hence, it must be admitted that the tick and the human being not only generally live in distinct *Umwelten*, but also — and more specifically — they live in distinct *temporal Umwelten*.

What is most relevant here is that different temporal *Umwelten* may not only characterise different species, but also different categories of organisms within the same species. Von Uexküll himself allows for this possibility, when he refers as an example to the *spatial Umwelt* of an astronomer, which is built in a radically different way compared to that of other human beings less inclined to the observation of the sky.

What could it be, in a similar vein, an example of a *temporal Umwelt* that is specific of a circumscribed category of humans?

An interesting hint in this regard comes when combining von Uexküll's with Fuchs's account. Indeed, Fuchs's depressive temporality and the notion of a category-specific temporal *Umwelt* share some essential qualities. First, a separateness and peculiarity compared to other subjective temporalities. Second, the fact that such separateness and peculiarity originate from the (depressed) subjects' possibilities of perception and action in the world, their very disposition within and towards the world. What emerges, then, is an original interpretation of depressive time as a peculiar and pathologically inflected type of temporal *Umwelt*, specific of the human category of depressed people.

As it was anticipated, von Uexküll tends to describe the *Umwelt* as something self-enclosed, since it is strictly dependent on a given organism's perceptual and motor possibilities. It is true that each organism is *naturally* assigned only a selection of such possibilities. It is also true, however, that these can be extended *artificially*, by means of specific technologies. Crucially, as it was foreseen shortly after this medium's birth, these technologies include cinema.¹⁸ Thus, it can be

¹⁸ Consider for instance Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, ed. by Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and Gary Smith, 4 vols, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004/2006), ii.

hypothesised, cinema could be employed in order to open given *Umwelten* to those who are normally not included in them.

This possibility has been envisioned clearly, in recent years, by Inga Pollmann.¹⁹ Pollmann works on a specific case study: namely, Charles Urban's film series *The unseen worlds* (1903). Urban employed magnification to show ordinary objects at an extremely close distance. By doing so, he offered spectators an unprecedented visual experience, thus breaking their usual perceptual bubble.²⁰ Hence, he established 'a technical analogue of the soap bubble that Uexküll asked his readers to create imaginatively'.²¹

The case study proposed by Pollmann is functional in relation to the *visual* properties of a given *Umwelt*. The question arises, now, as to whether something similar to what achieved by Urban with regard to these properties could be attempted with regard to *temporal* properties as well, and, in relation to the specific scope of this paper, to the temporal properties of the depressive condition. In other words, the question arises as to whether cinema could disclose the usually isolated temporal *Umwelt* of depression, making it available to the general population.

An original perspective on how the concept of *Umwelt* may intertwine with the domain of temporal properties can be found in a 2010 book by film scholar Pasi Väliäho. Väliäho shares the view presented here that cinema can give rise to specific *Umwelten* in von Uexküll's sense. Importantly, he also believes that, among the factors characterizing such *Umwelten*, a key role is played by their temporal texture. The latter indeed, according to Väliäho, is what allows cinema to convey its 'vitality affects', a notion that he borrows from psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern and that indicates the 'the force, intensity, quality, form, or rhythm of experience'.²² In Väliäho's view, the moving image and the given *Umwelt* it creates basically 'consists of breathing rhythms, intensities of affective states, and form and texture dynamics', which — crucially — spectators not only witness but *embody*.²³

Within the frame of this paper, then, the question expressed above may as well be formulated in terms of whether the 'vitality affects' corresponding to a depressive temporal *Umwelt* may be picked up and embodied by an audience that normally lives a different experience of time.

¹⁹ Inga Pollmann, 'Invisible Worlds, Visible: Uexküll's *Umwelt*, Film, and Film Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 39.4 (2013), 777–816.

²⁰ An experiment, it should be noted, already somehow attempted by von Uexküll himself by employing photography and the 'grid method' (see *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, pp. 62–5).

²¹ 'Pollmann, 'Invisible Worlds, Visible', p. 79. Clearly, other and possibly more suitable examples than Urban's work may exist. However, I chose to focus on Urban as he is explicitly mentioned in relation to von Uexküll's theory in Pollmann's essay, which I rely on in this part of the paper.

²² Pasi Väliäho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 92.

²³ Ivi, p. 93.

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Getting 'in Synch' with Depression: a Media-oriented Approach

Given the (audio)visual nature of the medium, disclosing the temporal world of depression by means of cinema may first be interpreted in terms of making this world *visible*. This may constitute a valuable way of bringing the general population closer to it; or — with a little pun — to get them 'in synch' with it.

However, if what is at stake is an actual advancement in the general population's understanding of the depressive condition, making it *visible* may not be sufficient. In contrast, it may be necessary to make it somehow experientially *accessible*. Hence, the focus on cinema may have to be extended to different media.

A Cinematographic Option: Son of the Lovely Capitalism

Coherent with Pollmann and Väliaho's hints, the first option analysed here for disclosing the temporal world of depression is a cinematographic one. More specifically, it is the 2015 short movie *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* by Suranga D. Katugampala.

Son of the Lovely Capitalism depicts the psychological consequences of the 'inexorable progress of capitalism' on '[a] boy, metaphor of today's youth'.²⁴ As it will emerge, the movie explicitly aims at representing some behavioural traits that are typical of the depressive condition. Moreover, though possibly less deliberately, it expresses very appropriately the temporal features of (melancholic) depression.

Son of the Lovely Capitalism can be divided into three main sections.

The first section consists of six static shots, comprising no camera movements. In particular, after an extreme close-up presenting a face devoid of any expression, five shots follow each other in which the main character — a young male adult — occupies passively different urban scenarios. In each shot, the more or less pronounced dynamism of the scenario is contrasted by the character's immobility: slumped over a subway stairway, sitting on the edge of a sidewalk, lying on a bench, he appears completely detached from the events surrounding him, and he is either ignored or looked at with suspicion by passers-by. Each of these first six shots largely exceeds the duration of one minute (fig. 1).

An extra-diegetic ominous sound rising gradually and the intensification of the pace of the editing (i.e. the cutting rate) mark the beginning of the movie's second section. This section is stylistically opposed to the former: within one single minute, five shots are presented repeatedly and at lightning speed. The fast rotation of the shots is accompanied by a progressive increase of the volume of the extra-diegetic sound, which reminds the sound of metallic components clashing. This second section is closed by a powerful image: as if leaning out from a huge piece of graffiti,

²⁴ <http://katugampala.com/son_of_the_lovely_capitalism/> [accessed 18 August 2020].

a monstrous animal — perhaps a zebra — and its empty-eyed knight tower over the main character, who is lying below the animal's hoof in a gesture of shocked surrender. The camera lingers on this image for about one entire minute (fig. 2).

In the movie's third and last section, the duration of the shots increases again. Echoing and relaunching the first section, three additional urban scenarios are presented, in which the main character keeps manifesting his immobility and isolation. The only element of differentiation is provided by a sub-section, which shows the back of the protagonist, who is sitting on the ground, in front of a wall. A series of images are projected onto his back; some of them reach the wall he is looking at. The images depict working men from different regions and epochs. Once this sub-section ends, one last, extremely long shot presents the main character standing in a field, in the dark, as he stares dully at the sky.

As anticipated, the psychological condition addressed by *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* and expressed by its main character matches quite precisely the depressive condition, as well as Fuchs's phenomenology of melancholic depression. It does so — more specifically — with regard to three main traits of the pathology.

First, the immobility of the main character relates to the idleness and apathy that characterise melancholic depression. These states not only mark the character's body, but they extend to his face as well, which may be seen to show the typical depressive feeling of hopelessness.²⁵

Conversely, the dynamism around the main character, and thus the discrepancy between such dynamism and the character's static attitude, may be interpreted to point at the desynchronisation that, according to Fuchs, constitutes the core of melancholic depression.

That what is at stake is not a generic form of marginalisation but rather the temporal construct of desynchronisation can be inferred by focussing on the temporal texture of the representation, hence by working not at the *diegetic* but at the *discourse* level.²⁶ At the discourse level, *Son of the Lovely Capitalism's* most remarkable features are the pace of the editing, which is extremely slow, and the duration of the single shots, which becomes consequently very long. These features, which are eloquently among the constitutive traits of so-called 'Slow Cinema',²⁷ mirror quite clearly the temporal slowing down (or even stasis) that Fuchs associates with melancholic depression.

²⁵ The intention to represent these behavioural and attitude traits is made explicit by the filmmaker himself. Indeed, in the official 'Concept' he associates to the short movie (available on the same webpage indicated in the previous note), he overtly uses the words 'apathy', 'waiting without purpose', 'life without goals' in order to describe the condition exemplified by the movie's main character. As already suggested, these words match precisely some of the key symptoms of depression according to both Fuchs's account and the DSM-5: i.e. apathy, idleness, and hopelessness.

²⁶ Louis Giannetti, *Understanding movies* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2014). For a broader yet classic argument, see Seymour Chatman, 'Towards a Theory of Narrative', *New Literary History*, 6.2 (1975), 295–318.

²⁷ See for instance Lee Carruthers, *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016).

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In this regard, it could be argued that — by contrast — the central section of the movie is characterised by a marked speeding-up of the editing. It should not be overlooked, however, that the acceleration of the images leads to a quasi-impossibility for spectators to grasp their content. Together with the ominous soundtrack accompanying it, this invites to conceive the section as a depiction of the environment's temporality as it is perceived by the main character: excessively fast, disorienting, exhausting if not impossible to follow. The (static) frame concluding this section, in which the main character appears dominated by the hoof of a gigantic monster, seems to support this interpretation. In fact, it may be read as epitomising the eventual defeat of a character that is smashed by a temporality he cannot bear, and thus that is pushed back — in the subsequent section — to the isolation of his own and separate temporal condition.

Stepping inside the Movie, or Not

Based on the argument above, it seems safe to conclude that *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* succeeds in making the depressive world, and its temporal traits more specifically, *visible*. Making a world visible, however, is not the same as making it *accessible*. Roughly, a merely visible and a more radically accessible representation may be said to correspond to two modalities of engagement: an observational one, based on a primarily third-person and outdistanced positioning; and a more decisively close-up one, based on the adoption of a first-person and internal standpoint within the representation. When adopting the first modality, spectators would primarily *witness* a given experiential condition as lived by someone else; on the other hand, when adopting the second one, they would more radically feel *as if* they were living the same experiential condition themselves. Hence, making the world of depression accessible would mean enabling the spectators to quite literally 'step inside' the movie and to gain an experiential grasp of the pathology.

Whether this would be desirable or even necessary connects to a broad debate, which has witnessed an impressive revival in recent years within the field of virtual reality (VR) — and in relation to VR-based 'immersive journalism' more specifically.²⁸ The debate revolves around how to promote increased awareness and proactive behaviour with regard to disadvantaged categories of people, which are the typical objects of this type of journalism.

Most scholars involved in this debate believe that the audience must be brought as close as possible to the disadvantaged people in the representation; and they claim that VR is the most suitable medium to do so, due to its immersive and

²⁸ On virtual reality as a new kind of image and its aspects of experiential novelty, see Andrea Pinotti, 'Towards An-Iconology: the Image as Environment', *Screen*, 61.4, 2020, pp. 594–603. On immersive VR-based journalism more specifically, see Ana Luisa Sánchez Laws, 'Can Immersive Journalism Enhance Empathy?', *Digital Journalism*, 8.2 (2020), 213–28.

illusionistic potential and to its possibility to superimpose a diegetic character's point of view to that of the members of the audience.²⁹ Indeed, when wearing a VR headset, the spectator finds herself/himself *de facto* projected within the represented world, and possibly within a character's body. Hence, what VR can produce is basically a coincidence between the represented subjects' and the audience's respective experiences.

Before pushing the argument forward, a couple of clarifications are due. Indeed, both the concept of an observational mode of engagement and the idea just proposed of a coincidence of experiences, which would be exclusive of VR, are seemingly vulnerable to criticism.

To start with, the term 'observational' appears to evoke an interpretive view that has been severely criticised in the field of film studies: namely, the view that cinema is a purely visual experience.³⁰ However, the emphasis here is not much on the visual component of the act of 'observing', as on the connected idea of standing in front of something that remains at some distance. This is precisely what — from both a technical and a phenomenological standpoint — *does* happen in cinema, and *does not* happen in VR. Indeed, though avoiding reducing the experience of a given medium to its technical properties, one may not want to completely neglect them either. Even if choosing to adopt a phenomenological approach, or precisely *because* of this choice, one should always bear in mind the 'conditions of possibility' of a specific media experience.³¹ With regard to the precise case at stake here, it is hard to deny that the technical difference between a flat screen presenting images some metres away from the viewer and a VR headset literally placing the user within the images does not have any consequence at the level of the respective experiences.³²

The technical argument just proposed also helps to defend the view that in VR only it is possible to observe the precise coincidence between the represented subjects' and the audience's experience described above. Indeed, it is true that certain cinematographic solutions, most blatantly the point-of-view shot, seemingly achieve a similar result. However, even when a point-of-view shot is used, in cinema a physical distance between the screen and the audience

²⁹ Chris Milk, 'How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine' (2015), talk presented at TED2015 conference, <https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine> [accessed 18 August 2020]; Mel Slater and Maria V. Sanchez-Vives, 'Enhancing our Lives with Immersive Virtual Reality', *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 3 (2016), 74.

³⁰ See for instance Vivian Sobchack, 'What my Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh', in *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 53–84.

³¹ Which is a very different position compared to plain technical determinisms: the technical properties of a medium do not *determine* the experience of it. At the same time, they most likely *impact* on it.

³² The issue can also be read in terms of the presence or the absence of a frame (or *unframedness*); see for instance Andrea Pinotti, 'Towards An-Iconology: the Image as Environment'; and Pietro Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milano: Mimesis International, 2020).

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nonetheless remains; whereas inside a VR headset such distance is abolished, so that the audience is not only *in line with* the position of a given character, but literally *occupies* that position. Moreover, in cinema the movements of the point of view are still pre-established and delegated to an external ‘entity’ directing them (i.e. the movie’s discourse); whereas in VR the point of view is created as the representation unfolds by each spectator, who appropriates and actively directs it by means of her/his own movements. Lastly, and tackling the issue from a slightly different angle, cinema seems to struggle when it comes to maintaining a first-person perspective for extensive amounts of time. In fact, in cinema this solution is normally temporary, if not exceptional;³³ whereas in VR it is structural. And even in the rare cases in which cinema adopts a first-person perspective extensively — or even for the entire duration of a movie — it is difficult that it manages to calibrate it in a way that does not convey any sense of unnaturalness or claustrophobia.³⁴ Therefore, based on these observations, it appears reasonable to claim that the ability of producing a coincidence of experiences proper between a diegetic character and the members of the audience is in fact VR-specific.

Still, going back to the debate introduced above, some scholars have put forward compelling arguments against the usefulness of such coincidence. More specifically, they have pointed out that the latter may not necessarily translate into emotional or ideological proximity, that it may reveal uncomfortable, or even impossible.³⁵

³³ Ruggero Eugeni, ‘Il first person shot come forma simbolica: i dispositivi della soggettività nel panorama postcinematografico’, *Reti, Saperi, Linguaggi*, 2.2 (2013), 19–23.

³⁴ See for instance Vivian Sobchack’s discussion of Delmer Daves’ *Dark Passage* (1947), in ‘The Man Who Wasn’t There: the Production of Subjectivity in Delmer Daves’ *Dark Passage*’, in *Subjectivity: Filmic Representation and the Spectator’s Experience*, ed. by Dominique Chateau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011) pp. 69–83. In this regard, another example of an extended first-person perspective that possibly results in claustrophobia (and by the way aimed precisely at representing a condition of illness) is Julian Schnabel’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007). Examples of movies entirely shot in a first-person perspective — arguably with an even more problematic outcome — are *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Hardcore Henri* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015).

³⁵ Anna Caterina Dalmasso, ‘The Body as Virtual Frame: Performativity of the Image in Immersive Environments’, *Cinéma&Cie. International Film Studies Journal*, 19.32 (2019), 101–19; Robert Hassan, ‘Digitality, Virtual Reality and the “Empathy Machine”’, *Digital Journalism*, 8.2 (2020), 195–212; Andrea Pinotti, ‘Autopsia in 360°: Il rigor mortis dell’empatia nel fuori-cornice del virtuale’, *Fata Morgana*, 13.39 (2019), pp. 17–32. From a slightly different angle, other scholars have warned against the ethical and (bio)political risks implied in the peculiar nature of the experience of VR. According to Pasi Väliäho, for instance, those risks would derive precisely from the fact that the latter experience is less an ‘optical process’ and more a holistic experience that can be used in order ‘to modulate affect and to pattern behaviour or, in more general terms, to produce, manage, and channel psychic and somatic flows’. The author refers specifically to some problematic aspects of using VR in order to treat post-traumatic stress disorder among the members of the US army; Pasi Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2014), pp. 12, 68. Though important to monitor, such risks, and the fields of application of VR in which they may occur, seem quite remote from the scope of the present paper. Therefore, they will not be addressed in detail here.

This paper, though in no way aiming at settling such complex and long-debated issue, expresses the view that the effectiveness of placing the spectators inside a representation should not be overemphasised nor dogmatised. Indeed, that this is in itself a sufficient condition (or even the only condition) for improving the audience's attitude arguably sounds simplistic. Still, based as well on recent empirical data attesting the prosocial effects of this modality of engagement,³⁶ this paper proposes that it may be useful to check whether given media representations have the possibility of inducing a first-person and up-close experience of the state of affairs they depict. Such checking procedure can be applied precisely to *Son of the Lovely Capitalism*.

To this aim, it is necessary to go back to the main traits of depression expressed by the short movie and to evaluate whether the way they are represented appears suitable for making them not simply visible but also experientially accessible. These traits, it was argued, are: the idleness and apathy characterising depressed subjects; the desynchronisation between them and their environment; and the slowness or even stasis of depressive time.

Concerning the last one, it is quite straightforward to argue that the modality of representation may trigger in the spectators a first-person involvement. To start with, long shots and a slow-paced editing are mostly used, as anticipated, in so-called Slow Cinema, precisely because they are supposed to slow down the spectators' style of reception. This observation also links back to Väliaho's notion of cinematographic 'vitality affects' and the way they are conveyed by means of the temporal texture of the moving image. It appears reasonable to assume that, indeed, in this case the spectators do appropriate the slow temporality expressed by the movie. Interestingly, this point can be substantiated by recurring to some empirical evidence as well. Indeed, a recent study comparing different styles of editing and their effects on spectators found that a slow-paced style of editing, involving long shot durations, induces a greater sensation of 'time dragging' compared to faster-paced styles.³⁷ In the case of *Son of the Lovely Capitalism*, this would imply that the slow temporality of the movie — reflecting the slow temporality of depression — 'spreads' to spectators as well.

The argument gets trickier, though, in relation to the other traits recalled above. As for the character's idleness and apathy, a first-person engagement would require a first-person appropriation of these states. Since cinema — as it was argued — cannot create a literal overlapping between the spectators' and the character's positions, such appropriation must imply a 'bridging' mechanism

³⁶ Fernanda Herrera and others, 'Building Long-Term Empathy: A Large-Scale Comparison of Traditional and Virtual Reality Perspective-Taking', *PloS One*, 13.10 (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0204494>> [accessed 31 March 2021].

³⁷ Ruggero Eugeni and others, 'It Doesn't Seem_It, but It Is: A Neurofilmological Approach to the Subjective Experience of Moving-image Time', in *The Extended Theory of Cognitive Creativity*, ed. by Antonio Pennisi and Alessandra Falzone (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 243–65.

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connecting the two. In film studies, this mechanism has been accounted for in several different ways: identification, empathy, and (embodied) simulation are among the key-concepts that have been used to do so.³⁸

One of the most prominent models in this domain, based precisely on the notion of embodied simulation,³⁹ proposes that spectators spontaneously ‘mirror’ the characters’ bodily activity and emotional states, thus always getting to some extent a first-person experience of them. In this case as well, empirical evidence is already available.⁴⁰ However, the debate surrounding the idea of a first-person appropriation of a character’s experience still comprises unsolved issues and diverging positions.⁴¹ Hence, it appears unsafe to put forward any definite prediction with regard to the spectators’ reaction to the character’s idleness and apathy in *Son of the Lovely Capitalism*.

As for desynchronisation, the issue gets even more complicated. Indeed, if desynchronisation is meant as a state experienced by the character alone, experiencing it in first-person would lead back to the problem just discussed. However, the representation of desynchronisation is not based on a depiction of this character only. On the contrary, it brings on screen a multiplicity of additional elements, as the construct intrinsically depends on the presence of an environment and other people in relation to which he is not in synchrony. Therefore, the required appropriation process could be different from that required by individual behaviours and states. In this case, due to the complexity of the resulting representation, it may even be easier for spectators to grasp the idea of desynchronisation by means of a ‘bird’s eye’ view: hence, rather by adopting a third-person, observational stance.

In sum, while making it successfully visible, *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* seemingly has little chance of plunging spectators experientially into the character’s depressive condition. Thus, it may be worth exploring whether a VR-based alternative may be better suited for this goal.

A VR-based Alternative: VR Experience of Depression

When it comes to VR-based representations of depression, one salient example is *VR Experience of Depression*, created in 2018 by the Singapore-based group Vere360.⁴²

³⁸ Amy Coplan, ‘Empathy and Character Engagement’, in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 117–30.

³⁹ Vittorio Gallese, ‘Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4 (2005), 23–48.

⁴⁰ For a collection of commented empirical studies, see Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴¹ Jane Stadler, ‘Empathy in Film’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. by Heidi L. Maiborn (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 317–26.

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP28kc3DfGo&feature=emb_logo> [accessed 18 August 2020].

The protagonist of *VR Experience of Depression* is a young girl, who is depicted as she struggles with the pathology during a brief segment of her day.

The short VR movie starts in the girl's bedroom, showing her as she tries (unsuccessfully) to get up. The camera is placed slightly above the character's top of the head, so that her point of view coincides quite precisely with the spectators'. A diegetic voice — the girl's own voice — makes her thoughts available to the spectators. The girl first urges herself to move, then she tells herself she does not want to do so, and finally that she *cannot* do so. In these words and attitude, it is immediately possible to recognise the typically depressive fatigue, idleness, and hypersomnia.

An alarm rings, and the girl manages to sit upright. After turning off the alarm on her phone, the girl starts reading multiple text messages sent by people checking on her and inviting her to join different activities. As the girl goes through the messages, the spectators become aware of her heartbeat, which was present since the beginning of the movie but which now accelerates and increases in volume. The girl reacts to the invitations with anxiety and declines all of them. At the same time, however, she repeatedly says 'Sorry' in her mind. This arguably attests again to the character's idleness, but it also shows that tendency towards perceived guilt that characterises depression and its melancholic version; moreover, it can be interpreted as a first sign of desynchronisation, in terms of an unwillingness or incapability to join social events.

Desynchronisation, however, becomes most evident in the subsequent part of the movie. Here, a friend knocks on her door, bringing some notes from a class that the depressed girl has been skipping. Dropping out from institutional obligations like school is a blatant sign of severe desynchronisation. The friend proposes the depressed girl to study together sometimes, which triggers a new increase in the girl's heartbeat. Manifesting another typical trait of depression, i.e. hopelessness, the voice expressing her thoughts tells the depressed girl that there would be no point in studying, because she would fail anyway. In the absence of a reply, the friend leaves. The depressed girl's heartbeat slows down, but her occasion to get back 'in synch' with her peers has faded. The short VR movie ends. As it was highlighted throughout its description, *VR Experience of Depression* appropriately illustrates some of the main traits of (melancholic) depression. The most urgent question now, however, is whether it presents advantaged compared to *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* in making these traits also *accessible*.

The first clear difference between the two media options concerns the point of view strategy adopted. Indeed, *VR Experience of Depression* creates a superimposition between the character's and the spectators' perspective. In fact, the spectators are quite literally put in the character's shoes, thus inhabiting her depressive condition from within. According to the prevalent view in the debate summarised above, this would be exactly what affords an experiential grasp of such condition. The girl's lack of energy would be the spectators' lack of energy, her effortful movements would be the spectators' own movements.

Such experiential proximity appears to be reinforced by the auditory features of the representation. What is key in this regard is the diegetic internal voice expressing

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the main character's thoughts. The effect of this voice is twofold: on the one hand, it strengthens the perceptual sensation of being 'inside' the character's experience; on the other hand, at a more cognitive level, it contributes to make this experience more understandable. Indeed, seen from the outside and in the absence of any cue regarding its underlying motivations, the static and unresponsive behaviour of a depressed person may result puzzling or even annoying, as it may be the case in *Son of the Lovely Capitalism*.

In a sense bridging the point of view and the auditory choices made by *VR Experience of Depression*, another factor comes into play: the character's heartbeat. Auditory in principle but bearing very strong 'embodied' connotations, the heartbeat is appropriately combined with the first-person perspective expressed by the movie and its diegetic 'thought-track', thus marking a maximum degree of proximity to the character's experience. In this sense, *Son of the Lovely Capitalism's* ominous soundtrack is certainly more refined and evocative, but at the same time less effective communicatively.

It should be noted here that *VR Experience of Depression* and *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* are animated by slightly different intentions, which result in correspondingly different styles. Indeed, *Son of the Lovely Capitalism* manifests a primarily aesthetic intention, which it pursues at the expenses of the clarity of its message. Conversely, *VR Experience of Depression* is first and foremost devoted to a didactic goal. Thus, it adopts extremely plain and straightforward solutions, leaving aside any aesthetic ambition.

Selecting cinematographic and VR-based options with more similar intentions may allow a more balanced comparison. However, a medium-specific advantage of VR can be glimpsed already. Indeed, at least something of what *VR Experience of Depression* proposes in terms of the spectators' engagement would simply not be achievable by means of cinematographic techniques. Hence, if aiming at bringing spectators inside given representations, and inside particular subjective worlds, VR-based options like *VR Experience of Depression* may prove more suitable than their possible cinematographic counterparts.

Conclusion, and Further Directions

After presenting one of the possible conceptualisations of depression, the paper has discussed the respective ways in which a cinematographic and a VR-based representation of the pathology may engage non-affected spectators and convey to them some of the main traits of the depressive condition. The proposed VR-based option proved more effective than the cinematographic one in affording an up-close and first-person grasp of depression. However, the conclusions reached in this paper are subject to some limitations.

First, as anticipated, that accessing someone else's experience rather than simply witnessing it is desirable (or even necessary) is still uncertain in the current debate. Second, even in case such issue was settled, the view that was

proposed in this paper would still need further validation, as it does not yet apply to cinema or VR *in general*. Indeed, additional case studies should be taken into account as well, in order to cover different genres and domains.

For instance, one may note that this paper has focussed on short, fictional products only. The question therefore remains open as to what would be the effect of longer and/or non-fictional alternatives. In this sense, one cannot avoid thinking about the domain of documentary.⁴³ In this domain, according to the view expressed in this paper, VR would still maintain its media-specific advantages. However, could the bursting-in of ‘reality’ itself somehow constitute a game-changer? Moreover, could the supposed media-specific advantage of VR be contrasted by the cinematographic documentary’s more durable tradition, and thus its more mature stylistic and rhetoric tools? Or, more specifically, by the power of the director’s voice or framing, gently walking the audience through a specific interpretive path? These and other factors⁴⁴ may challenge the view that the ‘mere’ visibility of cinema is not enough in order to afford an appropriate understanding of given mental disorders, like depression. Such understanding, however, would still need to be better defined by means of a comparison with the more ‘embodied’ one supposedly afforded by (at least certain instances of) VR.

In sum, in spite of its openness, or perhaps thanks to it, the discussion on the prosocial effects of audiovisual media like cinema and VR is among the most lively and stimulating today. Hopefully, its developments will benefit people suffering from depression as well, by breaking down the walls that allegedly divide separated worlds, revealing their unexpected proximity.

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⁴³ See for instance Des O’Rawe, ‘The Politics of Observation: Documentary Film and Radical Psychiatry’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 11.1 (2019), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2019.1568791>> [accessed March 31 2021]. This paper comprises notable examples of documentary films aimed at representing life in mental health institutions during the instable times of the post-war revolution of psychiatry.

⁴⁴ Indeed, the possible differences between a documentary movie and the short, fictional options analysed in this paper are far from being limited to those suggested here. Just to make one additional example, the case studies discussed in this paper revolved around one main subject only, whereas documentary movies often depict large groups of individuals, both in their interactions and with specific focus on each subject (see again O’Rawe).