

WHY VIRTUAL SPACE IS ENDLESS

Mădălina ALAMĂ

Abstract

The following article focuses on virtual space and on identification processes and stages in order to show why the virtual space is endlessly resourceful for the user who finds this particular space to be the ultimate identity enhancer. The article begins by defining some key terms and by putting forth that the mirror stage (as cited in Lacan, 2006) is instrumental in understanding identification processes that the subject is to undergo throughout his/her life. Other identity theories are brought into discussion in order to broaden the theoretical understanding of identification in virtual space.

Keywords: gaze, ideal ego, self, imago, virtual space, identification

The question of terminology

For the purpose of this paper one needs to understand terms like *gaze*, *ideal ego*, *self* and *imago*. In contemporary visual culture there are different perspectives that offer understandings of the concept of gaze. This paper refers to *gaze* as being a fundamental action that offers the subject a sense of mastery by seeing himself as the ideal ego. The *ideal ego* is the image that the subject sees, and partly constructs, in the mirror. The *self* is a process and organization of all identities that are connected to aspects of social structure (Owens, 2003). By *imago* one understands a projection that includes all the parts that the subject wants to use in order to obtain the ideal ego, namely: anybody and/or anything, body parts, objects, colours that together form the ideal ego image the subject sees. In other words the *imago* is an image that includes the image as such and the feelings of the subject that generate a particular visual representation of the subject.

At this point one might understand that technically the *ideal ego* concept overlaps with the one of *imago*. However, there is much more than goes into the ideal ego of a subject, than the imagoes that it relies on. Suffice to say that in his attempts to create an ideal ego for himself, the subject relies greatly on the image reflected in the mirror. This article intends to focus more on the importance of the image that the subject sees and constructs than on the complexity of the ideal ego as such.

As to why the Mirror Stage in instrumental

In the mirror stage the yet-to-become subject begins his/her entrance into language and culture. Early on in the mirror stage, the infant, in spite of the fact that s/he has not yet acquired language, is fascinated with the form that s/he sees in the mirror. Lacan (Lacan, 2006) refers to this form as being a gestalt: a form that is “more constitutive than constituted”(Lacan, 2006:76). One can infer from here that the form the pre-language child sees and toys with is one that is incomplete. This incompleteness is to remain long after the child has grown into subject by means of acquiring language and culture. It is precisely this incompleteness that lies at the root of the desire for identification that permeates the subject’s life.

While looking at the gestalt in the mirror the infant begins to work on his subjectivity using the specular image, the reflection of his body in the mirror, to start constructing his ego. Already at this point the infant does not always need a mirror per se, but can see his behaviour reflected in the gestures the ones around him make; these gestures turn the others into valid specular images.

Later on and throughout his life the individual is to engage in the same process: while looking at his image in the mirror/ others, the subject aspires to be just what he sees and constructs as his ideal ego: a coherent version of the self that transcends the chaotic drives of the actual, material body. This narcissistic ideal image is maintained in the imaginary order, where the subject’s fantasy image can safely and easily incorporate images of others, images that the subject wants to emulate: role models, love objects, etc. that the subject combines together and sets up as a mirror for himself. The subject is constantly engaged in a narcissistic relationship with this image. One must avoid the rather common mistake of understanding the realm of fantasy as a mental space predominantly governed by the unconscious. Fantasy images are operative, dynamic, and are generated at the border of the conscious with the unconscious (Pollock, 2002). Thus they are generated by and into the symbolic.

It is time to turn to the implications of all that has been explained above for the contemporary subject: the one that engages in symbolic identification under the fast and powerful influence of the media. As explained in the introduction, this paper focuses on one part of the media, namely virtual space. By a very rough definition virtual space is a space that *appears* to be real, or authentic, or proper and that despite its lack of these three qualities it might have the same effects on the individuals who use computers. These individuals seem to experience the contact with virtual space as a liberating trip, a leaving behind of the real time and space constraints (Wilbur, 2000). It is this dislocation from time and space that allows individuals to engage in mechanisms that help them work on their identities in novel ways.

As shown above the individual is in constant search for mirrors/ others that offer him specular images which help him construct his imagoes. This is a process that starts early on in the human's life and continues throughout his/her life due to the strong sense of incompleteness that permeates the subject's life and generates the desire for both imaginary and symbolic identifications. The virtual space accessed by the touch of a button goes beyond the screen for the subject/user who imagines through projections that his/her self is a coherent unity, not only a collage of identifications with the specular images collected in real time and space. Virtual space, unlike any other media offers the subject not only a leaving behind of the R/real, of the materiality of existence, but a fast and compelling succession of images that stimulate the subject's desire for identification.

Where the Virtual comes in

One of the questions yet to be answered is exactly to what extent the speed and the abundance of images in the virtual space are likely to increase the individual's desire for identification. Another question that follows is exactly how empowering the plunge into the virtual is for the subject and if the gaze that s/he performs is met with the gaze of the images looked at (Mitchell, 2005). While considering the concept of gaze, a concept of utmost importance to both Lacan (Lacan, 1981) and Mitchell (Mitchell, 2005), the visual studies critic puts forth that images do in fact 'look back at the viewer', as it were, thus exercising their own power over the viewer. In other words it is not only the subject who does the engaging with the images, but images engage the viewer, they communicate with the viewer, 'grab' him and 'drag' him into their realm. Therefore, immediately after the contact with the image the subject is about to be compelled to include in his fantasy image elements of the viewed image, elements that have a strong impact on his conscious and/or unconscious.

Virtual space is likely to offer more impact of images than other media, due to the lack of the real time and real space constraints, to the movement of the images presented and to the speed by which the images succeed one another. By placing Lacan's understanding of the gaze into this argumentation one can put forth that the danger of the real is mostly absent for the subject who enters the virtual world. Lacan defines the gaze as the moment of absolutely shattered illusions, the instant when the subject looks into the heart of his fantasy and realizes, under the influence of the real, that there is nothing there. The desire is then terminated: the subject feels that there is nothing there to identify with, s/he comes to the understanding that the fantasy image is just fantasy. It is always the fantasy image that coordinates the subject's desire; due to the fact that the real threatens permanently to attack and destroy the fantasy image, the subject's centre of desire is a false recognition, or a mis-recognition, of the fullness, of the consistent and complete texture of the fantasy image based on the subject's narcissistic projection. The desire is generated constantly precisely due to the very lack of consistency, to

the incompleteness of the fantasy image. The virtual space offers, as mentioned above, a new and improved speed and a great variety of objects/elements that the subject can use to create the fantasy image; the screen for the subject's narcissistic projections is offered by/on the computer screen. The speed by which the objects succeed one another does not give the subject the chance to arrive at Lacan's understanding of the gaze: the realization that there is nothing behind the subject's desire, nothing but the subject's lack. To put this differently: in the virtual space the subject never reaches the level of nothingness staring him back in the face. Rather, in the virtual space the subject is constantly engaged in re-visiting the fantasy image that s/he can create constantly with the help of a space that is vividly visual, yet safely away from the Real. The very heart of desire, the nothingness/irreality is in cyberspace never threatened by the Real and while constructing her/his fantasy image the subject is constructing a whole fantasy version of reality. The ideal image of self is integrated into an ideal image of reality. The complete immersion offered by virtual space enhances the subject's tendency to avoid a fetishistic investment in a single or in very few elements of the fantasy image because virtual reality offers a complete assemblage of elements/objects of desire and the possibility of an infinite process of de-assembling and re-assembling them, thus sustaining the infinity of desire. In this process the subject percolates new coordinates for his/her desire, and situates her/himself and the object of desire and establishes a relation between the two. The desire of identification with the fantasy image is the ultimate goal in itself, since as Žižek put it, "it is through fantasy that we learn to desire" (Mitchell, 2005: 70).

As suggested above, the contemporary subject's fantasy is to a great extent media-dependent; especially certain fantasies are generated by the images that circulate in the media (Mitchell, 2005) and also as suggested above it is the virtual space that through its endless reconfiguration of images supports infinitely the subject's desire of identification with the fantasy image. The technologies of virtual space are, to an increasing extent, employed to do more than to simulate the real, an idea put forth by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 1998), but rather to mentally replace the real (Wilbur, 2000). Consequently, the subject using the computer is immersed 'into' the virtual space. This immersion is not perceived by the subject as a painful dislocation from the Real that is daunting, but rather as an opportunity to shed the Real and to explore the fantasy image by indulging in repeated mis-recognitions with what the subject sees on the screen. The subject can thus identify with a coherent fantasy image in the virtual world, s/he can easily create a persona by using the images at hand. The virtual world is the only medium that is rich enough and, at the same time, boundary-free enough to allow the subject to create a complex and fluid fantasy image/persona. The subject can thus engage in identity work without the pressure of the Real. Regardless of the extent to which the virtual mentally replaces the Real, the lack of constraints of the virtual along with the vividly visual have an impact on the user who is prompted to engage with the visual and with himself in more dynamic and more coercive ways than ever before. Lacanian mirrors are very fast and very aggressively put in front of the on-looker; s/he gazes at the images on the screen and

mentally constructs the fantasy images only to de-construct them later when new images appear on the screen and gaze at the user demanding attention and demanding to be incorporated into the new fantasy image they have just begun to trigger. Due to this very strong impact the virtual images have on the user, several cyberspace designers maintain that the new technologies, that the virtual is based on, will make the body obsolete and destroy subjectivity (Escobar, 2000). This article does not go so far as to endorse such predictions, but rather to show that the technologies particular to the virtual space contribute significantly to a certain velocity of the user's subjectivity by challenging the user's sensorial regimes in new ways.

Beyond Mirroring: Identification as operational system

Modernity introduced liquid dimensions of identity with new emphasis on the aesthetical needs and desires of the individual-consumer (Bauman, 2000). The speed of images, imposed on the individual by the media, was a cornerstone to the liquid dimension of identity. Media dominated post-modernity moved toward the wishful thinking of identities as organic, cultural as well as technical (Escobar, 2000). That leads to the question of how and where to place subjectivity and self into the virtual world, namely how much of the self the subject takes from the real world into the virtual one and how the individual is going to negotiate his/her subjectivity-objectivity rapport. According to Shawn Wilbur (Wilbur, 2000), there seems to be a certain amount of confusion about the extent to which the subject/computer user can occupy the place behind the screen, namely if the user can navigate, completely immersed into the virtual world and keep a coherent sense of self that is not just illusory and likely to be shattered at the first encounter with the real. To what extent does this navigation confirm/verify one's constantly created identities and does any identity work hold in the real space and time? The identity theory that focuses on the internal dynamics that create and verify identity is the identity control theory (Stets, 2006). This theory conceives of identity as a system, a system that functions to aim at matching perceptions of the individual with the internal standards that the individual has.

In Lacanian terms the individual is constantly trying to reconcile what s/he sees as ideal ego with the real. Identity, as a system, tries to control the perceptions that come from outside so that they will match the inside standard of the individual. Specifically, identity is fluid and flexible and it is the one that negotiates the fine balance between fantasy and real. When this matching takes place identity verification follows. The disruption of identity occurs when there is an interruption of the identity control process for at least one element of identity. Lacking one element could lead to the impossibility of verification of other identity elements. This identity theory can very pertinently answer some questions about the identity of the virtual space user; it seems to be the only theory that proposes a cybernetic model of identity, namely it understands identity as a system, as a constantly active process guided by internal self-meaning as well as by situations. However, this

model seems to sustain that identity work by means of multiple identifications with several elements is enhanced in the virtual space since the whole process, guided as it is by the internal self-meaning of the individual can, in virtual space, choose the situations that the subject finds meaningful. Because this model explains that the individual constantly adjusts her/his identity and consequently the identity standards according to the level of rewards s/he is receiving the conclusion would be that the user can create identities that s/he finds meaningful and that are likely to be rewarded in the virtual space s/he consistently accesses. For instance a woman user is likely to identify herself with younger body images and younger dress style; she creates this fantasy image of herself while shopping online for clothes. She is very likely to be rewarded for her identity choice by the online vendor as well as by other shoppers, thus obtaining complete identity verification. As to what extent she is likely to obtain identity verification if she is to take her “younger self” into the real is a whole different and very problematic matter. The gaze that she obtains in virtual space is likely to reflect her fantasy image, being based on body parts and other few elements that she uses to create her persona. The other users “see” and gaze at a product of this woman’s mind supported by technology. Moreover, she is likely to add new elements to her online persona based on the rewards that she obtains from the other users who share a particular micro world with her, a micro world that is Real-free.

Interestingly enough, contemporary male users of virtual spaces seem to be more and more inclined to do identity work, especially if they participate actively as ... viewers of elements in virtual environments. They exercise a convergence of the Lacanian polarity of the Oedipal modal of subjectivity, based on the in/famous castration anxiety. Specifically, the postmodern male, the virtual space user does not render femininity either the abjected other or the sublimated ideal. Rather, in his imaginary there seems to be a rather nebulous conflation of the two poles of femininity. The distinction made between madonnas and whores is outdated and the virtual space is a magic space that enhances the inexhaustible conflation of the two. One is to take note of the fact that this conflation still objectifies the elements, the body parts that the male user sees on the screen.

The identification that takes place under such circumstances for the male viewer in virtual space is with the position of the gazer, he never objectifies himself, neither does he need to be seen, either in the virtual space or in real space, since in both spaces he perceives himself as the subject, the only subject. In Lacanian terms the male is always the subject and tries to fill out, to complete his perceived gestalt as explained earlier on in this article. Thus, in virtual space he is more likely to want to see, while the Other Sex (Lacan, 1981), namely the female is to be seen, by both male users and female users, the latter perceiving themselves as the Other Sex as well.

A feminist perspective

An optimistic view of the importance of images is offered by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (Pollock, 2002) who goes beyond the phallic model, that fundamentals the Lacanian approach, and who conceives of subjectivity as a co-emergence in difference, as encounter. She sees this encounter as transformative of both subjectivities: male and female, thus breaking away from the very long and extremely coercive tradition of understanding male as subject and female as object. Ettinger puts forth the idea of a matrixial border-space where the female subjectivity comes in contact with the male subjectivity and is likely to affect the way the two sexes think about the aesthetic. According to Ettinger (as cited in Pollock, 2002), this meeting point is not to be “defended phobically” (Pollock, 2002) by males who feel their clear-cut, familiar, subjectivities to be threatened by the unknown of the Other Sex and its subjectivity.

As suggested above, Ettinger’s theory might be a little too optimistic. Yet, one must say that, should there be a space where encounters of subjectivities are likely to more freely and easily take place, then virtual space might just be the ideal space. By encounter of subjectivities one means the place where each sex is likely to see its subjectivity as substantive, while having an increased awareness of the other subjectivity and while not trying to objectify its own subjectivity or the subjectivity of the other. The real might hinder such a process in numberless ways. Sex is born, gender is learned, passed from one generation to the next and absorbed throughout one’s life. Gender is then performed according to the norms absorbed and the aesthetic practices as well as identification practices are along the en-culturated lines. The real is likely to perpetuate this order of things as the only order of things. Needless to say that the real is likely to creep into the virtual space as well, yet, while not observed by members of his/her social and cultural milieu the individual might stand a chance to explore identification processes in a variety of ways that are found only in virtual space.

Conclusion

Regardless of how identification takes place: as described by Lacan, as proposed by Ettinger, or as detailed by Stets, or in ways that combine processes envisioned by each of the three, virtual space is to be considered one of the most resourceful and dynamic identity sites for the post-modern individual. The author offered several seminal theories that are instrumental to understanding identity formation at any stage in the individual’s life.

References and bibliography

- Baudrillard, J.** 1998. *The consumer society: Myths and structures*. London: Sage.
- Bauman, Z.** 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Escobar, A.** 2000. 'Welcome to cyberia: Notes on the anthropology of cyberculture', in D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: Routledge. 56-76
- Lacan, J.** 1981. 'Of the gaze as objet petit a', in A. J. Miller & A. Sheridan (Eds.), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd. 67-105
- Lacan, J.** 2006. 'The mirror stage as formative of the I function as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', in *Ecrits*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Mitchell, W. J. T.** (2005). *What do Pictures Want?: The lives and loves of images*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Owens, T. J.** 2003. 'Self and identity', in J. Delamater (Ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*. New York: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers. 205-232
- Pollock, G.** 2002. 'The Aesthetics of Difference', in M. A. Holly & K. Moxey (Eds.), *Art History Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Vol. 1). Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. 147-174
- Stets, J. E.** 2006. 'Identity theory', in P. J. Burke (Ed.), *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories* (pp. 88-95).
- Wilbur, S. P.** 2000. 'An archaeology of cyberspaces: Virtuality, community, identity', in D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds.), *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: Routledge. 45-55

The author

Mădălina Alamă is a Ph. D candidate in Cultural Studies with the University of Bucharest. She teaches English for Business Communication at the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. Her research interests span from small group interaction (offline as well as online) to online consumerism and online identities. Most of her publications are in the mentioned areas.