

The Carnal Specter: The Virtual Reality User Against Fragmentation

Giulia Rainoldi

giulia.rainoldi@kcl.ac.uk

Since Virtual Reality (VR) is characterised by the absence of the frame, the VR user has the impression of being immersed into the image, thus overcoming the distinction between spectacle and spectator. Therefore, the user becomes herself part of the work of art, exposing the limits of the Cartesian dualisms dominating the Western thought and raising critical questions about traditional aesthetic categories. Hence, my paper aims at pondering on the ontological status of the VR user. In opposition to Simon Penny's argument, which proposes that VR *fragments* the viewer into a physical body *versus* a virtual one, my research goal is to clarify that the participant's physical body and virtual body are inseparable and firmly intertwined. In order to do so, I analyse the VR documentary *Send me Home* (Evanisko, 2019). The point of departure is the acknowledgment that the VR user is invisible both to herself and to the other characters with whom she shares the virtual space. Following Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, I argue that this invisibility reveals the ontological status of the VR participant as a specter. However, my goal is to show that the spectrality of the user is not in contradiction with her carnality: on the contrary, even when one tries to bracket the body, the body remains vigilant, interpreting the world through its flesh. To conclude, then, I argue that the body is the condition of possibility for the user to feel immersed into the virtual world, and that, contrary to the fragmentation argument, physical body and virtual body cannot be thought as separate.

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Giulia Rainoldi

giulia.rainoldi@kcl.ac.uk

While Virtual Reality (VR) already emerged in the 19th century with the advent of the stereoscope, cinematic VR – that is, the use of the VR technology to produce immersive films – is much more recent, since the necessary high-power computers became affordable only about a decade ago¹. VR's primary aim is to illude the participant of being transported into a space that resembles reality so closely that it ensures the feeling of being *immersed* inside the image. To obtain this result, the participant experiences a computer-generated digital environment, shot by a 360-degree camera. On the one hand, such an environment is perceived through additional hardware devices such as the head-mounted device (HMD) (a stereoptical visor which hides the external world from sight); handheld controllers (with which the user assumes control of the computer); and a spatialized audio (with which the sound arrives as from a 3D space). On the other hand, to be believable, the space has to respond to the user's inputs with credible outputs. For example, by using a position tracker, computers map where the participant is looking, to then show her the portion of space in accordance with the direction of her gaze. To summarize, Sherman and Craig aptly define VR as «a medium composed of interactive computer simulations that sense the *participant's* position and actions and replace or augment the feedback to one or more senses, giving the feeling of being mentally immersed or present in the simulation (virtual world)»².

In addition to these technological features, Francesco Casetti and Andrea Pinotti add that, in VR, «[t]hree main axes appear crucial: unframedness, presentness,

¹ J. Mateer, *Directing for Cinematic Virtual Reality: How the Traditional Film Director's Craft Applies to Immersive Environments and Notions of Presence*, in "Journal of Media Practice", XVIII, 2017, pp. 14-25.

² W. R. Sherman and A. B. Craig, *Understanding Virtual Reality. Interface, Application, and Design*, Elsevier Science, San Francisco 2003, p. 13 [Original emphasis].

immediateness», and that the combination of these three features makes the participant believe to be immersed into the VR spectacle³. VR's *unframedness* is achieved through wearing the HMD, as the VR user's visual field is entirely saturated with the image. The result is that, as Lev Manovich suggests, «the screen disappears altogether»⁴: the visor exceeds the user's vision, and, consequently, representation and reality blur. In fact, as Meyer Schapiro puts it, the frame is «a non-mimetic element of the image-sign»⁵, with the essential role of distinguishing the out-of-frame (what the image is not: reality) from the inside-frame (what the image is: representation). Therefore, when the frame is missing, it is impossible to trace a border between what is image and what is reality, because there is no reference system. Furthermore, as Georg Simmel states, the picture's frame also has the role of «exclud[ing] all that surrounds it, and thus also the viewer as well»⁶. This means that, while the frame obliges the spectator to contemplate the image from a detached, frontal position, the absence of the frame implies that the VR user is not in front of the observed image anymore, nor detached from it. On the contrary, the participant feels to be inside the image, where the VR spectacle is taking place: this is why Pinotti and Casetti mention *presentness* as the second axis of VR. Consequently, the belief of being inside the image, coupled with the «extensive employment of highly sophisticated techniques», produces *immediateness*, for which the «medium opacity is blurred and concealed in many ways to the full advantage of what is directly exhibited as reality itself in the mediated environment»⁷. Such a transparent medium has the theoretical consequence of challenging the conventional contrapositions of representation *versus* reality, inside *versus* outside, seer *versus* seen. By piercing and penetrating the film's closed system, the user becomes herself part of the work of art, thus exposing the limits of the Cartesian dualisms dominating the Western thought and raising critical questions about traditional aesthetic categories. On a methodological note, this is also why, when talking about the VR user, I decided to

³ F. Casetti and A. Pinotti, *Post-cinema Ecology*, in D. Chateau and J. Moure (ed. by) *Post-cinema*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2020, p. 202.

⁴ L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, UK 2001, p. 97.

⁵ M. Schapiro, *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs*, in "Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art", VI/1, 1972-3, p. 17.

⁶ G. Simmel, *The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study*, in "Theory, Culture, Society", XI, 1994, p. 118.

⁷ E. Modena, A. Pinotti, S. Pirandello, *Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. New Tools for Art and Politics*, in "Paradigmi", XXXIX/1, 2021, p. 100.

avoid the terms *spectator* or *viewer*, since these designations would incorrectly imply that a spectator (the subject) watches a separated spectacle (the object).

Given this premise, my paper aims at pondering on the ontological status that the cinematic spectator assumes when she participates to a VR film. Some scholars, including Simon Penny, have argued against the ubiquity of the virtual user (who is both here in reality and there in virtuality, both spectacle and spectator) to renew the Cartesian dualisms, thus proposing that VR *fragments* the viewer. By splitting the user in two distinct parts, VR would separate the user's physical body – relegated to the physical world – and her *virtual body*⁸ – taken inside the VR documentary. In this respect, Penny states that

VR technology, far from including the body in a virtual environment, actively excludes the physical body, replacing it with a body image. One does not take one's body into VR. One leaves it at the door while the mind goes wandering, unhindered by a physical body, inhabiting an ethereal virtual body in pristine virtual space, itself a "pure" Platonic space, free of farts, dirt, and untidy bodily fluids⁹.

Here, Penny claims that VR imposes a marked distinction between body and mind, and his language is so radical that it evokes a certain religious terminology («ethereal», «pure»¹⁰), suggesting that VR dismisses the body as an obscene spectacle moved by terrene needs, while elevating the mind and its vision to a celestial Platonic hyperuranion. In opposition to Penny's claim that the VR user is fragmented, I will build on Jacques Derrida's notion of the *specter*¹¹ – which he discusses in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993) – to clarify how the VR user's physical and virtual body are inseparable, firmly intertwined because of their ontological status.

⁸ The VR user has the feeling of taking a *virtual body* inside the VR world, since the 360-degree camera is positioned at the eye-level, ensuring the perception of seeing the virtual world from a first-person perspective. However, if the user glances at the ground, she will soon discover that she has no visible feet and that the body that she feels she is using to move around the VR environment is actually fictitious and transparent.

⁹ S. Penny, *Consumer Culture and the Technological Imperative: The Artist Dataspace*, in S. Penny (ed. by) *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 1995, p. 62.

¹⁰ See note no. 18, *Ivi*, p. 70.

¹¹ I use the American term "specter" instead of the English "spectre" in accordance with Derrida's philosophical terminology in *Specters of Marx*.

The Invisible Virtual Body

Directed by Cassandra Evanisko and produced by Lonelyleap in 2019, *Send Me Home* is a VR short documentary which follows Rickey Jackson, a black man who served 39 years in jail for a murder he did not commit. Incarcerated at the age of 18, Jackson was sentenced to death and then to a life in prison. Finally exonerated in November 2014, he had to start his life from scratch: «it feels like I went to sleep at 18 and I woke up at 60», he says in the documentary. Evanisko's interest in Jackson's story sparked after seeing him presenting a TED Talk, during which Jackson recalled the personal value that the Cleveland Museum of Art had for him. After spending a great deal of his youth there, the museum became a sort of holy place to him, it was the space where he felt «more safe», the one which waited for him to come back from prison: «that's a friend»¹², Jackson bitterly ironizes. Therefore, Evanisko decided to shoot the first section of the documentary at the museum, to then focus on Jackson's new life – his new house, his family, his friends – while juxtaposing images of the prison (grey, desolated corridors and rooms, or fenced open spaces) to images of openness and freedom.

Toward the end, *Send Me Home* shows a party thrown at Jackson's house, gathering his family and friends. In the garden, two small groups of people occupy the space in front of the VR user: on the left, a group of ladies seated around a table chat, laugh, and eat; on the right, some children dry themselves off after a swim in the pool, all covered up with some towels, while some girls dance at the music. The atmosphere is cheerful and warm, conveying a sense of community and family, in opposition to the isolation of Jackson's prison's cell. No one seems to be cut out or put aside – no one apart from the VR user. The camera position (embodying where the user feels to be) does not help the process of interaction, since it is arranged to film the party from a frontal position, from the outside rather than in the middle of it. When commenting the VR documentary *Carne y Arena* (Iñárritu, 2017), Anna Caterina Dalmasso strikingly points out that «like ghosts, the bodies of the characters pass through the body of the experiencer, or, rather, the experiencer acts like a ghost among them»¹³. The same happens here: the VR

¹² Rickey Jackson, “Finding Freedom in an Art Museum,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=cCIhqDRQim4&feature=emb_title [last date of access: 19/06/2022].

¹³ A. C. Dalmasso, *The Body as Virtual Frame: Performativity of the Image in Immersive Environments*, in “Cinema&Cié. International Film Studies Journal”, ed. by E. Gipponi and J. Ymibe, XIX/32, 2019, p. 109.

participant feels like she is being ignored by Rickey Jackson, like she is transparent. She is behind Jackson's shoulders, so near to him that she can almost see the picture of the ladies on Jackson's mobile phone [see fig. 1], so near to him that they could have almost touched; and yet the user's presence is in no way acknowledged.



Figure 1: Proximity with Rickey Jackson.

Considering the immersive experience in which the user is engaged, this complete lack of interaction between her and the people who share the same space appears alienating. Bound to a two-dimensional cinematographic system, the lack of interaction betrays the presence of an insurmountable distance between the user – who now assumes again the form of a spectator – and the characters, restoring a solid fourth wall between them. As Tom Brown recalls, in two-dimensional cinema breaking the fourth wall «destroys the illusion of the story world and, by acknowledging the technology behind the cinema (i.e., the camera), distances us from the fiction»¹⁴. In VR, the same result is achieved by *not* breaking the fourth wall: by treating the user as absent from the story, the impression of immersion cracks, threatening the realism of VR's experiences. Precisely because VR aspires to achieve a total immersion and the elimination of the frame, the interaction between the user and the characters is crucial: in this sense, VR should emulate live theatre, where, according to Brown, «actors are fully present [...], [and] interaction (or inter-acknowledgement, at least) is sometimes expected/encouraged and/or a convention»¹⁵. But Rickey Jackson does not show any

¹⁴ T. Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, p. x.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. xii. On the metaphor of VR as theatre, see: J. M. Charlton and M. Moar, *VR and the Dramatic Theatre: Are They Fellow Creatures?*, in "International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media", XIV/2, 2018, pp. 187-198.

surprise when his proximity with the VR participant becomes inopportune, making the user wonder whether the carnal ontology that rules her physical body applies to her virtual body as well.

While out of VR, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty posits, «I feel myself looked at by things» because «my activity [of seeing] is equally passivity [of being seen]»¹⁶, here something different happens: is the user invisible to Jackson's eyes? The fact that, when looking at her own legs, torso, or arms, the VR user does not see her body, corroborates the hypothesis of having a transparent, rarefied body. However, she cannot assess whether she is invisible for the other virtual bodies without the help of a mirror, since one cannot «see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits»¹⁷ and the mirror is not only the technical device «which [can] make our entire body visible to us»¹⁸, but it also informs us of how the others see us. In his 1960 course at the Sorbonne University – collected afterwards in the paper *The Child's Relations with Others* – Merleau-Ponty follows the phases of the infant's development. Analysing the child's approach to the reflected self in the mirror, he finds that this encounter is conflictual and alienating, as

for him it is a problem first of understanding that the visual image of his body which he sees over there in the mirror is not himself, since he is not in the mirror but here, where he feels himself; and second, he must understand that, not being located there, in the mirror, but rather where he feels himself introceptively, he can nonetheless be seen by an external witness at the very place at which he feels himself to be and with the same visual appearance that he has from the mirror¹⁹.

The challenging encounter with the mirror determines a fundamental step for the child to develop consciousness of its visible side. To use Merleau-Ponty's words, the child «becomes capable of being a spectator of himself. Through the acquisition of the

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), ed. by C. Lefort, trans. by A. Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1968, p. 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* (1960), in M. Merleau-Ponty and J. Edie (ed. by) *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1964, p. 163.

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Child's Relations with Others* (1960), in M. Merleau-Ponty and J. Edie (ed. by) *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1964, p. 129.

specular image, the child notices that he is *visible*, for himself and for others»²⁰. Indeed, the child acknowledges a certain correspondence between the visible self and the visible other, a correspondence that Vivian Sobchack defined as a «homeomorphism»²¹: the other is instantiated by the same fleshy ontology and by the same seer-seen body.

In the case of *Send Me Home*, it is precisely when the user faces a mirror that she understands she inhabits an invisible virtual body, both for herself and for the other characters in VR. When invited to take a seat in Jackson's car, the camera/user is positioned in the front passenger seat: from this perspective the participant's reflection should naturally appear in the side mirror of the car, and yet, her reflection is missing, a spectral void lingers on its glass surface [see fig. 2].



Figure 2: The absence of the user's reflection in the mirror.

Now, what is a body which structurally eludes the mirror's reflection? Merleau-Ponty claims that «such a body [...] would be almost an adamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity»²². The consequence is that, as Dalmasso suggested, by escaping the mirror image the user's virtual body exhibits its *spectral* nature: in fact, following Derrida's account, the specter is that which «interrupts all specularities»²³, all optical reciprocities.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 136.

²¹ V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, p. 110.

²² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, cit., p. 163.

²³ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge, New York 1994, p. 6.

The VR User: A Carnal Specter

Derrida's work on specters represents the richest philosophical investigation on this issue. Karl Marx's definition of Communism as a specter haunting Europe in his *incipit* to *The Communist Manifesto* constitutes Derrida's point of departure: his research goal is that of investigating how Communism is spectral.²⁴ To do that, Derrida needs a general definition of the specter, for which he employs Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an eminent example. In the tragedy, which revolves around Hamlet's ethical conundrum as he cannot decide whether to avenge his dead father the King of Denmark, the character of the ghost plays a decisive role. Similarly to a *deus ex machina*, the specter appears on scene and reveals to Hamlet that his father was murdered by his uncle Claudius, now crowned as the new King²⁵.

It is important to notice that the invisible spectral apparition can come into sight because it is covered by an armour, as revealed by the exchange between Marcellus and Horatio. When the spirit briefly appears, Marcellus interrogates his friend: «Mar. Is it not like the king? / Hor. As thou art to thyself: / Such was the very armour he had on / When the ambitious Norway combated»²⁶. «Armed at points exactly, cap-a-pe»²⁷, continues Horatio when reporting the apparition to Hamlet, and Derrida builds on this detail to introduce what he calls *the visor effect*. The philosopher notices that, thanks to the ghost's «carapace» (his armour and helmet), «one see[s] nothing of the spectral body, but at the level of the visor and beneath the visor, [this armour] permits the so-called father to see»²⁸. The visor effect, then, establishes a unilateral direction of the gaze, for which the one who is looking (here, the ghost), remains nonetheless invisible (here, hidden by the armour). Elsewhere, in a conversation with Bernard Stiegler, Derrida comes back to the concept: «[t]he 'visor effect' in Hamlet, or what in any case I

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 2.

²⁵ These points come from Freddie Rokem's key-note paper "From Virtue to Virtuosity: Telling Hamlet's Story to an Unknown World," which he presented at the Lake Como Summer School "Aesthetics, Technique, and Emotion" on June 7th, 2021. See also F. Rokem, *Who's There? Hamlet as Philosopher and Thespian*, in F. Rokem, *Philosophers & Thespians: Thinking Performance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, pp. 59-86.

²⁶ W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in W. Shakespeare and W.J. Craig (ed. by) *Shakespeare Complete Works*, Oxford University Press, London 1996, p. 871.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 874.

²⁸ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 7.

have called this, is that, up or down, the king's helmet, Hamlet's father's helmet, reminds us that his gaze can see without being seen»²⁹.

A clear analogy emerges here, as one cannot help but notice that the same unilaterality constitutes the fundamental trait of the VR user's sight, who finds herself invisible to the other characters, while she is able to see them. Furthermore, and even more tantalizing, the visor effect finds a resonance in the HMD: the VR visor, as a helmet or a carapace, envelops the VR participant's eyes, masking the physical body as the armour does with the ghost's body, and allowing the user to see the virtual world, while remaining unseen. Mirroring what Tim Fiskem emphasises about the ghost's visor, that «[i]t is, paradoxically, the corporeality of this armour which renders the specter spectral, because by wrapping and concealing the ghost, the armour allows it to appear without revealing itself»³⁰, the same can be said about the HMD: it is this technical exoskeleton that renders the VR user a virtual apparition that sees without being seen.

Then, if the virtual body of the VR user can be described as a spectral apparition eluding the VR characters' gaze as a ghost liberated from carnality, one could contend that this argument actually coincides with Simon Penny's claim quoted above, as he states that «VR technology, far from including the body in a virtual environment, actively excludes the physical body, replacing it with a body image»³¹. On the contrary, in order to claim that the invisible user is nonetheless always bound to the flesh, let me come back to Derrida's analysis of the specter. The French philosopher is firm in arguing that «what distinguishes the specter or the *revenant* from the *spirit*, including the spirit in the sense of ghost in general, [...] [is] the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of someone»³². Derrida is then careful in distinguishing the spirit – the immaterial and ideal German *Geist* proper of the Hegelian system – from the *embodied specter*, a phenomenon that *sensibly* appears. Even without flesh and blood, the specter remains «a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a

²⁹ J. Derrida and B. Stiegler, *Spectrographies*, in M. del Pilar Blanco and E. Preen (ed. by), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, p. 42.

³⁰ T. Fiskem, *The Spectral Proletariat: The Politics of Hauntology in The Communist Manifesto*, in "Global Discourses", II/2, 2011, p. 20.

³¹ S. Penny, *Consumer Culture and the Technological Imperative: The Artist Dataspace*, cit., p. 62.

³² J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, cit., p. 6.

certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit»³³, an ephemeral presence that nonetheless can be sensed.

In other words, Derrida claims that spectrality is not in contradiction with carnality, contrary to what Penny stated. An analysis of the two bird's-eye views that Evanisko used in *Send me Home* can help further elaborate on this point. The first time, the camera is positioned on a drone, which flies over Jackson's neighbourhood [see fig. 3], while the second time the camera is fixed on a very high tripod, so that it is possible to glance at the prison from above: if one turns around, a mesmerizing sunset caresses the jail's wall, in a metaphorical oxymoron of light and dark, freedom and captivity.



Figure 3: A bird's-eye view of the neighbourhood.

This camera choice is evocative, and it assumes a sharp significance in the context of this documentary, but it remains anchored to a logic of two-dimensional filming. When the participant is immersed and spectrally embodied in the virtual world, those bird's-eye views do not obtain the hoped result: on the contrary, the camera informs the position in which the user feels to be – now flying, floating up in the air – and, consequently, it conveys a deep feeling of discomfort, once again threatening the VR realism. Jennifer Barker, whose phenomenological analysis of bodily responses in cinema is surgically precise, claims that, typically, «if [a] scene makes us uneasy, then, it is because it refuses any easy identification, either physical or emotional»³⁴. Likewise, *physical* identification is precluded here, since the unnatural feeling of being suspended in the sky collides with the obvious impossibility for humans to fly. Instead of being

³³ Ivi, p. 5.

³⁴ J. M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye. Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2009, p. 6.

positively surprised by the unexpected perspective that the camera proposes, the immediate response to these bird's-eye viewpoints is that of distancing from the VR experience because of the physical impossibility to familiarize with it. Barker's suggestion is that, instead of the term «discomforting», one could say that scenes like those are «discomfiting», – a term which, «with its root in the Latin *conficere*, “put together”»³⁵ – acutely conveys the idea of a dissonant incongruity between the bodily response and the cinematic experience.

This discrepancy between body and cinema experience, uncomfortably felt as something undesirable, shows that these two elements should not collide but go together. Sobchack's famous paper *What My Finger Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh* ponders on this issue. There, she coins the neologism «cinesthetic», which gathers together the terms «cinema», «synaesthesia» (the possibility to awaken one sense with the direct stimulation of another, that is, for example, hearing through vision), and «coenaesthesia» (one's ability to proprioceptively feel the body as one's own): the spectator is the convergence of these three elements, which are intrinsically indiscernible, since they all constitute the lived body.³⁶ This is to say that, even if VR encourages a form of spectral and thus disembodied vision (as Penny claimed), my sight is nonetheless always bound to my body, because my body is the very *condition of possibility* for my vision to be instantiated. Indeed, the discomfort felt during the sections filmed with the drone confirms that the spectral user cannot ignore her carnal dimension. Sobchack claims that «the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our body but because of our body. [...] Movies provoke “carnal thoughts” that ground and inform more conscious analysis»³⁷: even when the imagination tries to bracket the body, the body remains on alert, interpreting the world through its flesh. To say it otherwise, the living body can never suspend its fleshy dimension, and the mind is always grounded in carnality: therefore, the spectral user of VR can be ultimately defined as a *carnal specter*.

This argument, that the carnal body is the condition of possibility for what feels like a disembodied gaze, implies that the physical body is also the condition of possibility

³⁵ Ivi, p. 7.

³⁶ V. Sobchack, *What my Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh*, in V. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004, p. 67.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 60.

that allows the user to feel like being immersed into the virtual world. Contrary to Penny's fragmentation argument, this is to say that, if one brackets the body, if one separates the mind from by the body, immersion will not take place. To illustrate this last point, let me take into consideration the example of Achilles. A non-Homeric myth narrates Achilles' story: he is the hero who, immersed in the water of the Styx by his mother Thetis, becomes invulnerable. Though not quite: since Achilles had been held by Thetis from his heel, this part of his body did not touch the water, resulting in the hero's vulnerability and, eventually, death. Now, when considering Achilles's heel as the symbol of weakness *par excellence*, we tend to forget that, on the contrary, Achilles' heel was indeed the very possibility for him to be immersed in the Styx by his mother Thetis. This example has the merit of illustrating that we cannot think of the physical body as a burden from which one needs to be liberated in order to wander within VR, but, on the contrary, as the very means to achieve immersion. On the other hand, the other merit of Achilles' analogy is that it epitomizes the "both at the same time" structure of VR: the two worlds, virtual and physical, coexist, precisely as for Achilles, whose out-of-water portion of his body (his heel) and inside-water portion (the rest of his body) coexist. Such a structure, then, forces Achilles to acquire at the same time a different nature (here as a human, there as a deity) in different spaces (outside the water, inside the water). Likewise, the VR user is both spectacle and spectator, situated both here in reality and there in virtuality, thus instantiating a structure of ubiquity that maintains together body and mind.