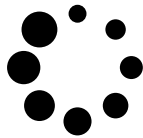AN-ICON

How Digital Hybridization Creates New Performance Practices: The Case of Alternate Virtuality Games

by Anthony Bekirov
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Alternate reality game
Liminality
Digital studies
Mediatic event
Subjectivation

How Digital Hybridization Creates New Performance Practices: The Case of Alternate Virtuality Games

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Abstract
In this paper, we examine a new set of hybrid ludic practices utilizing cross-media narration that emerged with the rise of the Internet commonly called Alternate Reality Games. However, we propose to coin the term Alternate Virtuality Games (or AVG) as a way to distinguish these digital practices from their real-life counterpart. Viral online AVGs like *This House Has People in It* (Resnick, 2016) or *Ben Drowned* (Jadusable, 2010) are emblematic of a horizontal relationship between work and spectator, as well as performance outside of art institutions. The immersiveness of AVGs is unbound by the space and time of a specific happening, and is rather experienced by a multitude of agents at different times and places. This characteristic of being an extra-individual experience as well as being independent from institutions also places AVGs within liminal experiences such as studied by anthropologist Victor Turner.

As such, we analyze these hybrid games as a mean for the 21ˢᵗ century spectator to overturn societal status quo through newfound agency. These performing agents get into a subjective state where they can experience and criticize our relationship to digital devices in a society of information and control, without being subjected to it.

Keywords   Alternate reality game   Liminality   Digital studies

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Introduction

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are a set of hybrid ludic practices utilizing cross-media narration that emerged with the rise of the Internet, and which fall under the type of performance where the spectators are the main performers. They are constructed as real-life treasure hunts, where the participants are guided by a puppet master in public spaces, through "rabbit holes," i.e. hints distributed on social networks and/or websites. Similar to the artist who lays down the rules of the performance between themselves and the audience, the puppet master gives the players general instructions towards completing the game. However, whereas performance art is still closely dependent on the subjectivity of the artist, the puppet master's (more subdued) role is solely to accompany the players in their experience.

ARGs have contributed to a less vertical relationship between work and spectator, as well as to bring performance outside of art institutions. Moreover, with the growth of social platforms online and especially YouTube, the term "ARG" has been used more broadly to refer to new *dispositifs*, which we call Alternate Virtuality Games (AVGs), such as *This House Has People in It* (Resnick 2016; *infra* THHPII) or *Ben Drowned* (Jadusable 2010).[1] They too are a kind of treasure hunts with well-hidden hints, but they are unique in that they are digital-native: they are strictly performed online and do not ask the players to go outside.

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1 A. Resnick, "This house Has People in It," 2016, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-pj8OtyO2I , accessed July 14, 2023. Other notable AVGs include: A. Resnick, "Alan Tutorials," 2011-2014, https://www.youtube.com/@alantutorial; "Unedited Footage Of A Bear," 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gMjJNGg9Z8; "Petscop," 2017-2019, https://www.youtube.com/@Petscop; "Poppy," 2016-ongoing, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8JE00xTMBOqKs7o0grFTfQ; "Catghost," 2017-2019, https://www.youtube.com/@CatGhost,; "Dad," 2019-ongoing, https://www.youtube.com/DadFeels, which all start as YouTube videos; "TheSunVanished," 2018-ongoing, https://twitter.com/TheSunVanished, which is played out on Twitter; "No Players Online," 2019, https://papercookies.itch.io/no-players-online, which is primarily a videogame that can be found on indie video game sharing platform itch.io. All links accessed July 14, 2023.

The rabbit holes of AVGs are merged with the *dispositif* itself and are given as fictional devices. There is no apparent puppet master, nor apparent goal or treasure, other than finding new leads and new connections between elements of the "game." The player/performer can thus view every aspect of their experience as part of said game. As such, AVGs are more akin to video games, as they tend to dissolve the object/subject dichotomy.

Therefore, the persona of the artist is no more presented as a demiurge welcoming the profane audience to their performance. To access and participate in the AVG, the spectator needs not go to a specific place where their experience is being validated: the work takes place through the digital interface. In the case of AVGs, there is no clear delimitation between the space allotted to the performance and the one allotted to "real life." The immersiveness of AVGs is unbound by the space and time of a specific happening, and is rather experienced by a multitude of agents at different times and places. This characteristic of being an extra-individual experience as well as being independent of institutions also places AVGs within liminal experiences such as studied by Victor Turner. These performing agents dive into a state that mirrors our relationship to digital devices in a society of information – and control.

In this chapter, we will analyze the AVG apparatus through the socioeconomic and anthropological lens, in order to understand its role within society. We will see how it is not merely a leisurely game created for the entertainment of a few, but is a direct reaction to social anguish and provides leeway to greater agency for individuals. This participatory art form, thanks to its hybridity and plasticity, can be considered the epitome of our society's relation to digital images – if not images in general.

Erasing The Artist

AVGs as we said above, are modelled after Alternate Reality Games, but reworked and made palatable to the average Internet user of the 21st century. They share in common the "This Is Not A Game" (*infra* TINAG) philosophy, that is, their decision to obfuscate their gameness to the players, and to present themselves as real events instead of fiction. But instead of asking players to go outside, out of the comfort of their own room like ARGs do, AVGs are treasure hunts that take place solely on the Internet through various platforms: forums, websites, social networks, YouTube and the like, etc. And because ARGs take place "in real life" and because real life is governed by social standards, there is always a moment where the organizers must signify to the players that they have achieved their goal – either that, or time has run out and the ARG is over. This moment almost never happens in AVGs, because the whole ordeal takes places "inside," on the players' computers, where the users are their own guide. The player in this case only deals with images, and not actual, real people in a real-life setting. As such, any image is subjected to scrutiny and doubt, any image can become a world of play. And we need to look into concrete examples to better understand how this world plays out.

One of the more emblematic AVGs is arguably *Ben Drowned: The Haunted Cartridge*, published between September 7 and 15 2010 by Alexander Hall on the paranormal board */x/* on the online discussion board 4Chan. Following the TINAG philosophy, Hall under the alias Jadusable introduced the first part of his narrative by stating clearly that this was a true story. The narrative being one of a sophomore college student having been gifted an old Nintendo 64. Looking for old games to play, he finds a cartridge of *Zelda: Majorah's Mask* at a garage sale. When

he boots it up, he discovers a save file titled "BEN." When Jadusable tries to play, his actions are hampered by odd glitches as he is being shadowed by a corrupted version of the protagonist Link. Jadusable realizes the cartridge is haunted by the spirit of BEN, who starts haunting his computer as well. At the end of the story, BEN warns the readers that he shall haunt their computers too.

Ben Drowned first started as a forum thread. Soon, however, Hall started uploading videos on YouTube documenting glitches in the game. To be sure, these glitches were his doing, using a gameshark (a game-altering program) on a ROM of the game. Readers became involved in trying to solve what happened to the entity named BEN by analyzing the hidden clues within Jadusable's writing and videos. *Ben Drowned* was not introduced as a game – which falls in line with the TINAG philosophy – but as the genuine account of a random gamer who finds himself confronted with peculiar, paranormal events. The idea that a cartridge could be haunted by the spirit of a deceased boy is of course ludicrous and should place the narrative among the fictional immediately – just as ARGs do when they present the players with an obvious fictional contract. But here is the catch: Jadusable did not present himself as a puppet master, nor did he present his videos as an ARG. As far as online users were concerned, he was a nobody lost in a sea of other uploaders. We unfortunately don't have the place to dissect and analyze here the original comment section on the forum thread and the YouTube videos, but there were roughly two consensuses: 1) the game's odd behaviour, although very unsettling, is probably just a one-in-a-million occurrence of bugs and malfunctions, and Jadusable is a highly superstitious person for whom this was the proof of a haunting; 2) Jadusable is a prankster and tries to capitalize on users' curiosity and own superstitions. People tried to rationalize the odd events by classifying

them either under delusions or pure fiction. But there was no way to be sure. And so, there was a third category of spectators: 3) people who believed the cartridge really was haunted.

As much as *Ben Drowned* still owes a great deal to the ARG apparatus, it kick-started a more radical, virtual set of practices: without a puppet master, without narrative closure, where events are told in a chaotic fashion. Alan Resnick and Robby Rackleff's *THHPII Has People In It*, aired on AdultSwim and published on YouTube in March 2016, integrates these new elements fully. This short flick shows the supposed surveillance footage of a typical American suburban family, who experiences unexplained paranormal events, such as their daughter merging into the floor. The more curious watchers can click on the URL in the video description and access the website of a fictional surveillance camera manufacturer. A login page gives access to a secret file directory where one can find many more elements of the AVG.

THHPII is undeniably constructed as a meta-ARG. The apparatus is tentacular and offers a self-referential image of the mechanisms at work in its interpretation, as well as a cryptic statement on social issues. We can say *apparatus* in the full sense of the word, as a vector of subjectification that gives a form to the individual subject and regulates discourses and behaviors. As a network of goal-oriented elements, the apparatus mobilizes objects and techniques that will produce different subjectivities. In the case of *THHPII* this conditioning is moreover made explicit as the work makes interpretative mechanisms a theme.

Among the numerous theories on *THHPII*, many make mention of psychiatric afflictions. At some point during the short, we see a TV show called *Sculptor's Clayground* – which you can watch on YouTube – where

the presenter played by Resnick warns against a fictional pathology, Lynks disease. Resnick thus plays himself as the supposed puppet master by playing, ironically, the one person afflicted by Lynks disease: the disease of making connections. Besides, apophenia (a symptom of over-semantization of insignificant elements) or paranoia are frequently mentioned as typical phenomena in the resolution of ARGs. These altered states of perceptions are indirectly discussed in the work within the broader theme of public health, and are also given as the way to "play" *THHPII.* The Lynks disease relates as much to the narrative of the *THHPI*, as to the spectatorship and its ability to conjure meaning.

　　　　　As we see, the AVG apparatus is a complex system of disassembled images – of which the actual extent is kept undisclosed – left for the spectator to make sense of. As the creators of AVGs withdraw themselves into obscurity, they give off the impression their work (their "game") has seemingly appeared out of thin air and is thus shrouded in an apparent mystery begging to be solved. The form assumed by this type of media is already well within the realm of participatory performances, that is, the form of a quest for the player – however endless and fruitless this quest may be.

What is at stake in AVGs?

　　　　　These sets of practices and *dispositifs* recently admitted into the field of academic research enable the reevaluation of different categories firmly anchored in our conceptual language. For instance, this is the case with the protean distinctions between subject and object. These distinctions establish the authority of the separate artistic subjectivity from a work of art as an external object – or at least as a shared subjective experience, and place the public as another subject. However, a *dispositif* such as

the one formed by *THHPPII* makes it possible to fully realize the aspiration to horizontality present in contemporary art and in performance art in particular. The participatory or interactive nature of an artistic performance feeds, as a shared experience, the desire to bring together the spheres previously mentioned. Thus, the subjectivity of the artist is brought into play, in a work in where the artists themselves participate as an active element, and in front of a public who can take part in it. Nevertheless, the institutional, academic, economic and psychological arrangements that direct the performance as an event remain dependent on an authorial, distinctive and elitist logic. The *person* of the artist and the people who constitute the public are linked by a spectatorial, spatio-temporal, even economic and sociocultural contract. The performance takes place in a space authorized as an institution or place of artistic validation, and in a given time, a duration that delimits it. It is in this system that an audience is expected, often selective or even exclusive because it responds to identifiable socioeconomic and cultural determinations. This subject-object-subject triptych, or artist-work-public, is precisely what is shattered in AVGs.

Concurrently to the abolition of these concepts comes the limitlessness of the work as a situated event, as a finished object or entity. Indeed, whether it concerns the person of the artist-creator-performer, the spatio-temporal, cultural and institutional location of an audience, and the duration of a performance, none of these limiting notions can then account for what is radically reticulated in an AVG. The generalized decentralization of what can still be attached to an artistic performance, in the case of AVGs, therefore produces a mutation and a displacement. Mutation, because we observe the spatio-temporal extensions of what can now differently be called a performance and a work. An AVG is neither finite nor situated. The space

of performance is no longer stratified by institutional and sociocultural criteria, but strictly technical and economic: anyone who has access to a screen provided with an Internet connection can now experience a continuously modified performance – and perform it. In these performances, the end of the production chain ("performing audience") matters more than the beginning ("artist"). The "performing audience" being the only entity deploying the work and the apparatus, the availability of the AVG on the web can be described as virtual, no less real but less actual. Without institutional or curatorial validation, AVG apparatuses are only actual and therefore deployed when people perform them. The institutional space that hosted the performance becomes the space of the world as part of the computerized paradigm. The time of the performance becomes that of the duration of attention and of a "spectatorial" intervention which the work cannot, structurally, do without. There is, as in video games,[2] a work of art only deployed, by a ludic instance which determines it in a situated way, within singular spatio-temporal dimensions. It is therefore no longer a question of interactivity or participation, because these notions presuppose an irreducible distinction between autonomous subjects or entities. On the contrary, the proper names behind the said "work" as well as the people they designate matter as little as the "place" where it takes place. The performance in the AVG is that of subjective instances brought forth and delimited by the AVG apparatus. The fusion of the space of the world with the space of performance makes it possible to approach such practices under the horizontal and decentralized prism of new forms of subjectivation. As a paragon of a computerized audiovisual paradigm, the AVG highlights the precariousness of categories which are ultimately maintained

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2 A. Bekirov, T. Vaillancourt, "Le jeu-vidéo, expérience-limite du sujet," *Marges*, no. 24 (2017): 30-44, https://doi.org/10.4000/marges.1255.

only by cultural, moral and economic imperatives. Often unquestioned notions such as subject, object, work of art, or public are hence brought to a semantic limit when we speak about AVGs.

Opening the experience of performance by transposing it into spheres which, by definition, are foreign to the worlds of institutional art, would be the main decompartmentalization produced by AVGs as an operational notion. However, this does not amount to speaking of a degradation or dissolution of the quality of experience. Taking exegesis out of authorized and limited spheres to deploy it "outside" the institution amplifies, intensifies and multiplies the experience(s). This is no longer the role of educated and privileged observers forming an authorized audience, but becomes the generalized expression of a *modus operandi* and of a computerized *Weltanschauung* associated with it. More than a supposed "democratization" of performance art, AVGs allows us to see complex relations emerging from a computerized paradigm that constitutes new forms of attention, of thought and sensibility. Within a contemporary economy and ecology of attention,[3] AVGs offer new elements to understand how our receptivity and our perceptual abilities are shaped by our media-technical environments. From this perspective, such arrangements allow us to analyze new processes of large-scale simulacra and stereotypes production, that ultimately are processes of subjectivation.[4]

3 Y. Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (2014), trans. B. Norman (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).
4 P. Klossowski, *The Living Currency* (1970), trans. D.W. Smith, N. Morar, V.W. Cisney (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); P. Klossowski, *La Ressemblance* (Marseille: Ryôan-ji, 1984).

Computerized subjectivations and new apparatuses

To speak about *Weltanschauung* implies we need to consider the globalization of a computerized paradigm as a new cultural matrix and as a new communication and research model. Talking about a disarticulation of the instances at play in the institutional performance art also allows a critical return to the categories delineated by Benjamin.[5] In the Benjaminian logic of a passage from religious and ritual art (unique original work) to art in its political function (reproduced work) comes the loss of the aura. However, this logic can be nuanced when we consider that the aura can, according to Latour & Lowe,[6] migrate, and that a cult dimension remains present in intrinsically non-unique works, whether cinema, video game or AVGs. On the one hand, it seems to go without saying that the cult dimension of cultural productions does not disappear in a paradigm of technical reproducibility. Many fanatical behaviours, as much as fetishists ones, easily illustrate the blurring of a distinction between political and religious functions when we think about industrialized and reproduced works of art. On the other hand, in the paradigm of a political function of art, the subjectivating and ecstatic dimension of the relationship to the work only undergoes a regime change. Moreover, from the perspective of a reading of capitalism as religion, which Benjamin[7] precisely affirmed, we can only speak of a transformation – of a technically assisted amplification – of the forms and places of worship. It matters

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5 W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. M.W. Jennings, B. Doherty, T.Y. Levin, trans. E. Jephcott *et al.* (Cambridge MA-London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).
6 B. Latour, A. Lowe, "La migration de l'aura ou comment explorer un original par le biais de ses fac-similés," *Intermédialités*, no. 17 (2011): 173-191, https://doi.org/10.7202/1005756.
7 W. Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. P. Fenves, J. Ng (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2021): 90-92.

little whether we adopt the perspective of the spectacle where social relations are mediated by images,[8] or simply that of a *Weltanschauung* produced by the extension of the information and societies of control. The challenge is above all to consider the permanency of logics of ritual – of initiation or worship – where the notions of unique work and institutional artist have disappeared.

This vestige of ritual is important because it opens up the analysis of individual and collective subjectivations, beyond distinctions abolished by the generalization of computerized apparatuses on a planetary scale. In other words, by decompartmentalizing performance practices and distinctions typical of the art world, it is a question of renewing a point of view and developing its consequences. These outline an anthropology in a computerized regime, which must take into account new attentional, cultural and economic data. By redrawing the contours of performance practices, AVGs present themselves as computerized devices that provide subjectivations specific to our contemporary era.

Apparatus or *dispositif* became a central notion in Foucault's work during his lessons at the Collège de France in 1977-1978. The term is used to describe a network of different elements generating subjectivities and behaviours.[9] Foucault also describes apparatuses as networks of institutions, rules and laws, scientific, moral and philosophical statements. In other words, Foucault's attention is directed to power relations within broad networks.[10] Hence, from our point of view, it becomes significant to integrate technological aspects of *dispositifs* in our analysis, as Agamben precisely does in a more recent text. In

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8 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994): 47-90.
9 M. Foucault, *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France*, *1977-78*, trans. G. Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
10 M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. 2: 299.

What is an Apparatus (2009), Agamben enlarges even more the already wide Foucauldian definition of *dispositif* by including everything that has the capacity to capture and subjectify living beings' behaviours and discourse.[11] AVGs are also an opportunity to consider subjectivities produced by contemporary apparatuses in a less technophobic and reactive way than Agamben's analysis.

More extensively, this leads to new questions that could be answered with anthropological tools. From a subjectivation perspective on AVG performance, one could ask what remains of the rituals linked to the liminal spaces that Turner described, within the contemporary practices that interest us?

Reclaiming The Space Left Empty Inside Ourselves

British anthropologist Victor Turner stated that the distinctions between work and play that have been prevalent during the 20th century in Western societies are dependent on the industrialization thereof, and moreover, have cemented the separation of what is deemed "objective" and what is deemed "subjective."[12] Indeed, rather than abstract entities left to the scrutiny of metaphysicians, Turner displaces the discussion on subject and object towards sociological grounds. Building on and refining Arnold van Gennep's influential ideas on liminality in the rites of passage in tribal societies,[13] he analysed the way globalized capitalist societies have given rise to novel subjectivities

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11 G. Agamben, What Is an Apparatus? *and Other Essays* (2006), trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2009): 14.
12 V. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 53-96, 66 https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63159.66.
13 See for example his seminal book A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classic Study of Cultural Celebrations* (1909), trans. M.B. Vizedom, G.L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

and where liminal spaces can be found in said societies. Liminality – the characteristic of being in an in-between state, to be on the *threshold* between two socially recognized subjectivities – usually pertains to pre-industrial social practices whose goal is to strengthen the cohesion among the members of a community: carnivals, Mardi Gras, coming-of-age rites, etc. all help create a sense of community, while at the same time reversing values, playing with the fringes of what is socially acceptable, albeit for a moment only.[14] However, with the advent of the rationalization of the workplace in the 20th century came also the dissolution of the old separation between the working class and the nobility in favor of a new hybrid class of hard-working citizens who also enjoy leisurely pleasures in their free time.[15] In this context, the notion of social fringe and reversal of values, in other words, liminality, becomes less adequate. A new concept was required.

This is what Turner proposed with the idea of liminoid phenomena. These liminoid phenomena are re-enacting the ancient rites of passage but without the presiding instance of community elders, without the need to be recognized by others. This is now in individual affair. Whereas the goal of liminal practices was to guide the individual through collectivity, liminoid phenomena take place within the individual's free time, in opposition to one's time spent at the workplace: "one *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid."[16] While the liminal still applies to environments where a figure of authority must be referred to in order to act, the liminoid is willed by the individual as a way to escape from the constraints of work. This is where sport, games, art and social critique happen. And because these liminoid practices are highly individualistic,

14 V. Turner, "Liminality, Khaballah, and the Media," *Religion*, no. 15 (1985): 205-217, 213-215.
15 V. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid:" 66-67.
16 V. Turner, "Liminality, Khaballah, and the Media:" 216.

they enable what Turner calls the loss of ego.[17] The "Self" which acts as the mediator or the "broker" between one's and another's actions becomes irrelevant. Since all participants of leisurely activities follow the same rules and embody these rules by their very actions, the Self is no longer needed to bargain about what can and cannot be done. Therefore, the liminoid encapsulates rather well the "Death of God" trope in our society: gone is the burden of a transcendent Being lurking over us, gone are the kings, and so are the authors. The creator as a demiurge is no more, but how do we fill the space left empty inside of us?

The easy way out is to fill this space with another set of liminal practices. This is easily observed in our neoliberal society where the line between work and leisure is blurred: the *gamification* of the workplace – such as providing devices for leisure like baby-foots or ping-pong tables to increase productivity – and the professionalization of gaming practices like e-sports or online streaming are two sides of the same capitalist coin.[18] But another answer could also be to use this empty use as a playground for liminoid activities. And indeed, AVGs are eminently liminoid in that they do away with the author, and do so radically. As long as the artist or the creator appears as a guidance for the spectator into their work, the spectatorial experience is hampered by the presence of the Other. There is this element of outside-ness to performance art, where the performance can only be played out insofar as the artist is concerned. In Alternate Virtuality Games, "virtuality" is to be understood as reality constructed in terms of mediatic events, a collection of images assembled haphazardly by the individual player. As the player assembles images in

17 V. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid:" 88.
18 M. Antonioli, "Le stade esthétique de la production/consommation et la révolution du temps choisi," *Multitudes* 4, no. 69 (2017): 109-114, https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.069.0109 ; A. Bekirov, T. Vaillancourt, "Esquisse d'une généalogie du romanesque, du point de vue du jeu vidéo," in I. Hautbout, S. Wit, eds., *Jeu vidéo et romanesque* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021): 117-130.

accordance with their own criteria (what makes sense to them), they become the *de facto* creator of one possible performance of the game. Here we see how the loss of ego is inherently part of the AVG experience: as the authoritative figure of the Author is absent, the player can now invest this role and progress towards a state of indistinctness between subject and object, between what is created and what is spectated. The rise of ARGs and more so of AVGs can thus be interpreted as the growing social need for liminoid phenomena, a need for agency in a world of where subjectivation is too often synonymous with subjection.

Conclusion: Beyond representation

Taking into account such apparatuses and practices implies new configurations and new focuses. Speaking about *Weltanschauung* draws a metaphysical point of view, and hence demands an ontology. To put it short, the ontology that underpins this *Weltanschauung* is an ontology of simulacra. This means that we are no longer in a regime of representation submitted to Reality as the only form of the Truth. There are of course numerous ways to escape from Platonism or empirical realism. The one underlined by AVGs is situated within a paradigm initiated by Nietzsche and described by Deleuze, Foucault and Klossowski, a way of paying attention to the effects generated by simulacra in many contexts. We can obviously consider post-truth tendencies and their political consequences as the dark side of such a *Weltanschauung* in which truth is no longer a dichotomous question. That being said, simulacra around AVGs also lead to virtuality in a narrower sense. If "virtuality" is to be understood as reality constructed in terms of mediatic events, then the production of reality is also a ludic

process in which everyone can take part notwithstanding their expertise.

Reality, understood as produced by mediatic events, opens new perspectives and new possibilities for subjectivation. Given the fact that the distinction between "the real world" and "the world of the image" is no longer valid, every aspect of life becomes a potential reality production through mediatic events as the only *milieu* within which we take place. From this perspective, redefining notions such as subject, object, artist or audience, is necessary in order to describe contemporary processes that no longer fit in a paradigm of representation and truth.

In that sense, virtuality and the effectiveness of images are the new reality. AVGs do "environmentalise" images in the way they force us to zoom out from the context of institutionalized art, and understand what is going on outside of it. Looking at image environments in larger digital contexts, we realize that the theoretical and often abstract categories like subject, object, artwork and audience – which are still rampant today in "canonical" artistic production – become less relevant to appreciate our relationship to images in the 21st century. The aesthetical, socio-political and psychological stakes in AVGs outline a new paradigm that can be applied to the sphere of institutional art and could hopefully render the rigid boundaries of their categories a bit more permeable.

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