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Mystical-Type Experience at The Virtual Reality Interface

*Technics, Aesthetics, and Theology in the Search
for Cosmic Connection*

In recently received event invitations and articles in online tech publications such as *Wired*, *Futurism* and *The Verge*,¹⁾ I have noticed an interesting pattern of a kind of “spiritual” attention being paid towards new digital immersive technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). I attended one such event (in which an acquaintance, a “ritual designer”, was involved) and my experience there deepened my interest in this field of what I would call *quasi-religious, mystical* or *metaphysical* themed experience in mixed reality. It has also raised some questions that I hope to address in this article regarding the specific modes of ontological reflection that technologies such as VR and AR might be capable of offering, and the cultural or existential needs or *crises* that they seem to address. Moreover, I am led to speculate on the value of such experiences — do new immersive technologies really offer an enhanced interface to sensations of cosmic or mystical connection, or do they, by attempting to manifest what is often understood as essentially ineffable, intangible, and not “actual” in a literal sense, actually in some ways demean the “authentic” mystical experience?

Named *Isness*, the specific experience I had was a communal guided “ritual” experience in VR, presented as a workshop within the biennial “Breaking Convention: Conference of Psychedelic Consciousness” at the University of Greenwich in London in 2019.²⁾

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- 1) Specific articles I explore later in this paper are: Jon Porter, ‘HTC Thinks Christians are VR’s Next Big Audience: From virtual to spiritual realities’, 16 December 2018, *The Verge*, <www.theverge.com/2018/12/16/18139134/htc-vive-studios-7-miracles-focus-virtual-reality-movie-raindance-film-festival>, [accessed 28 April 2020].
Kristen French, ‘This Pastor Is Putting His Faith in a Virtual Reality Church’, 2 February 2018, <www.wired.com/story/virtual-reality-church/>, [accessed 28 April 2020].
Kristin Houser, ‘Watch a Mother Reunite With Her Deceased Child in VR’, 7 February 2020, <futurism.com/watch-mother-reunion-deceased-child-vr>, [accessed 28 April 2020].
 - 2) See: <www.breakingconvention.co.uk/>, [accessed 30 June 2020].

Though I confess that didn't engage much with the conference itself and merely arrived for the VR experience, I could tell upon entering the bustling main hall of the venue that this was not a regular academic conference. Despite lectures and talks by such esteemed folk as government advisor Dr. David Nutt, this seemed to me to be an event directed primarily at practitioners of alternative therapies and self-confessed "psychonauts", and the trappings of this were evident in the tables laden with rainbow-coloured art, crystals and dreamcatchers. However, I located the room in which this VR experience took place, and despite a little tentative awkwardness, I had an experience that genuinely excited me.

After a brief introductory stretch and breathing exercise with the host who had greeted us, my group of four were led single-file and blindfolded into another room, where we were positioned within a space, our blindfolds removed and replaced with VR goggles. By the gentle guiding voice of a narrator (the familiar voice of my acquaintance) we were instructed how to interact with the virtual space, the other three participants, and with the molecular objects which appeared to float between us.³⁾ It was an incredibly calming, harmonious experience. At the end, about 20 minutes later, the goggles were removed and we sat on the floor to discuss what we had seen and felt. The other participants straight away likened their experience to drug-induced visions they had previously had with the shamanic ritual hallucinogen ayahuasca. I personally felt calm, focused, and yet excited to have had my first meaningfully *shared* VR experience. What was perhaps then of equal fascination was to find out that this pseudo-spiritual experience was in fact an academic research project led by Dr. David Glowacki, working out of the *Intangible Realities Laboratory* at the University of Bristol.⁴⁾

Despite this VR experience's empirical purpose, having been there myself, then having read the paper written about the research,⁵⁾ and considering its location at a psychedelic consciousness convention, it does seem to me (possibly contentiously) that it was intentionally designed to appeal primarily to a kind of new-age spirituality movement. Though I am sure that the researchers saw this audience, and this conference specifically, as fecund territory for an open-minded sample group for their experiment, they will no doubt have also had considered the topicality of the fresh cultural focus from groups invested in "Eastern philosophy, alternative therapy and contemplative studies" and indeed from some more established churches, in the technologies of virtual, augmented, and mixed reality.⁶⁾ For most of these groups, VR is seen to have potential as a means of attaining what are referred to as Mystical-Type Experiences (MTEs). Though I will go into greater detail on these later, MTEs are described by Glowacki et al. in short as "subjective experiences whose characteristics include a sense of connectedness, transcendence and ineffability".⁷⁾

In a culturally broader sense (beyond just new-age spiritualism), there is a recent attention paid not only to the attainment of higher states of consciousness at the crossover

3) A short video about the *Isness* experience can be viewed here: <vimeo.com/386402891>, [accessed 11 July 2020].

4) The website of which can be found at: <irl.itch.io/>, [accessed 11 July 2020].

5) David R. Glowacki, Mark D. Wonnacott, Rachel Freire, Becca R. Glowacki, Ella M. Gale, James E. Pike, Tiu de Haan, Mike Chatziapostolou, and Oussama Metatla, 'Isness: Using Multi-Person VR to Design Peak Mystical-Type Experiences Comparable to Psychedelics', arXiv:2002.00940 (2020).

6) See for instance the website: <embodiedphilosophy.org/>, [accessed 28 April 2020].

7) Glowacki et al., 'Isness', p. 1.

of religious and psychedelic experience, but also to other modes of liminal consciousness; engaging with pathologies such as psychosis and schizophrenia, with trauma and grief, and with Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) and Out-of-Body Experiences (OBEs). In this sense, immersive virtual technologies are being used to simulate a wide category of boundary states of consciousness that are not just *mystical* but more *metaphysical*, in the sense that they do not only aim for an exhilarating transcendence but also, in a more mundane therapeutic sense, for simply maintaining a conscious equilibrium through moments of cultural and psychological instability.

Of course, this attention to the ontology or indeed *theology* of VR is not entirely new. Michael Heim articulated these parameters in 1993 in his influential book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*:

Some observers, in their first efforts to explain the phenomenon to their contemporaries, pointed to drugs or sex or entertainment. But the profundity of the VR experience calls for something of a grander stature, something philosophical and religious. The time has come to grasp the phenomenon in its depth and scope. After all, we are talking about virtual “reality,” not fleeting hallucinations or cheap thrills. We are talking about a profound shift in the layers of human life and thought. We are talking about something metaphysical.⁸⁾

Heim acknowledges that VR is often first associated to the effects of hallucinatory drugs, and wishes to look beyond these trivial “cheap thrills” towards something considerably more *authentic* and profound — even religious. However, for Glowacki et al. and others, it is certainly not to demean VR to liken it to psychedelics, as both experiences are equally authentic in a phenomenological sense. They express an understanding that both VR and hallucinogens exist within a “broad continuum of virtual technologies” that include ritual practices, dreaming and meditation that can permit MTEs to occur without drugs or technological augmentation.⁹⁾ If what Heim is seeking is a lasting experience of profundity then this is something certainly achievable through hallucinatory states (as has been very well documented by figures such as Alexander Shulgin and Aldous Huxley). What is perhaps more questionable is whether anything approximating this same elevated, fully embodied state is achievable through VR alone. If drug-induced psychedelic experiences seem to emerge spontaneously from within, and are seen from our own mind’s eye, do immersive technologies not simply offer a rather more superficial *simulation* of profundity, represented and displayed before us, but created by someone else?

Glowacki et al.’s research on MTEs in virtual reality in fact directly models itself on relatively recent psychedelic drug research by Griffiths et al.¹⁰⁾ Interestingly, these experimental models were developed to use psychedelics for the therapeutic treatment of depression, addiction, and end-of-life anxiety, and yielded results not only in the successful

8) Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xvii.

9) Glowacki et al., ‘Isness’, p. 10.

10) Roland Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una McCann and Robert Jesse, ‘Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance’. *Psychopharmacology*, vol. 187, no. 3 (2006), pp. 268–283.

alleviation of symptoms but also in generating meaningful MTEs. The research in fact concluded that the two were directly correlated — the implication being that mystical experiences are no mere side effect of the treatment of pathology, but rather a major factor in the healing process.

This all leads me to ask what ontological status VR experiences should have, and through what disciplinary knowledge should we approach the kinds of meaningful experiences that VR affords? Is this a *psychological* issue of media affordances (deployed within the therapeutic pursuit of “self-help” or self-discovery); a *philosophical* issue of technological systems by which we can potentially enhance our understanding of our existence through technological prostheses; an *aesthetic* issue of how images or art stimulate and provoke metaphysical thought; or in fact a *theological* issue of quasi-religious experience? To address some of these questions, in this paper I shall consider some technical and aesthetic theory that seems pertinent to these issues of mystical or spiritual experience in media in general, before looking at some current trends in VR content creation to ask how their makers configure a techno-aesthetic appropriate to this category of experience. Finally, I move to consider some of the theological issues these trends raise, exploring the possibility of a techno-theology or “technoetics” for VR.

Technogenesis and Metaphysical Experience

In my book *The Digital Image and Reality: Affect, Metaphysics and Post-Cinema* I discussed “metaphysical experience” as something that is subtly altered through the influence of digital image technologies.¹¹⁾ I wrote about how digitally rendered experiences of plastic or malleable time, space, materiality and causality (in cinematic special effects and post-cinematic immersive environments) passively accumulate towards a profound ontological shift barely noticeable at a conscious level. Rather than experiencing revelatory or sublime *eureka* moments of insight that are recognised and acknowledged as such, we instead experience a slow, subconscious meshing together of small, low-key affective “frissons”, and without really realising it find ourselves within quite a different *structure of feeling* about the universe, the world, and our sense of self. Rather than framing this shift in a theological sense, I aimed for a rather more ambivalent ethical stance of a “mellow nihilism” or “weak metaphysics” (from philosopher Gianni Vattimo), and of a kind of playful speculative futurism.¹²⁾

I accounted for the digital shift in metaphysical thought by working with a philosophical concept of technogenesis, emerging from Heidegger’s essay *The Question Concerning Technology*¹³⁾ and through Bernard Stiegler’s notion of “grammatisation”,¹⁴⁾ in which we see humanity evolving alongside technology in a synergistic mode. Within my understand-

11) Daniel Strutt, *The Digital Image and Reality: Affect, Metaphysics and Post-Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

12) Gianni Vattimo, ‘From Utopia to Heterotopia’, in *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

13) Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977).

14) Bernard Stiegler, ‘Die Aufklärung in the age of Philosophical Engineering’, in M. Hildebrand et al. (eds.), *Digital Enlightenment Yearbook 2013* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2013).

ing, digital image technologies arrive after cinema (possibly as an extension or re-launch of the Deleuzian “Time-Image”) as the latest mode of the *enframing* of existence (or “Ges-tell” in Heidegger’s language).¹⁵⁾ Digital technologies capture and express reality as image according to their own technical capacities and automatisms, in a broad shift from photographic *representation* (in cinema) to the digital *simulation* of more complex and malleable realities.

For theorists such as Patricia Pisters, digital image technologies bring to the fore a specific category of image of mental landscapes — the *neuro-image* — as an apparent turn inwards and away from stable, observable realities.¹⁶⁾ Here we see images of psychosis and schizophrenia that reflect on the contemporary status of our consciousness of the world, and on our contemporary digital networked screen culture, which is itself schizophrenic. For other theorists such as D. N. Rodowick, the turn away from the indexicality of photographic media permits a turn to fantasy landscapes, which while retaining “reality markers” such as three-dimensional space and gravitational force, inexorably gravitate towards the stretching and breaking of physical realist principles.¹⁷⁾

In my own approach, I see these contortions of reality as ethical modes of ontological reflexivity — not dissolved within the detached relativity of multiple subjective perspectives of equal importance, but rather as a means of imagining ethical futures in a pragmatic if still playful sense. By aesthetically experimenting with the liminality of digitally rendered realities through digital image tools (e.g. the morph, the glitch, deepdream, etc.), we might start to intuit an immanent *plasticity* in all of our lived realities. This is to say that a reality that is understood to be simulated is one that can also be manipulated — not necessarily as the nightmarish *Matrix* of the film, but instead an empowering *indirect* realism that allows us to palpably feel the world as virtual and plastic.¹⁸⁾

Cosmic Connectedness

While in my work I have steered clear of religious or theological concepts even when considering films such as *Enter the Void* and *Source Code* that explicitly deal with concepts of soul and reincarnation, media theorist Laura Marks expertly draws together issues of faith, philosophy, and media technology. In her two latest books *Enfoldment and Infinity*¹⁹⁾ and *Hanan al-Cinema*²⁰⁾, as well as in much of her other recent writing, she works with Islamic theological concepts drawn from what were the “Dark Ages” of Western Europe but a time of great philosophical *illumination* in medieval Arabia and Persia, to reflect on a shift away from the figurative, direct realism of European art towards a *figural* and ab-

15) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).

16) Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

17) David N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).

18) Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

19) Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).

20) Laura U. Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

stract digital, algorithmic aesthetic.²¹⁾ As Marks most succinctly explains in her article “Thinking Like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media”, due to the Qur’an forbidding the representation of actual living forms as blasphemy, a powerfully abstract expression of divinity developed through material media such as carpets, wood carving, tiles, and calligraphy, amongst others.²²⁾

By returning to pre-modern spiritual philosophies “of an enchanted world, the world before the great disenchantment of the enlightenment”, Marks speaks to both a concept and an embodied aesthetic of the harmonious interconnectedness of body, world, and cosmos that was later overridden or “repressed” by the Western rationalist enlightenment.²³⁾ Woven carpets function as a useful metaphor for this kind of thought: “thinking like a carpet may help us model, with our thoughts and our bodies, the relationships between points and the universe.”²⁴⁾ Although perhaps an obvious truth, this mode of thought highlights the fact that no mediated image, nor any image-generating hardware or software, is independent of energies, processes, and underlying dimensions of the universe. This points to the *indirect realist* observation that no image is ever simply a representation of something but is a manifestation of complex connected forces, and thus constitutes its own essential microcosm. In addition, each act of embodied sensual perception creates the image anew in its affective dimension — a momentary extraction and materialisation of form from a fluctuation of cosmic energies. In her book chapter “Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics” from 2014, she describes mediation in general as a process of *unfolding* the infinite (the cosmic) into material existence.

Mediation is not a block to the infinite but a fold between the infinite and our perception [...] Media does not destroy nature but is part of it; it is an extra set of folds, a surface complication, codifying and altering nature, and contributing its own materiality.²⁵⁾

Connecting Deleuze and Guattari’s *actuality* and *virtuality* to Islamic concepts of manifest and latent states (*zahir* and *batin*, respectively), the technological medium that shows us reality does not simply represent it as an image but rather unfolds it and actualises it for our sensory faculties from an underlying immanent and infinite virtuality. Images do not represent the infinite but rather conjure their own material realities as manifestations of

21) Drawing on Deleuze’s idea of figural aesthetics from *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

22) In Marks’ words, *living forms* include “anything with a face, anything with a body, and sometimes even with an outline”. Laura U. Marks, ‘Thinking Like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media’, *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, vol. 7 (2013), p. 9.

23) Laura U. Marks, ‘Rethinking Digital Ideologies: In Conversation with Laura Marks’, Interview with Max Breakenridge. 16th December 2019, University of Glasgow School of Culture & Creative Arts. Online: <cca.academicblogs.co.uk/rethinking-digital-ideologies-in-conversation-with-laura-marks/>, [accessed April 2020].

24) Marks, ‘Thinking Like a Carpet’, p. 19.

25) Laura U. Marks, ‘Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics, or the Unthought at the Heart of Wood’, in R. Gaafar and M. Schulz (eds.), *Technology and Desire: The Transgressive Art of Moving Images* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), p. 159.

an underlying immanence. Cultivating a “cosmic perception”, then, is to sense and perceive the infinite in and through images.²⁶⁾

Of course, not all images cultivate or encourage this mode of perception, or act effectively as interfaces to the infinite. Figurative art represents the recognisable forms of life as they appear in ordinary perception, often mummified and static. For Marks, carpets, like other forms of Islamic art, are effective exactly because they are *not permitted* to be figurative, instead using organic or cosmic forms:

These carpets depict a mise-en-abîme of worlds within worlds. Carpet scholars sometimes suggest that the center or the deepest layer represents heaven; often the motifs become increasingly refined as they approach the “divine” center. A mystical view could see these carpets as lessons that all of reality is illusory, but that the universe has an underlying Structure.²⁷⁾

Marks has on many occasions described this same cosmic aesthetic unfolding in new media art. In Chapter 10 of *Enfoldment and Infinity* she compares Caucasian carpets to “genetic algorithms” (drawing on the concepts of evolutionary biology as they have been taken up by computer science) that do not imitate the *forms* of life but instead the *processes* of life. She suggests that though programmed by discrete sets of rules and parameters, through time these carpet designs evolve and “mutate” with a kind of non-organic but self-organising creative life-force.²⁸⁾

These strange forms show that the new arises not from laws but from chance, creativity, and individual actions that could not be foreseen. If there is religion here, it is a Gnostic one, imagining a God who does not make laws but just observes the system as it unfolds, curious to see what we will do next.²⁹⁾

In new work, Marks articulates a concept of a specific kind of “talisman-image”, a media form that like a magical talisman explicitly and effectively folds cosmic energies to our advantage, and “connects the divine source to the human recipient”.³⁰⁾ She describes:

With the Neoplatonist model of a well-organised cosmos established, practices emerged to intervene in its order by folding it differently: astrology, alchemy, and magic, in particular the making of talismans. The talisman-image intervenes in the order of the cosmos by folding it and drawing the folded points into contact with the body.³¹⁾

26) Marks, ‘Rethinking Digital Ideologies’.

27) Marks, ‘Thinking Like a Carpet’, p. 15.

28) Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, pp. 305–315.

29) Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, p. 315.

30) Laura U. Marks, ‘Talisman-images: from the cosmos to your body’ in Radek Przedpełski and Steven Elliot Wilmer (eds.), *Deleuze and Arts of Multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 28 [forthcoming].

31) Marks, ‘Talisman-images: from the cosmos to your body’, p. 6.

Although Marks does not believe in actual magical powers, she aims to describe how this kind of image “appeals to interconnected cosmic levels”, “cultivates awareness of these interconnections”, and makes it possible “to cultivate ourselves as microcosms”.³²⁾

Whilst saying that she will save a detailed investigation of talismanic media content for later writings, Marks does nonetheless briefly speak of a *talismanic cinema* that shows how the universe is connected, and which “activate sympathy among entities at different levels of the cosmos”. This raises questions about how we might then imagine a form of talismanic VR content. Could VR, even more so than cinema, be an especially effective interface to the infinite?

Interfocality and Virtual Reality

Although Laura Marks flirts with virtual reality in chapter 9 of her *Enfoldment and Infinity*, “Herat, 1 487: Early Virtual Reality”, she is really dealing with a metaphor of virtuality for Islamic Art (in the Deleuzian sense) rather than the actual technical interface of the VR apparatus. To now move to discuss VR as a discrete technical form in its own right, with its own specific content, I find it useful to draw on the theory of interface and interfocality from Korean film scholar Seung-hoon Jeong. Serving as a useful bridge between cinematic concepts and digital forms, Jeong’s concept of interface draws together the philosophy of technology (or *technics*) and image theory in a way that allows us to think about the specificity of VR as an interface which generates a particular kind of ontological reflexivity.

In his *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media*, Jeong suggests that the cinematic image was originally and from its birth about a flickering tension between actual and virtual modes of perception. In rethinking and reconceptualising cinematic form and aesthetics through the new media metaphor of the interface, he creatively appropriates a concept of interfocality to frame the cinematic concept of *suture* as a flexible and creative point of contact with media content and technological forms. He states: “Suture is no longer a suspicious ideological mechanism, but a productive agency for renewing film theory.”³³⁾ For Jeong, suturing techniques, along with *de-suturing* breaks, have from the beginning of cinema worked in harmony to creatively play with our consciousness of the reality status of images. They work together to imply a tension at the interface between direct and indirect realist modes of embodied perception, forcing us — our body, our subjectivity — “back-in-the-room”. De-suturing moments force an acknowledgment of the virtuality of the image, or at least its highly contingent reality status. The interface is thus a space of continual suture and de-suture, unfolding and enfoldment, within fluctuating realities, and where we can creatively negotiate our own subjectivity within virtual cinematic dimensions.

32) Marks, ‘Talisman-images: from the cosmos to your body’, p. 34.

33) Seung-hoon Jeong, *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 15.

Interfaciality proliferates in self-reflexive and self-encompassing ways between the strictly material interface, the fantasy interfacing with the extradiegetic outside, and the film as a fantastic interface installed in our social reality. The specific interface per se then sutures one shot to another, and thereby desutures the shot/reverse-shot structure; fantasy sutures the character into the intradiegetic outside, thereby desuturing the diegetic inside; film sutures the spectator into the entire diegesis, thereby desuturing one's sense of reality of reality boundary.³⁴⁾

Jeong ends up describing a system of “Chinese boxes of interfaciality” offering connection between “different dimensions of the image (diegesis, enunciation) or of the subject (reality, the Real)”.³⁵⁾

Though articulating his theory initially through the cinematic image, by using the new media “interface” as an expansive metaphor Jeong is most literally discussing digital media forms. As analogue film offered up a specific and limited technical apparatus for suturing and de-suturing processes (the edit, the camera, the projector, film effects), the technical interfaces of computational hardware and software offer up a wholly different, considerably more complex, and ontologically distinct set of image processes.

Jeong describes how the image-interface in digital forms offers its own layered dynamics of subjectivity and reality: cultural and historical content becomes re-organised from classical cinematic linear narrative and diegetic forms into virtual database worlds such as YouTube (that he defines as *cultural* interfaces); screens become permeable membranes and immersive interactive spaces that complexify the distance of cinematic interface (*perceptual* interfaces); and the body is now a sensory interface in and of itself, without which the “image” does not manifest or have any independent existence (*embodied* interfaces).³⁶⁾ Each image offers different dimensions of interfaciality that impact on connecting consciousness to reality in specifically digital modes. On VR specifically, Jeong describes the increasingly active user-subject:

No longer remaining a dreamer of a fantasy world simulated on a head-mounted display, the VR user now becomes a navigator whose embodied agency, motor intentionality and tactility actualises access to a real space, a “space full of information that can be activated, revealed, reorganised and recombined” as he navigates it. The turn is clear: from optic observation to haptic operation, from digital imagery to digit-using subjectivity, from passive reaction to active production.³⁷⁾

Noting the increased materiality of this “real space”, VR does seem, for Jeong, to bring new dynamics of intentionality and agency. In principle, this seems like increasingly productive agency as a kind of creative empowerment, but at the same time, the interface is in a way *less* virtual that cinema was — more actual, more real, more tangible. The question then becomes: could VR in its increased immersivity and complexity potentially serve as

34) *Ibid.*, p. 49.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

36) *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

37) *Ibid.*, p. 210 (quoting Mark Hansen).

a better medium for ontological reflexivity — as an enhanced “interface to the infinite” in Marks’ words — or does it, by making space, objects, bodies, and information more material and *operational*, actually foreclose virtuality? Is there in fact something about “remaining a dreamer of a fantasy world” that is potentially lost in VR?

Ultimately broadening out beyond material technological interfaces, Jeong’s theory, much like Marks’, moves beyond the image-as-representation altogether to offer a broader ontology of images, of aesthetic experience, and of existence in general. He asserts that in fact *all experience is interface*, such that being embodied and embedded in the world depends fundamentally on *virtual* interfacial processes with manifested realities. It is, Joeng says, simply, “connectedness”.³⁸⁾

In this sense, interfaciality could become merely another abstract and relativistic catch-all term for phenomenological experience; a productive new-media metaphor that serves for all aspects of reality and subjectivity. However, with enough technical and medium specificity the term can pivot to the ontological, to processes and moments of becoming or unfolding at distinct technological interfaces. Jeong’s interfaciality, as woven together with Stiegler’s understanding of technical grammatisation and Deleuze’s principles of a “time-image” cinema, allows us to think about an ontological paradigm shift that accompanies digitisation, and to speak of ontologies of digital interfaces in both specific forms (from discrete simulation and 3D technologies to VR) and yet in terms which are generalisable to a whole generation of new-media users.

VR as Mystical-Type Experience: Enchantment, or Connectedness?

Moving through the abstract technical systems of Stiegler, to a general image philosophy through Marks, and then to the specificity of cinematic and digital image interfaces through Jeong, we can perhaps arrive at VR technology proper with a functional theoretical backdrop. This is to see VR as an enhanced technical interface that potentially generates its own emergent dynamic relationship of our subjectivity with realities and their underlying virtual or informational basis. Understanding then that *all* media forms, from wood, to carpet, to cinema, generate material realities as interfaces to the infinite (which is really to say that all images generate their own ontology), we might be encouraged to ask what is so special about VR? What are the specific functionalities or *affordances* of virtual reality that inspire the conviction (or *faith*) amongst some that this technical form is especially well adapted to offer us an elevated mystical-type experience? And what, then, are the specific affordances of VR as relative to those of hallucinogenic drugs (which lead Heim to believe VR to be even more real and profound than any drug experience), or indeed to those of religious ritual?³⁹⁾

38) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

39) Affordances here are understood first through James J. Gibson’s original 1986 ecological definition, as “what the environment provides or furnishes the animal” [James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1986)] and then through Donald Norman’s revision of the concept as the discoverability of an object or system’s “action possibilities” — as a question of technical or interface design [Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded Edition, 2nd ed.* (New York: Basic Books, 2013)].

It is perhaps necessary to look closer at what actually qualifies as a subjective MTE in any context, be it induced by psychoactive drug, religious ritual, or media interface. As Glowacki et al. describe, a solid empirical framework for measuring mystical experience was developed by Ralph Hood in 1975 within the realm of the phenomenology of religiosity and spirituality.⁴⁰ Called the “M Scale”, it was designed to cluster and measure self-reported descriptions of a variety of mystical-type experiences for comparison and correlation. This scale was itself based on an earlier categorisation of specifically *religious* experience from 1960 by perennialist philosopher⁴¹ Walter Stace⁴², which Hood organised in three categories of experience as such:

Introvertive mysticism

- timelessness and spacelessness (“*I have had an experience which was both timeless and spaceless*”)
- ego loss (“*I have had an experience in which something greater than myself seemed to absorb me*”)
- ineffability (“*I have had an experience which cannot be expressed in words*”)

Extrovertive mysticism

- inner subjectivity (“*I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious*”)
- unity (“*I have had an experience in which I realized the oneness of myself with all things*”)

Interpretation

- positive affect (“*I have experienced profound joy*”)
- sacredness (“*I have had an experience which I knew to be sacred*”)
- noetic quality (“*I have had an experience in which a new view of reality was revealed to me*”)⁴³)

Glowacki et al. explain how Griffiths et al. in 2006 then first used Hood’s M-scale to measure experience under the influence of high doses of psilocybin.⁴⁴ To do this, they deliberately eliminated overt reference to God or a godlike sentience, secularising the

40) Ralph W. Hood, ‘The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 14 (1975), pp. 29–41.

41) The perennialist position towards mysticism taken by Hood, Stace and others, such as William James and Aldous Huxley, seeks a universal account of mystical experience with an assumption that all such practices are in pursuit of a single or identical type of metaphysical truth. This school of thought sees that there are core similarities to mystical experience across religions, cultures and eras. This is disputed by Katz (1978), who states that Stace’s typology is reductive of the complexities and varieties of mystical experience, and notes that Stace supposes that superficial similarities in the way experiences are described implies a similarity in experience. According to Katz, a closer examination of context reveals that those experiences are not in fact identical. Steven T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’, in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978).

42) Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960).

43) Source: Research Centre for Biographical Studies in Contemporary Religion, Bielefeld University. Online: <[www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/theologie/forschung/religionsforschung/forschung/streib/methoden/mysticismscale.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/theologie/forschung/religionsforschung/forschung/streib/methoden/mysticismscale.html)>, [accessed 28 April 2020].

44) Griffiths et al., ‘Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences’.

mystical-type experience into notions of wellbeing, meaningful insight, and positive affect.⁴⁵⁾ Griffiths' "Mystical Experience Questionnaire" (the MEQ30) was thus simplified and restructured again with a streamlined four-category structure:

It is designed to capture a participant's feeling that their experience: (1) is ineffable; (2) transcends typical experiences of space and time; (3) is mystical (i.e., produces senses of internal/external unity, connectedness, sacredness, and noetic qualities); and (4) produces a positive mood.⁴⁶⁾

Glowacki et al. then make the *additional* shift to apply these categorisations of MTEs to experiences within VR. He takes the four above categories — I, T, M, P — as measures of MTEs, and charts them on graphs with supporting descriptive "indicative quotations" as a qualitative measure of these categories of experience.

I cannot help but reflect on these categories of "mystical-type" experience relative to my own consideration of "metaphysical" experience (framed by a philosophy of technogenesis). I discussed metaphysics in terms of our embodied understanding and awareness of unobservable but real structures of existence, albeit sometimes very abstract laws of speculative and theoretical physics such as quantum physics, string theory, and dark matter. I suggested that the way that these *virtual* concepts and forces (which are often as much a matter of philosophical reflection as of empirical science) are mediated, shown, or actualised in a technical interface, affects the embodied intuition of our bodies in time, space, material reality or within multiple dimensions. To cultivate a sense of the structure of the universe and our place within it seems clearly related to "mystical experience" as defined thus far. The suspension or transcendence of space and time, ineffability, positive affect, noetic quality, unity, and reflection on subjectivity and ego all seem also within the realm of metaphysical experience.⁴⁷⁾ But this raises the question of what is in fact specifically *mystical* about these experiences. Why entertain the use of what are really *theological* definitions of mystical experience rather than considering more secular scientific concepts of the organisation of the universe?⁴⁸⁾

Perhaps we really need to ask if we are truly in the realm of theology, or instead of the much more tangible and technical concepts of media affordances? Interestingly, Glowacki et al., like Griffiths et al. before them, steer clear of explicitly religious concepts in their article. And yet the context of my experience of *Isness* was very clearly and deliberately spiritual, with my co-participants already highly invested in both the vocabulary and the stated goal of attaining higher states of consciousness (this issue of sample selection is in fact addressed by Glowacki, as I will discuss later).

In comparison, Laura Marks really does reflect on issues of God and faith in her work,

45) Glowacki et al., 'Isness', p. 3.

46) Glowacki et al., 'Isness', p. 3.

47) I perhaps also deliberately secularised these experiences by framing them within the realms of scientific knowledge of the universe as explored through science fiction and fantasy.

48) This perennialist account of *mystical* experience as actually being more about *metaphysical* intuition is also the position taken by Huston Smith in his article 'Is There a Perennial Philosophy?', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 55, no. 3 (1987), pp. 553–566.

talking specifically about experience of the infinite and the cosmic through “enchanted” and magical Islamic theology and philosophy. It is interesting to think about how she expertly bridges this gap between metaphysical and mystical experience through an *aesthetic* analysis. It feels like a deep consideration of aesthetics is often the missing component in both overly *technical* (focussing only on the structure or apparatus) and overly *mystical* (focussing only on phenomenological meaningfulness) accounts of metaphysical experience, and could offer a bridge, or point of triangulation, between them. This is because we can speak of a digital aesthetics as much as we can speak of a religious or sacred aesthetic, with both of these approaches permitting discussion of intellectually distanced concepts as well as the more intimate affective and perceptual aspects of the objects themselves. Aesthetics accounts for the way we approach such experiences within a pre-existing world-view that contextualises the “direct” experience we have just as much as the actual technical interface and its contents, and thus perhaps can go some way to explaining the kinds of cultural and subjective investments people have in these types of media.⁴⁹⁾

Mystical and Metaphysical Aesthetics

To discuss the aesthetics of interfaces and metaphysics in an abstract sense, we have to eventually also talk about the actual *tangible* content of these VR experiences that I have described. I would thus like to quickly survey what kinds of VR content are out there currently, to ask how they relate to a cosmic affective aesthetics of “unfolding the infinite” at the digital interface.

However, we should first ask: what is the aesthetic content of the *original* categories of MTE — that of the divine, or of God him/herself — otherwise thought of as the *generic* characteristic of religious mystical experience (that we are, ultimately, comparing a VR style MTE to)? In doing this, we should acknowledge that differing religions are perhaps marked by their distinct cultural and aesthetic approaches to the sacred, the mystical, and the afterlife. Not only do different religious traditions have discrete vocabularies and symbolic forms of God, they have a kind of *political* aesthetic of the role of faith and religion in a well-functioning society. Without delving too deeply into this complex of cultural-theological relations (though I do return to this below), we could perhaps broadly say that Judeo-Christian religion is marked by mystical categories of experiences that typically include hearing the voice of God, angelic or sublime visions, and the witnessing of miracles. Alternatively, as Laura Marks describes in “thinking like a carpet”, in Islamic aniconism divinity is represented and experienced indirectly through a rather more abstract sacred aesthetic of algorithmic complexity.

Then we could ask: what is the aesthetic content of drug-induced and hallucinogenic MTEs? While this is, to an extent, unique to the user, ritual-use shamanic drugs such as ayahuasca and peyote are known for inducing very distinctive visions and spectacular

49) One other philosopher who approaches an aesthetic theory of mystical experience is Kai-man Kwan, who describes a complexity of holistic factors involved in religious experience that undermines any scientific approach of “narrow empiricism”. Kai-man Kwan, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism* (London: Continuum, 2011).

imagery of nature and connection — intricate and brightly coloured designs that pulse with light and energy. People then often describe encountering intelligent entities as guides, in the form of animals, plants, and other humans, or gods, aliens, hybrids, and beings that could not be described with words.⁵⁰ Similarly, ketamine users (at very high doses) have described communion with extraterrestrial beings and computers (for the “psychonaut” John C. Lilly), or with nature and states of transcendent being — leading one woman, Marcia Moore (the “priestess”), to dub the drug the “aesthetic anaesthetic” and later her “Goddess Ketamine”.⁵¹ However, ketamine seems to have a very different sensory aesthetic to ayahuasca, inducing less explicitly visual hallucinations as internal images, and rather distortions or exaggerations of perception (especially auditory).

Arriving to MTEs at the VR interface, we might simply expect the content and aesthetic of metaphysical or mystical experience in this medium to straightforwardly mimic or duplicate these kinds of religious and quasi-religious aesthetic experiences, hoping that a “mystical-type” feeling of transcendence would simply fall in behind these re-creations. This is, to an extent, exactly what most producers of this style of VR content actually seem to be doing. However, there is an immediate distinction to be made between the re-presentation of this in “old” media forms and its *simulation* in VR-type interfaces — adding dimensions of operability and agency that could be argued to be lacking even in religious or drug-induced experience. Religious and hallucinogenic MTEs, while fully embodied and overwhelming, seem to be more usually *witnessed* as visions rather than being consciously controlled by the user or interactive in any lucid dreaming sense.⁵² This leads me to now consider the actual MTE content in current circulation on VR platforms to see exactly how it either conforms or deviates from the types described thus far. I then aim to ask if they offer a potentially enhanced or more profound mystical experience or its opposite — a neutered virtuality.

We could start perhaps by describing *Mutator VR*, a “generative art” experience created by my colleague at Goldsmiths, Prof. William Latham. This installation deploys an almost explicitly hallucinogenic aesthetic in the mould of the ayahuasca or DMT experience — offering brightly coloured organic shapes with their stated aesthetic origins in both rave culture and fractal psychedelia. While “futuristic” and “alien” in one sense, this is, as Latham says himself, also nostalgic for a 1980s aesthetic vision of VR that was imagined in movies like *Tron* and *Lawnmower Man*, only now finally fully manifested due to

50) See for instance: <psychedelictimes.com/the-universal-archetypes-of-ayahuasca-dreams-and-making-sense-of-your-own-visions/>, [accessed 11 July 2020].

51) As discussed in chapter two of Karl Jansen’s *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities*, Marcia Moore understood her experience through Hinduist theological concepts: ‘The highest state was said to be the cosmic matrix, out of which she forms a new word “cosmatrix”, described as a pure state of transcendent being. The cosmatrix was equated with *Sat*, which Moore described as “the first emanations from the power source which the Hindus call *Brahman*” (the fundamental divine energy source from which everything is said to be derived).’ Karl L.R. Jansen, *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities* (Sarasota, FL: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, [MAPS], 2000), p. 52.

52) A cinematic example of this is the hallucinogenic DMT sequence at the beginning of the film *Enter the Void* that is widely regarded as authentic, and which is based closely on the director’s own experience. Ian Failes. “Enter the Void Made by FX”. 28th December 2010, FXGuide, <www.fxguide.com/feature/enter_the_void_made_by_fx/>, [accessed 28 April 2020].



Mutator VR

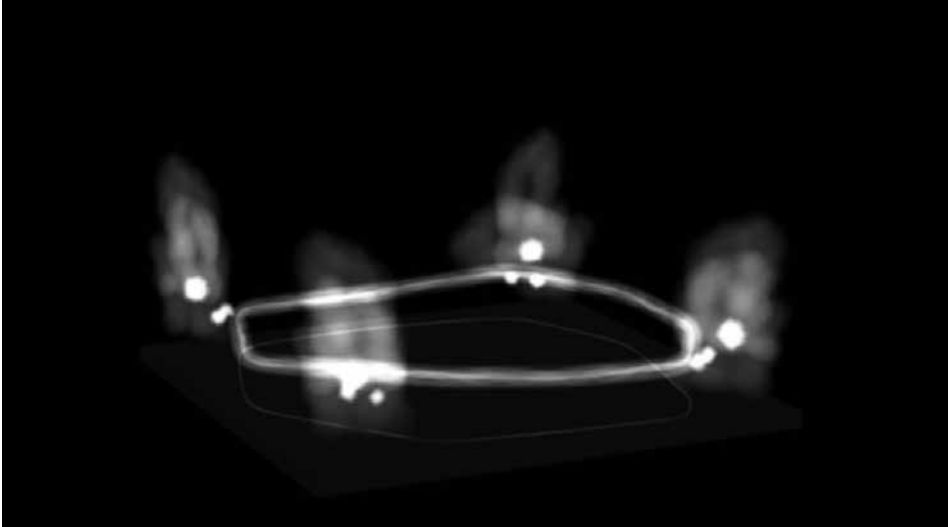
the huge processing power available to us. However, while engaging with a “rave” aesthetic that incorporates positive affects of happiness, togetherness, and ecstasy, *Mutator VR* makes no explicit claim to offer a spiritual or mystical-type experience, and its context (other than occasionally in the nightclub) is in the art gallery or technical showcase, and not for a psychedelic spirituality audience.

It was, however, in exactly the environment of pseudo- or *alternative* spirituality that I found *Isness*. Despite this, what initially distinguished *Isness* for me was not the context but the fact that it was a communal experience. As Glowacki et al. describe:

We developed *Isness* as a fork of the open-source *Narupa* project, a multi-person room-scale VR framework originally designed to enable groups of people to simultaneously cohabit real-time scientific simulation environments where they can reach out and touch molecular objects, manipulating rigorous real-time simulations of their dynamics.⁵³⁾

In the VR simulation of *Isness*, we found ourselves in a dark space that looked like a valley with distant hazy mountains surrounding us. Using a glove controller (called a “mudra” glove by the creators), we were guided by the narrator through a series of tasks which involved interaction with our own bodies (visualised as glowing forms), with the other participants, and then with the “molecular objects” mentioned above, which appeared as a floating string of geometrically connected floating points and lines (our task here was to work together to untangle the object, before allowing it to float up and away). This was all visualised in simple graphic forms that varied in colour, density, and brightness according to our interactions. These different tasks, conceived by the creators as

53) Glowacki et al., ‘*Isness*’, p. 4.



An image from *Isness* (from glow-wacky.com)

“states”, were each designed to a set of “aesthetic hyperparameters” that attempted to connect them directly to the discrete attributes of the MTE as describes by Griffiths et al.:

We defined a phenomenological “state” as a given set of aesthetic hyperparameter values. [...] Our decisions on how to set the aesthetic hyperparameters were grounded in design concepts [...] highlighted in the psychedelics research literature.⁵⁴⁾

So this experience, with a kind of elemental design aesthetic, sets out to directly reproduce and stimulate MTEs, and the feedback questionnaire, in turn, was designed to directly link the aesthetic states back to the categories of mystical-type experiences as originally articulated by Hood in 1975.

Another category of VR experience that also seems to explicitly connect mystical and drug-induced experiences are virtual OBEs (out-of-body experience) and NDEs (near-death experience) — where the former is considered to be a generic feature of the latter. The VR OBE conjures a virtual experience of leaving your body. By deploying psychological techniques such as “rubber hand illusion”⁵⁵⁾ and haptic feedback within the VR simulation, the user is first sensorily situated within a virtual body, before then having their perspective shifted up and out of that body to look down upon their virtual form.⁵⁶⁾ Researchers claim that this experience can help alleviate end-of-life anxiety, though critics note the pseudo-religious presumptions of this finding. As Vice documents:

54) Glowacki et al., ‘Isness’, pp. 4–5.

55) See for instance: Marieke Rohde, Massimiliano Di Luca, and Marc O Ernst, ‘The Rubber Hand Illusion: feeling of ownership and proprioceptive drift do not go hand in hand’. *PLoS ONE*, vol. 6, no. 6 (2011), e21659.

56) Pierre Bourdin, Itxaso Barberia, Ramon Oliva, Mel Slater ‘A Virtual Out-of-Body Experience Reduces Fear of Death’. *PLoS ONE*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2017), e0169343.

Craig Blinderman, the director of the Adult Palliative Medicine Service at Columbia University Medical Center, [...] feels that something about the VR experience is false, and if it did work, it might be promoting or creating belief systems that weren't there before. "There is something manipulative about "creating" a psychological belief that there may be "life after death" or that "my body is the only thing that dies, but some non-corporeal entity may live on," he says. "It all feels a little bit like escaping from reality."⁵⁷⁾

Other VR NDEs seem less *empirical* in emphasis, instead aiming only to faithfully represent a distillation of described experiences of near-death in an aesthetic way. One such experience, created by clinical psychologist and mindfulness teacher Tamara Russell with "cyberdelic" artist Jose Montemayor, seems to focus a combination of haptic effects, music, abstract art, and landscapes. As a journalist from *Psychologies* magazine reports (with fairly hazy detail), after a calming qigong session the group of four are given a headset and haptic backpack, and enter their own (separate) worlds:

And what a world! After the near-death scenario — which feels like a pain-free accident; not at all scary — things get interesting. There is an exhilarating buoyancy, the feeling that I'm ascending into the cosmos, of seeing the earth, a ball of life beneath me, gorgeous swirling images that Montemayor calls "visionary art" — art that inspires us to look inward — beautiful natural landscapes, the soothing voice of a "guide", uplifting music and a choice to enter new realms. It's so wonderful, love-filled and compelling I don't want it to end.⁵⁸⁾

In a slightly more perturbing experimental VR experience that was televised in South Korea in 2019 in a documentary called *I Met You*, the line between death and life is perhaps similarly transgressed, as a grieving mother was reunited, virtually, with her daughter Nayeon, who died in 2016 from an incurable disease.⁵⁹⁾ In an extremely emotional video, the mother speaks to and tries to reach out to touch the ghostly, uncanny image of Nayeon, while the rest of the family watch as spectators.⁶⁰⁾ Mother and daughter then float together upwards away from the simulated "real" world and to some other fantasy plane where they enjoy a rather eerie birthday picnic party together. The child then lies down to sleep before dissipating into a glowing white butterfly that flies off into the sky. The mother at this moment is clearly intended to experience a sense of cathartic release and emotional closure. However, there is a strange sense of stilted interaction in this whole simulation. Mother and child seem to converse, and yet the child speaks over the mother, clearly pre-programmed with her actions and reactions and unresponsive to the mother in any

57) Shayla Love, "The VR Experience That Might Make You Less Afraid to Die", 31 January 2018, *Vice*. Online: <www.vice.com/en_asia/article/qvwgpb/the-vr-experience-that-might-make-you-less-afraid-to-die>, [accessed 28 April 2020].

58) Jini Reddy, "Virtual reality: recreating the near-death experience", 8 April 2019, *Psychologies*. Online: <www.psychologies.co.uk/virtual-reality-recreating-near-death-experience>, [accessed 28 April 2020].

59) Houser, "Watch a Mother Reunite with Her Deceased Child in VR".

60) See the video of the experience here: <<https://youtu.be/ufTK8c4w0c>>, [accessed 30 June 2020].



Screenshot from *I Met You* (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, Korea, 2019)

meaningful sense. Later, we see the mother's hands passing through the child's face as she tries to touch her, and later still the mother appears to be placing virtual candles on the birthday cake as if in a gaming environment. The uncanny valley is a gaping chasm here, and I have to wonder, despite the tacit acknowledgment of cultural differences in the memorialising of the dead, if this is truly therapeutic for those involved.⁶¹⁾

My personal sense of discomfort aside, this experience, like the OBE described above, clearly plays to a kind of belief in an afterlife by representing a fantasy realm in which this is the case, and in which the child transmogrifies into a pure entity of white light before "passing over". While these images are perhaps generically spiritual in terms of communing with the dead, watching them I did not feel as if they conform to any kind of mystical-type experience of ineffability, ego-loss, or ontological reflection, as despite the emotionally charged situation and technological prowess that is evident, the aesthetic here seems rather clichéd and cathartic. There is little in the way of virtuality here, and this does not feel like an expansive ontological experience but rather more in the realm of *phantasy* fulfilment.

This generic spiritual approach, perhaps unsurprisingly, also seems to apply to straightforwardly dogmatic religious content. As *The Verge* reported in 2018, the VR company HTC directly targeted Christians with the VR video game *7 Miracles*. They describe:

Although billed as the world's first feature-length VR movie, it's more accurate to think of *7 Miracles* as a collection of seven 10-minute-long vignettes, each of them focused on one of Jesus' miracles as described in the Gospel of John. It's nothing if

61) This is a subject of some debate even in Houser's *Futurism* article on the topic. See also Russ Banham, 'The Departed: Communicating with Lost Loved Ones Through AI and VR', 2019, DellTechnologies.com, <<https://www.delltechnologies.com/en-us/perspectives/the-departed-communicating-with-lost-loved-ones-through-ai-and-vr/>>, [accessed 30 June 2020].

not a straight telling of one of the least controversial portions of the Bible that wouldn't feel out of place as a special attraction in Sunday School.⁶²⁾

Clearly, having experiences which might seem too new-age spiritual, open, or alternative could be construed as problematic for any monotheistic religion which finds its source of truth in scripture. Thus, the only images that could feasibly be shown are those already described in religious writings. Within the short biblical narratives of *7 Miracles*, having any interactive agency beyond simply moving through the staged 360-degree scene, or having a simulated power to intervene in or change events, might also be problematic. And so the experience ultimately leaves *The Verge* journalist cold, as he describes the detached nature of the representational aesthetic — “devoid of blood, politics and conflict”.

Christians like and engage with the stories and lessons contained within the two Testaments in the Bible, but the shared community of experiencing and understanding their lessons is just as important, if not more so. Although the stories the Bible has to tell hold little appeal for me, the sense of community and togetherness does. Though well-produced in places, *7 Miracles* offers the former without the latter.⁶³⁾

For this journalist, there is no elevated or mystical experience here, though the content is perhaps also inherently “spiritual”. His suggestion is that while VR could potentially offer a more communal, immersive, and embodied spiritual experience, and thus an enhanced social experience of religious content, *7 Miracles* remains limited by old media conventions. The appeal of VR to denominational religious audiences is nonetheless still evident, with examples of VR churches and sermons, religious games, and VR bible apps, and so one has to wonder why this is. Perhaps they imagine that by making the narratives less historically distant, and by making the sacraments more sensorily immediate, they will be more vividly experienced as sacred.⁶⁴⁾ However, one can see that by literalising these imagined miracles, they can instead seem stripped of their “magical” power and become merely dry storytelling.

Radical Theology, Aesthetics, and Technoesis

I think I can easily surmise that mystical or metaphysical type experience in VR is not about the relative representational or narrative realism of the immersive experience, although some level of embodied sensory authenticity through haptic feedback can certainly act to better locate people in the immersive experience. So what then are the decisive factors of a mystical-type experience, that turn it into a meaningful, productive experience of agency at the interface of subjectivity and ontology? There are several factors I have addressed: questions of technology (e.g. suture, interfaciality, immersivity, interac-

62) Porter, ‘HTC Thinks Christians are VR’s Next Big Audience.’

63) Porter, ‘HTC Thinks Christians are VR’s Next Big Audience.’

64) French, ‘This Pastor Is Putting His Faith in a Virtual Reality Church.’

tion), questions of metaphysics (e.g. time, space, energy, materiality), questions of aesthetics (e.g. realism, abstraction, psychedelia, virtuality, communality), and questions that are really best accounted for by theological concepts (enchantment, connectedness, cosmic perception, sacredness). It does then feel, given the established proliferation of interest in mystical or spiritual experience in VR, that it might actually be quite productive to think of these technical notions of suture, immersion and interface through an aesthetico-theological lens.

There is a clear conviction, both philosophically and empirically, that VR has the potential to offer an enhanced ontological self-reflexivity at the digital interface — due to its fully embodied perceptual experiences of immersion and agency. For some, this is and will always be analogous to neuro-chemical psychedelic highs, where VR can offer a radical cerebral disruption of “normal, baseline perception”.⁶⁵ As author Diana Reid Slattery notes:

Both VR technology and psychedelic technologies extend perception and reorganize sensory ratios to create new experiences of reality, new epistemological platforms and the conditions for new knowledge acquisition in the fields to which they are applied.⁶⁶

For others such as Thomas and Glowacki (2018), it seems more explicitly about inhabited bodily/somatic rather than neural/perceptual transformation:

Cinema, immersive theatre, puppetry, digital performance, religious ritual, and meditation practice are all examples of practices which create spaces and cultures of how virtuality can be imagined and represented, and which can transform or transport the bodies of participants or audiences. [...] A participant who is transported to a virtual environment (VE) using virtual reality (VR) technologies is arguably not merely transformed, transported or extended but instead undergoes an intrinsic sensorial re-wiring.⁶⁷

Ambivalently, we can simply see VR as a *technoetic* human-computer interface, a technology of embodied consciousness, that has the potential to encourage productive thought about who we are in the universe — perhaps better thought of as a technologically augmented meditation device. More speculatively, or perhaps optimistically, this translates as a capacity to offer aesthetic experiences that approximate mystical or transcendent insight and experience, and thus can be deployed as a healing or therapeutic medium to “reconnect” people with something beyond, or bigger than, themselves. Given that this therapeutic capacity for Glowacki, Griffiths, and others pivots on (or “correlates” with) the experience of the mystical, it is maybe productive to look more directly at theology, or to

65) Diana R. Slattery, ‘VR and hallucination: a Technoetic Perspective’, *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008), p. 16.

66) Slattery, ‘VR and hallucination: a technoetic perspective’, p. 16.

67) Lisa May Thomas and David R. Glowacki, ‘Seeing and feeling in VR: bodily perception in the gaps between layered realities’, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), p. 145.

be exact, to the field of *critical* or *radical* theology. This is, for the purposes of this article, more of a suggestion of a productive future interdisciplinary pursuit of a *techno-theological aesthetics* (though this is arguably the style of analysis already pursued by Laura Marks).

The work of radical theologian Don Cupitt seems of particular relevance here, as he explicitly engages in what one could call a *technical* theology. An ex-priest and author of some 48 books of critical theology, Cupitt offers what he calls a “non-realist” account of religious experience which draws itself in relation to the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. His understanding equates to a wholesale rejection of any *direct realist* truth value to the dogmatic narratives and myths of organised religion, instead drawing on continental philosophy, linguistic and aesthetic models to account for subjective phenomenologies of faith. As one reviewer of Cupitt summarises:

Religion is “simply a lot of stories and symbols, values and practices” which one must, like an artist, shape into one’s own religious life. The believer is like an artist — the material she has to work on is her own life. Faith, then, is “the production of one’s life as a work of religious art”.⁶⁸⁾

Cupitt sees faith and religious experience as primarily linguistic, drawing on Wittgenstein’s “ordinary language” and Derrida’s grammatology. As such, humanity’s mystical-type experience has evolved as our idea of God has changed both in language and culture, and, I propose, in other mediated symbolic forms. Cupitt speaks of how “God” is more recently expressed through a language of nature, *life* itself, or indeed “connectedness” as a humanistic and “ordinary” language of the sacred. As another theological analysis of Cupitt articulates:

He collected hundreds of new phrases, noting the overwhelming reference to the word “life” as the replacement for God, and as a new religious object. In our colloquial language practices the “supra-natural” has died out and has been dispersed into the ordinariness of our lives. We often take recourse to such phrases like “wrestling with life”, “loving life” or “having faith in life”, which have over time established themselves as standardised expressions through which we have consciously or half-consciously transformed God into the encompassing notion of “life”.⁶⁹⁾

Cupitt vigorously denies being an atheist, but for him “God” is nothing but a fluid, contextual and changing category more like Heidegger’s *Dasein* (as a self-reflexive relationship to existence). He posits that Nietzsche’s “Death of God” is both a crisis of representation and a tacit acknowledgement that, as in Islamic aniconism, we cannot attempt to truly *express* God. He offers Wittgenstein’s statement: “Do not ask what the words picture or stand for; ask instead, in the context, what job the utterance is being used to do”.⁷⁰⁾

68) Jane Compson, ‘Review of Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realistic Philosophy of Religion’, *Conversations in Religion & Theology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2003), p. 145.

69) David Biernot and Christoffel Lombaard, ‘The prayers, tears and joys of Don Cupitt: Non-realist, post-Christian spirituality under scrutiny’, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, vol. 74, no. 3 (2015), p. 5.

70) Don Cupitt, *Turns of Phrase: Radical Theology from A to Z* (London: SCM Press, 2011), p. 9.

In this way, we ask what do these notions of God, the infinite, mystical experience, or cosmic connection, *do* in specific cultural contexts, and what do we then make of that? His approach essentially brings together the technicity of language, aesthetics, and ontology within a critical theological philosophy of experience.

What I take this to mean for the search for MTEs in VR is that we can productively position this impulse, these technical affordances, and the underlying faith in VR's potential, within a wider sphere of critical and speculative theology. It should not then be positioned as a search for "truth" or "connectedness" in any direct realist sense. As Cupitt notes, any attempt to cling to a *metaphysical realism* leads ultimately to a cultish marginalisation (which he thinks has already happened to the Catholic Church). We should thus think technically and aesthetically, rather than *supernaturally*:

Cupitt advocates a faith resembling abstract art — the Abstract Sacred, as he calls it, must "refuse to accept the lie of otherworldliness" and be "entirely of this world and quite unconsolated." Sacredness, for Cupitt then, lies in the very rejection of the traditionally sacred, namely the idea of a supernatural realm, and an acceptance of our transience and radical contingency.⁷¹⁾

Conclusion

Despite the setting of *Isness* within a context of what I personally construed as a new-age *metaphysical realist* conference (admittedly based on my own perceptual bias), and with a research sample selection which seemed to be "preaching to the converted", it cannot be said that its creators do not maintain a healthy sceptical attitude. They themselves note concerns about the relative *authenticity* of the mystical nature of the experience — given that the technology is explicitly virtual (and where the "true" experience of god would be presumed *actual*). To resolve this, they take a purely perennialist phenomenological stance towards the capacity of contributors to self-report and interpret the experience, to reach the non-realist and relativist conclusion that all such experiences are pretty much similarly virtual at the level of linguistic description:

This logic, combined with our evidence that VR can occasion MTEs, suggests that "virtual reality" may be a concept best understood from a wider vantage point, where head mounted displays (HMDs) simply represent one kind of "virtual reality" technology amongst a broader continuum of VR technologies, which include for example YDs, mythologies, rituals, meditation practices, lucid dreaming, etc.⁷²⁾

Accepting that even "authentic" mystical experience is essentially virtual and technological, and accepting that all such mystical "interfaces" are best roughly understood as self-reflexive technologies of Being (Dasein), then we have to ask, technically, what is the

71) Compson, 'Review of *Is Nothing Sacred?*', p. 146.

72) Glowacki et al., '*Isness*', p. 10.

productivity of this specific technical form of virtual reality (the head mounted display) at this time in our existence? Without being too instrumentalist, and conserving the right to *play* as a productive mode of ethical practice, the question becomes: what does a VR MTE potentially add to our reality? It is perhaps reductive to see these experiences as only or mainly therapeutic in a narrow pragmatic sense (as is the *clinical* emphasis of both Glowacki et al., and in other research on psychedelics in the treatment of anxiety, depression and other psychopathologies). While this empirically measurable goal no doubt legitimises the research, it does not do justice to the *theological* issues raised.

However, there is one profoundly theological issue that emerges to connect many of the theorists cited — a clear and present existential crisis to which this technology, this aesthetic, this theology, and these experiences, do directly address — and that is an *environmental* crisis. For Glowacki et al., the need or yearning for meaningfully connected experience (that VR responds to) is directly connected to recent discourses of extinction (which he says instigate a kind of end-of-life anxiety), and to crises of capitalist rationality that he refers to obliquely as the “addiction to unsustainable growth paradigms”.⁷³ For Laura Marks, the desire for an enchanted, sacred aesthetic of cosmic perception responds to a disenchanted, disconnected world in which we simply do not understand the underlying material and energetic flows that underlie all our technological behaviour.⁷⁴ For Cupitt, the difference lies between introvertive and extravertive mysticism; where the former draws one inward, disconnecting us from the world — “listening for God in the dark”, the latter “sees the world charged with the grandeur of God”, affirming nature, everyday objects and sights as sacred, and tending towards a “rapturous, high-spirited *solar* joy in life”.⁷⁵

The new forms of immersive interface then seem to have a specific potential to offer a kind of embodied ecological connectivity — of a sympathy and aesthetic passion for living and non-living connected systems which can be construed as sacred or divine. Considered this way, VR content, images and experiences should then cultivate our awareness of these connected “cosmic” systems and our role within them, and this could be enormously humbling, but also empowering. As Marks describes: “When images make contact with us, we recognise that we are strung in webs of causality. By cultivating affective response and indexical awareness, we can draw the universe close, even rearrange it”.⁷⁶

This *ecological* perspective also hold sway in current theological discourse, as “systematic theologian” Paul Schutz describes:

Arguing for a perceptual turn to the cosmos does not only aim to increase awareness of ecological issues in theology. Rather, it broadens the context for theology, emphasizing how the interconnectedness of all aspects of reality operate as constitutive elements of the total reality theology must address.⁷⁷

73) Glowacki et al., ‘Isness’, p. 2.

74) Marks, ‘Rethinking Digital Ideologies’.

75) Cupitt, *Turns of Phrase*, p. 34.

76) Marks, ‘Talisman Image’, p. 35.

77) Paul J. Schutz, ‘Cultivating a “Cosmic Perspective” in Theology: Reading William R. Stoeger with Laudato Si’, *Theological Studies*, vol. 80, no. 4 (2019), p. 820.

While environmental issues might frame VR MTEs in a somewhat abstract sense, we must be reminded that they ultimately manifest through a *mystical* or *magical* phenomenology, and this reminds us that these experiences are best thought of, ultimately, as a matter of “faith”. An ecological aesthetic, as Schutz describes, can then merely enrich this faith belief, turning it from dogmatic introversion towards a more extravertive and joyous piety.

Laura Marks reminds us on a couple of occasions that a *faith* in the potential of the image must come first. The user of the “talismanic image” that interfaces to cosmic connectedness must approach it with the appropriate ritual respect, or with the correct pious “mindset”:⁷⁸⁾

For a talisman to function, the indexical, operational, and passionate links between talisman and object is not enough: the talisman must be activated through ceremony [...] Al-Kindī emphasises that both the operator and the recipient of image magic must have focus and right intention, and the magician must have imagination, desire and confidence/faith (*fides*).⁷⁹⁾

What this seems to mean is that, like the attendees at the psychedelic consciousness conference where I found *Isness* (and thus for the researcher’s experimental sample), one needs to, if not already be a believer, at least be fully open and willing to embrace the possibility of the MTE. One needs to already have a subjective or cultural *faith* in something, whatever that may be (life, nature, God, technology) to come seeking this kind of connection. This, I feel, is ultimately a theological issue. Whether VR technology (especially as it develops as a shared, communal experience of the mystical) has a specific potential talismanic power to *convert* people to a cosmic perception, truly remains to be seen.

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78) In ‘Thinking Like a Carpet’, Laura Marks speaks about the need to approach Islamic art (in this case carpets) with a *non-figurative* mindset to appreciate and understand “the rhythmic energy of the abstract line”, and she states that this may be an issue of prior exposure to similar images, p. 19.

79) Marks, ‘Talisman-Images’, p. 29.

SUMMARY

Mystical-Type Experience at The Virtual Reality Interface
*Technics, Aesthetics, and Theology in the Search for Cosmic Connection***Daniel Strutt**

In the context of a recent proliferation of Virtual Reality content that focusses on spiritual, religious or “mystical-type experiences” (MTEs), this article speculates on its cultural and subjective value, to ask if new immersive technologies might offer an enhanced interface to sensations of “cosmic connection”. Drawing issues of critical theology and media technology together with a consideration of the aesthetics of mystical or metaphysical experiences, the author asks what specific types of VR content might actually have a capacity to offer sensations that approximate mystical or transcendent experience. Can these then be deployed as healing or therapeutic experiences to (re-)connect people with something beyond, or bigger than, themselves?

In reaching an understanding that even “authentic” mystical experience is essentially virtual and technological in a philosophical sense, and accepting that all such mystical “interfaces” are best understood as practices of ontological self-reflection, this article finally asks, what is the usefulness of this technical form (the VR head mounted display) at this specific time of social and environmental crisis? Could VR in its increased immersivity, interactivity and interfacial complexity potentially serve as a better medium for ontological reflexivity — as an enhanced “interface to the infinite” in the words of Laura U. Marks — or does it, by making space, objects, bodies, and information more material and operational, actually foreclose virtuality?

keywords: Immersive Technology, Mystical Type Experience (MTE), Virtual Reality, Technoetic, Cosmic Perception, Interface