From Digital Creations of Space to Analogous Experiences of Places:
Living in Second Life and Acting in Flash Mob

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to raise the question of how individuals and groups become placed – or take up place – in the contemporary environment and to consider what forms the need for situatedness takes today, by examining the phenomena of the Flash Mob and Second Life. In a Flash Mob, an email activates a virtual community and converts it into a physical performance in the city, challenging a new cognition of place, where place is constituted by the event. On the other hand, Second Life takes the form of a digitally constructed world, which opens the possibility of a "virtual place" that enables users to establish connections not only with each other, but also with the [virtual] environment itself. The two case studies together question place in its materiality and its symbolism, and it is argued that they act as media to re-code "groundedness". Thus we reach a paradoxical conclusion: although the contemporary world suggests a dynamic and more flexible existence on the earth, the need for "situatedness" and the demand for "well-grounded claims" remain stronger than ever. The structure of this research reflects a double set of conditions that, although not new, have intensified due to the emergence of new technologies: first, the expansion of the human body beyond its corporeal limits and second, the augmentation of the perceived world beyond the mere materiality of any kind of environment. Therefore the thesis studies how, on the one hand, bodies, communities and crowds transform within digitisation, and, on the other, how the world develops as a consequence of the digital reconstruction of grounds. It examines the way in which individuals detach from their "real-world groundedness" by forming bonds-connections to these digitised grounds, which display – as generators of endless possibilities – a kind of utopian open-endedness. Finally, it explores the phenomenon of "virtualisation" to raise the question of whether the contemporary world is infused by information and thus augmented in terms of meanings, connections, and attachments, or is instead made of a series of projections, transforming reality into an idealised version of itself.

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Introduction. Getting Real through Digital Means

1. Living in Second Life and Acting in Flash Mob

The sub-title of this dissertation, "*Living in Second Life and acting in Flash Mob*", suggests that the distinction between the physical and digital worlds is no longer clear. One can adopt a role and "act out" a performance when participating in some sort of urban play like a Flash Mob or share a "real-life-like" experience with other people within a virtual environment like Second Life. Within the context of digitisation, the boundaries between living and acting – put differently, between perceived reality and enacted imagination – need to be re-examined. The question of virtuality, the role of the phantasmatic and the imaginary that has always supplemented "reality", is now at the centre of attention due to the emergence of new technologies. Cyberspace in general and also Virtual Reality, which visualises Cyberspace in specific spatial forms, have attempted to visualise the virtual and to realise a long-pursued fantasy, the separation of body from mind. Virtuality stimulated cultural fantasies regarding the new and the different in a new age of computerisation and connectivity, in which the boundaries between a series of oppositions were blurred: the physical and the non-physical, the organism and the machine, nature and culture. Within digitally-constructed environments, people communicate and share experiences, and they establish connections that either extend or even augment their first, "physical" lives. At the same time, due to their connectivity, they form communities that can be activated via an e-mail or a text message and result into physical manifestations in the city. This research questions the role of the body and the body's place in the world within this framework, in an attempt to understand place as a concept and its relations to physicality and virtuality. On the one hand, it looks closely at the construction of virtual worlds such as Second Life, aiming to identify the ways in which the "players" invest and build in these environments and the relation that this has to their embodied "first" lives. And as a reverse, "physical" example to the case of Second Life it, on the other, studies the phenomenon of the Flash Mob to understand how communities develop within digitisation and how they relate and attach to their context.

2. Place within Digitisation

The concept of "Place" has been traditionally conceptualised in terms of a relation to the ground, rootedness, and the desire of fixity and security. Being in a place means first and foremost standing on the – natural or artificial – ground as a body, so that places undergird our existence and, conversely, our presence defines places. Therefore we both relate to places and relate to others though places. Since Plato, chora as space was considered as infinite, unlimited and universal and opposed to topos, which is to say place that has been conceptualised as static, limited and local. The primitive condition of place is often represented by home, as the centre of meaning and a point of attachment, which is emphasised even more in the characteristics of stability and materiality. However, in the contemporary world, the notion of place is being challenged by time, space, and technology. In effect, speeding up communications and endless mobility make the "where we are" a relative condition that may equally depend on physical space, or on electronic connections, or on a combination of the two. On the one hand, mass mobility calls us to seek placeness within movement, liberating place from its static concept. On the other, digitally-constructed space may also provide the basis for communication, interaction, and exchange of information with those who possess the necessary technology, and as such it may serve as a condition of possibility of a place, a place bound more on connections and attachments than on the materiality of things. Most generally, the "information revolution" has achieved the dematerialisation of space in the field of communications and the formation of immaterial cyberspace, in which various important transactions, previously related to physical locations, take place. In the preface of the "*Fate of Place*" (1997), a book that has been very central to the determination of this research topic, Edward Casey discusses the emergence of "virtual place" as a new condition of place that occurs following the development of "virtual reality" and "cyberspace". Casey argues that in inhabiting a virtual place, one engages in a "*quasi face-to-face interaction*" (Preface, p.xiv) in which, although the other parties to this interaction are not physically present and only appear as figures, they altogether share the same space that, despite its immateriality, seems to have distinct limits and certain properties, and therefore can be studied as a phenomenon of place as well. Thus the increased mobility that detaches us from physical places and also the ever-growing connectivity that creates new bonds with digital platforms and with others through these platforms call for a more expanded

consideration of placeness. The dominance of texts, screens, signs, and most generally the image, and also the role of the event and the spectacle in everyday life directly affect the process of emplacement in the world. Then, on one hand, the sensory experience of place seems to lose its rootedness in the contemporary environment and, on the other hand, people tend to establish relations within virtual space due to their connectivity. Instead of embracing the idea of a loss of place, this research suggests that mobility rather than stability, and dislocation rather than location, may in fact constitute the very basis of a new sense of place, so that the idea of place becomes transformed rather than suppressed due to new technologies.

3. The Emergence of a Digital Culture

If we take mobility, temporality and connectivity as basic components of the world we experience every day, it is easy to understand why our bonds to and/or our faith in place might have dwindled. Our sense of place is today determined by a system of physical and digital connections within a world of multiplicity, heterogeneity and fragmentariness. The need for rootedness, if there is one, juxtaposes with constantly changing time-space relations. Moreover, due to the telecommunication networks, one can be anywhere or nowhere: what matters most is connectivity. Therefore, the general context of this research is the development of a "cyberculture", in keeping with the emergence of information technologies and cyberspace, and its relations to the material world. It seeks to examine, through the two case studies, the transformation from the digital to the physical and vice versa, and the transitions from materiality to virtuality and from reality to imagination in order to understand how the physical and the digital worlds configure relations and intersections. And since the separation of body from mind is a simplified hypothesis that we often make but is in fact impossible, the question of embodiment will always haunt the discussion.

In the introduction of his book "Cyberspace: First Steps" (1991), Michael Benedikt presents a series of ten different definitions of cyberspace (Benedikt, 1991, p.1), referring to a wide range of different approaches. Among others, cyberspace is described as: the dystopic vision for a future of urban decay and degeneration, referencing the first use of the word in William Gibson's "*Neuromancer*" (1984); as a parallel universe to ours, constructed and sustained by telecommunication networks; as

a limitless place accessible from anywhere in the world as long as one's computer can be connected to the system; as a mental geography built out of memories, but also imagination, dreams and desires; as an endless space where data flows and is stored; as a "spaceless" construction where anything stored in it is always available; as the space where money "actually" flows and business is "really" made; as the space where anything informational or important can be found for sale; and as a realm of pure information that relieves the physical world from extra waste of materials, pollution, commutes. Cyberspace is clearly all these things and even more, nevertheless the definition that most directly responds to the context of this research is the following:

"*Cyberspace: the tablet become a page become a screen become a world, a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere, a place where nothing is forgotten and yet everything changes.*" (Benedikt, 1991, p.1)

Here cyberspace suggests a "there" that can be entirely constructed and that, paradoxically, exists both everywhere and nowhere, naturally creating confusion regarding the "here" in which we physically are at the same time. This is what is special about the "digital condition": the fact that it presents a "there" that may be equally everywhere and nowhere, making its location less important than its accessibility, and therefore introducing alternative perceptions of placeness. The way that the electronic mail functions illustrates this example. Unlike the physical world, the email address does not simply carry within it information about someone's location but it simultaneously assigns a name and an identity to the subject. Although it signifies privacy and intimacy – similarly to the concept of the physical home – the email does not constitute a fixed place, but instead it may be accessible from anywhere, as long as one has the access code and can connect to the network. Then place as a concept detaches from "groundedness" in its tangible sense within digitisation[1], but at the same time becomes closely linked to the human body, as it is the body that gathers all the information together. Then this "there" that exists "nowhere" has the ability to bring people together from "anywhere" and get them to exchange information and share experiences. Unlike conventional geography, cyberspace suggests a "*mental geography*" (Benedikt, 1991, p.3), free from physical constraints, yet tied to our

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[1] Of course, this seeming "groundlessness" cannot be achieved without a "physical" servers' infrastructure that is very well-grounded on the earth and on which digital networks owe their existence.

collective and personal decisions, a collective construction in the form of a hallucination, and a common – but not fixed – territory that gives space to mythical figures, symbols, ideas, fears, and desires. Interestingly, anything that is important to people in the physical world, personal, social, and professional matters, interests and concerns, are also given space and new extensions within this "other", weightless space that is detached from the earthly ground. This makes cyberspace neither a "parallel" nor the "other" to this world. It is not parallel because it might have been built by the same people that inhabit the physical world; nevertheless it was built under different priorities and constraints (less material inhibitions but more coding restrictions and also having as a point of departure the real world but in an attempt to overcome it), taking it in new directions. At the same time, cyberspace is not the "other" to this world either as – despite being physically "uprooted" from the material world – it is always closely linked to our personal experiences. Instead, cyberspace may be seen as a different layout of this world, an environment where proximity and distance, materiality and virtuality are set on a different basis, where fantasies are easily visualised, multiple identities are externalised, and human communication and relations are feasible due to connectivity instead of physical proximity. As such, it is more of a reconfiguration of this world under new rules, and its continuation towards new extensions, always shaped as a collectivity of personal views and experiences, but also dreams, fears, and desires.

This is why the digital is so significant here: on one hand it is the world of desires and ideals visualised, and a space that promises the indulgence of bodily pleasures by getting rid our actual body. But on the other hand, it is also the projection of the physical world put into a new order. Within this context the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised are all in question ideologically. The aim of this project is to study social and spatial structures and question the boundaries between materiality and virtuality, now that the limits between the technological and the natural, the corporeal and the phantasmatic are no longer clear. The construction of the Self and the body within this context play a central role.

In effect, it is not so much the immateriality of cyberspace that has made it popular but possibly the fact that despite this immateriality, the environment appears friendly and intriguing at the same time. Unlike the built environment that appears concrete and fixed, complete and unchangeable, the world of Internet is flexible and

adjustable, easier to customise and open to various forms of interaction. Cyberspace by default grants a certain degree of freedom to users and is largely built by them rather than professional designers and programmers. Moreover, both its expansion and popularisation have brought along the development of a "cyberculture" that may be read as a truly popular culture, based on people's needs and desires expressed via their digital personae. Within this fairly short time that the Internet has become easily accessible to more and more people, applications and websites became part of our everyday life, so that we can hardly recall the time before the launch of YouTube or Google Earth. Within digitisation, just as the corporeal body has ceased to constitute the boundary between interiority and exteriority, "home" is no longer the boundary between private and public life. Work, entertainment, social interaction, and also education, shopping and banking, can also take place within home, opening it to the public and making it more accessible to "outsiders" than ever. As part of this evolving cyberculture certain codes of behaviour are being developed that obviously affect real-world interactions as well. Thus either online or offline, individuals in the electronic age are aware that they are always being watched and behave accordingly: they post information to be heard and seen and they freely comment on other people's posts. One becomes an increasingly public figure and a character on stage, and can decide if one wants to act spontaneously or prepare one's next action. Cyberspace today is equally about surveillance and self-surveillance: it is not that some sort of a "Big Brother" is not watching us anymore (this is in fact easier than ever as we all contribute to that by sharing personal information through the web), but also each one of us is a Big Brother and a player, in a much more complicated but potentially more democratised role-playing game. Here everybody is simultaneously the actor and the audience, the consumer and the seller. Consequently the Internet does not simply provide the terrain for cultural experimentation, but also the tools for culture-making and most importantly, culture-monitoring. Within this framework, the concepts of property, identity, movement, context, need to be reconsidered. Although many contemporary thinkers argue that the emergence of this new culture will result in having fewer occasions for public appearance in the future, this research suggests that it is more likely that there will only be different occasions and novel forms of this public appearance, for instance more "flash-mob-like" events, or other forms of physical social interactions structured by digital communication.

4. Research Statement

If being in a place is symbolised by the image of a body standing on the ground, this research aims to re-visit this concept based on two sets of inquiry that were developed simultaneously: first, the expansion of the understanding of the human body beyond its corporeal limits, and second, the augmentation of the perceived world beyond the mere materiality of any sort of ground. This entails a double change in perception. On the one hand, it has to do with the perception of the human body as an open-ended entity, a body that might be physically enhanced with micro-devices that facilitate its operation or with equipment that keeps it connected to others, but, most importantly, a body that is mentally extended beyond its skin through technological augmentation, to include other bodies, objects, ideas, fears, and desires. This hybrid body has been argued by contemporary theorists to stand against any categorisation such as "natural", "pure", and "original", and therefore against any sort of pre-given and fixed identity, breaching all kinds of boundaries and challenging the discriminations of race, sexuality, gender, and class. On the other hand, the perception of the world also opens up to include other forms of spatialities. Within digitisation the world is not simply geographically ordered, but supplemented by connections and virtual spaces that altogether suggest an exciting play between materiality and immateriality, gravity and weightlessness, and most generally, groundedness and groundlessness. Moreover, the body and the world connect in complex ways, abolishing any clearly-defined boundaries between them. It is also important to note that both the ideas of the open-ended body and the augmented world are not new; in effect, both the human body and the world have always been conceived as something more than their material enclosures, however, it is due to digitisation that these extensions have become more visible and that new cultures based on this hybridity of things are developed. While digitisation might not have created but only foregrounded and accelerated the hybridity of things, it nevertheless, has also provided us with the appropriate means to re-construct both the body and the ground digitally and thus it has enabled us to question their significance and their symbolisation.

The aim of this research is to raise the question of how individuals and groups become placed – or take up place – in the contemporary environment and to consider what forms the need for situatedness takes today. It examines how individuals connect to others and to their environments building attachments understood as a "sense of place" in an increasingly digitised and as such complex world. Therefore it looks into

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the ways that digital environments have challenged the traditional understandings of both place (the "whereness" of being in the world) and body (which is now expanded in its field of action beyond the body), aiming to argue not on the failure – or the inadequacy – of thereness today, but on its dissolution and reassertion, under new perceptions of the world, and against anything pre-given and fixed. By re-conceptualising the play between materiality and symbolism in electronically mediated urban play and virtual environments, this thesis aims to re-code "groundedness" within a context of mobility, temporality, and connectivity.

In this attempt to understand the "whereness" of things in the world this research develops a dialogue between the cultures of two phenomena that at first sight do not appear genealogically related: Second Life and the Flash Mob. Whereas in a Flash Mob, an email activates a virtual community and converts it into a physical performance in the city, Second Life takes the form of a digitally constructed world that enables users to establish connections not only with each other, but also, with the [virtual] environment itself. The act of bringing the two case studies together suggests an experiment of exchange: although a physical act, Flash Mob is dense in cyberspace allusions, and Second Life on the other hand, despite its digital construction, is structured through real-life metaphors. In this way, they illustrate the complex transformations from the digital to the physical and vice-versa that occur in the electronic age and very often escape our attention. The following section looks closely at the ways both Second Life and the Flash Mob operate.

Although the two case studies do not appear directly related to each other, it was the initial selection of the one that led to the other. The Flash Mob was central to the conceptualisation of this research as it challenged the static character of place – and therefore the understanding of place and a pre-given and fixed thing – by introducing the idea of an "instant" placeness, and with it the instant appearance and disappearance of places in the city due to such temporal public events. In a Flash Mob an email motivates individuals to form a physical crowd in the city, only for a few minutes. Then as a critical counterpart to that, a virtual, immaterial world required to be studied, which would draw references from the physical world – the physical world being considered here as both the built environment but also its inhabitants' dreams, hopes, and fears – in order to construct a representational space that would challenge the idea of a "virtual" place. Second Life was chosen because, unlike most online virtual worlds, there are no

specific tasks to be accomplished and no winners or losers in it, but instead is formed as a social environment inside which many different interactions take place, giving the possibility of a "second life" to its users. Moreover, Second Life is unique in the fact that it establishes strong economic and legal connections to the real world, which allows users to buy and invest (both real-world money and personal time/effort) in virtual property, a fact that indicates that the need for situatedness and "groundedness" does not cease to exist within immaterial contexts. Together, the two case studies allowed the exploration of the interplay between the "everywhere" and the "nowhere" introduced by the digital culture by combining different aspects of its complexity, such as materiality and virtuality, permanence and ephemerality, reality and imagination, and thus were a way to understanding how the open-ended body performs in this ever-connected world. And although the case studies are very different in their nature, this thesis presents examples in which they interconnect in interesting and complex ways – for instance, the "Flash Crowd" science fiction story by Larry Niven presented in Chapter 4 may be a significant precedent for the understanding of Flash Mobs, but, interestingly, it is also a story that contains attributes of Second Life. Moreover, an online protest within Second Life that is discussed in the same chapter is described by bloggers as a "Flash Mob" due to its instant appearance and disappearance. What is important, in general terms, is the way Second Life and Flash Mob together, through the interplay of the digital and the physical, become media whose study facilitates a more dynamic understanding of both place (which is the topic of this research) and context (which is discussed in the final chapter of this thesis).

My first contact with the Flash Mobs took place in late 2003 in Athens, only a few months after their initial appearance in New York, as a close friend of mine was a member of "flashmob.gr", the group that organised these very first Flash Mobs in Greece. The group managed to assemble no more than twenty people at its first attempts, but after a while the participants raised to a number of between fifty and one hundred. I was mostly an "outsider" and a viewer rather than an active "flash-mobber" at these early stages; however I was very much impressed by the instant transformation that the city was going through, and by the suspension of very well-known places in the city that lasted only for a few minutes, until everything returned to their everyday pace. The urban crowd of Athens was also genuinely surprised by these events, as nothing of that sort had happened before – the streets of Athens always gave place to political

demonstrations, protests, and riots, but the idea of a "fun-based" crowd formed for no reason at all could not be explained. The mass media soon discovered this practice that was spreading around the world and Athens was put on the worldwide map of this strange urban game. Since then, I followed the evolution of Flash Mobs across time and space – I participated in very popular Flash Mobs in London and in Edinburgh and I also discovered alternative facets of cities by watching the innumerable videos of Flash Mobs that have been posted in YouTube. It is exactly this double transformation, the unique experience of familiar urban spaces on the one hand and the reading of unknown spaces through their instant appearance and disappearance on the other hand, that make Flash Mobs a tool for the understanding and the re-coding of groundedness in the contemporary cities.

My first experience of Second Life came a few years later, in 2009, for the purpose of this research project and as I was framing its parameters. Having limited experience with virtual worlds before that, I spent a lot of time trying to decide on a name and a first avatar body. Since the name of the avatar is one of the very few things that cannot be changed after the construction of one's account, I had to delete my first avatar as its name bore very close relation to my "first life" name. I thought that if one is to build a "second" life, then s/he should begin with a new name. My second – and current – avatar instead took the name of a favourite book character, Sabina. This process makes me think that even when we attempt to start anew, we need to ground ourselves into some sort of personally meaningful fiction. Within the past four years I built the fiction of "my version" of Sabina. She travelled a lot within Second Life, trying to see and experience as much as possible: she made friends, she went to parties, she attended conferences and lectures, and she went shopping for hair, skin, eyes, and other bodily members – she experimented with her body more than I will ever do. At times, she had a much more active life than my first life. Through her "eyes" I managed to see how people, whose existences in Second Life are less utilitarian than mine, build artificial environments and ground themselves in them, escaping all different kinds of exclusion – from financial to communicational to social exclusion. These grounds were for them much more important than their "first" lives' locations.

It is these different accounts of "groundedness" that Second Life and the Flash Mobs bring together, raising the question of "locatedness" in an increasingly digitised world, within many different agencies and multiple interactions. Thus Second Life is a

digital and as such a representational ground, onto which human interaction takes place and communities are formed, whereas, Flash Mobbing suggests new ways of using and appropriating the well-known and lived urban terrain thanks to a virtual community that becomes "real". Since our world can no longer be considered only physical or local, and at the same time, the digital realm cannot be seen as utterly unreal, experiences like those in Second Life and Flash Mobs explore how our physical presence in the world is being overlaid by electronic networks and, in this way, put the traditional concept of place under question. This original encounter then aims to develop, in different ways, a new sense of "situatedness" that would contribute to the hypothesis that the concern that virtual space abstracts us from the essence of place is overstated. Against narratives which suggest that globalisation and the dominance of cyberspace aim to eventually deny time, space, and place, this thesis aims to argue that, in the electronic age, the need for "locatedness" and the demand for "well-grounded claims" remain stronger than ever.

5. The Case Studies

A Flash Mob is a group of anonymous individuals, who have nothing in common apart from their connectivity to a digital network, that meet in a pre-determined location, perform an unusual act and then disperse peaceably within ten minutes (fig.1). Most generally, this is seen as a fun, spontaneous event that has by default no ideological background and focuses only on the excitement of the moment. The first Flash Mob was created in Manhattan in May 2003, by Bill Wasik, senior editor of Harper's Magazine in New York. The origins of the Flash Mobs were unknown until Wasik published an article about his idea in the March 2006 edition of Harper's. Before that, he had semi-anonymously (as "Bill", sometimes "Bill the journalist") explained his original intentions at several blogs that covered the growth of this fashion, and later at an interview for the Stay Free Online Magazine: "*I wanted it to appear like one of those things circulating around the internet*" (Wasik, 2005). In 2004, the term "Flash Mob" was included in the 11th edition of the Oxford Concise English Dictionary, published in July 2004, in which it was defined as "*a public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again*" (Soanes and Stevenson, 2004).

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Figure 1: Flash Mob in Paris (Segel, 2010)

Wasik came up with the Flash Mob idea in an attempt to employ electronic technology in order to bring people together for no reason at all: "*the original idea was to create an email that would get forwarded around in some funny way, or that would get people to come to a show that would turn out to be something different or surprising*" (Wasik, 2005). On May 27, 2003, as described in his book "And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture" (2009), Wasik created an anonymous email account and send himself the following message:

"*You are invited to take part in MOB, the project that creates an inexplicable mob of people in New York City for ten minutes or less. Please forward this to other people you know that might like to join.*" (Wasik, 2009, p.7)

Within the following four months Wasik organised eight similar events. People would synchronise their watches, they would meet at a specific location, they would be given information about the theme of the project and what they should do, they would begin and end their performance at the agreed times, and they would disappear right after that. By default, the mobs did not have any ideological or political background, but only focused on the event for the event's sake. Wasik carefully chose his locations to be public or semi-public spaces of urban everyday life, such as public squares, city parks, and shopping malls. Soon the media – newspapers, but also websites and blogs – picked up the new trend and made it known to an increasingly wider public. A blog called

"Cheesebikini" (Savage), run at the time by a post-graduate student of Berkeley University named Sean Savage, which kept record of the "Mob Project" gave it its name, "Flash Mobs", paying a tribute to a 1973 science fiction story called "*Flash Crowd*", written by Larry Niven. Interestingly, this first set of Flash Mobs was initially conceived as a local thing: Wasik thought that this trend would suit perfectly the people in New York who always look for the "next big thing". As a viral trend, this would intrigue them to find out what everybody else was so excited about, and to want to become a part of this scene. However, the word spread via e-mail, text messages, and also social-networking websites led into countless Flash Mobs in more than 100 cities around the world in the following years. In March 2008, the first global event was also organized: the "Pillow fight Flash Mob" took place in 22 different cities at the same day. The vast spread of the phenomenon has to a certain degree undermined its effects: today the urban crowd is no longer surprised when a mob forms out of nowhere to perform a short, fun, and absurd act in the city, and at the same time different sorts of actions in the city, from political protests to artistic performances and television advertisements, are named as "Flash Mobs" to emphasize their instant appearance and disappearance within the city and their playful attitude.

This new idea of public appearance illustrates how an email circulating among the members of a virtual community may transform into a physical performance in the city, and therefore how everyday life is increasingly underpinned by information and electronic connections. There are multiple reasons for the significance of the Flash Mob in the context of this research. First, it explores in a very straightforward way the transitions from the digital to the physical, and back again to the digital within the mobility, temporality, and connectivity of the contemporary city. A Flash Mob begins with an email that stimulates people that share the same interests, to get together in the city and engage in this new form of urban play. A digital community becomes a physical crowd, only for a few minutes, and disappears shortly thereafter. And although a fleeting event, it will be digitally recorded via the cameras and the camcorders of the participants or the surprised viewers, or even through the CCTV cameras, and it will then be permanently stored as a public image on the Internet. The play with time is also very important here: Flash Mobs manifest an unexpected happening in the city that comes out of nowhere – literally, since cyberspace exists nowhere or everywhere – yet they create something that changes the pace of the city for a short while. Such a practice

also illustrates how communities are formed within digitisation and how they are "realised" within the urban scene. Through the examples of Flash Mobs we may study different crowd formations – virtual or physical – and also conditions of co-presence and coexistence within the electronic age. Moreover, Flash Mobs suggest novel ways of inhabiting the contemporary city by temporarily transforming it into an "urban playground". Most important, as mentioned above, Flash Mobs propose the concept of an "instant place" or even an "event place", a place that exists not because of the memories and the values concentrated on its ground, but instead because of the event, and therefore a concept that reduces the city and its ground into a thin surface. Train stations and shopping malls, public squares and parks become newly significant due to people and their actions. Just for a short period of time, people create an illusory environment in the city: they enact their digital personae, raising questions about the virtualisation of the physical world. Flash Mobs create an event-based landscape following contradictory rules within the mobility, temporality, and connectivity of the times: they are formed by an anonymous group of people gathered up due to their participation to the same network [connectivity], that perform an unusual act in the city [mobility] lasting only for a few minutes time [temporality].

The practice of Flash Mobs continues a long tradition of mass formations and activism in public space by re-visiting the relation between the group and the individual in an increasingly complex – and digitised – world. They can be read as an ironic commentary that recalls the mass formations as theorised by thinkers such as Elias Canetti and Siegfried Kracauer and the oppositional events by the Situationists. Therefore they suggest a "kitsch" participatory fun-like orchestration that attracts a large number of people "just for fun" – and it is exactly the claim of the absence of any ideological background that allows space for critique on crowd formations. Moreover, through Flash Mobs the crowd becomes a cinematic element in the city, questioning whether the masses today take the form of an ornament or even of an effective image.

Then mobility, temporality and connectivity introduced by new technologies seem to directly affect everyday life and the way individuals establish connections with the environment, but they do not abolish these connections. Flash Mobs re-visit the need to get out in the streets again and act collectively, to make a protest, to have fun, or simply to be found with others. Urban play attempts to ascribe new meanings to the city and redefine individuals' attachment to it. The need to relate to the world and consume

meaning remains, but this presupposes seeing the world as a collection of heterogeneous identities and fragments, which affects the way we function in the city and how we construe "placeness". A new "sense of place" emerges, detached from rootedness and fixity that is now embodied and dramatic due to movement and action. And while the attachment to the ground, the need for security and stability seem to dwindle, virtual worlds gain ground. The digital environment provides the arena for people to express themselves and establish connections not only with each other, but interestingly with the environment itself.

As described above, Second Life was selected as a counter-example to the Flash Mob case study. The reason is that it constitutes an entirely artificial environment that draws its references from the real world as defined both by our lived experiences and our pursued ideals, and therefore challenging the possibility of a "virtual" place. Developed and launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, Second Life is an open, privately owned online digital world. "*Built upon a unique grid and streaming architecture*" (Ondrejka, 2004, p.1), Second Life's technology allows users/players (usually called "Residents", or simply avatars) not simply to customize their experience in the world, but also to interfere at all levels and participate in its design and function. Unlike most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games[2], in which the development of the status of the player throughout various processes and tests is the primary goal, Second Life focuses on human interaction rather than on gaming, which makes it more of a social environment rather than a game. Residents are free to explore different worlds within this world, meet other Residents and socially interact with them, engage in individual or collective activities, but also buy or trade virtual property and services with one another, build their homes or create businesses. To enter to this world, the user/player initially has to decide on the name and the appearance of his "avatar", that is, his digital representation. After building his/her avatar body appropriately (not necessarily as a human body, an avatar may also look like an animal, a cyborg, an object, or an abstract form), s/he is free to interfere with the environment as well. Most generally, the avatar may be defined as the "*representation of self in a given physical environment*" (Castronova, 2003, p.4), and as a "*mythic figure with its origin in one*

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[2] Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) is a genre of computer role-playing games in which players interact with one another within virtual environments.

world and projected or passing through a form of representation appropriate to a parallel world" (Little, 1999). As a visual representation and a piece of software, it is inseparable from its creator and functions as the medium that stands between the self and this other world and enables the user to experience the world by "driving" or "inhabiting" it.

Figure 2: Land Hierarchy

Interestingly, this world looks more like the real world than something utopic or ideal. Second Life is not simply a space where people share experiences, communicate, and interact through their avatars – and for these reasons potentially a place too – but it bears great similarities in its appearance to the material world as well. Thus the world has a ground and a sky, day and night, gravity and wind, trees, rivers and lakes, islands and sea. Objects fall under the force of gravity and avatars walk, although they have the option to fly from one region to another or even teleport. In most cases there is the option to abolish many real-world restrictions (for instance, the user/player has the option to select between day and night or in some cases sunny and winter weather), however such features as default options still give the impression of an environment very similar to the earthly one. Land in Second Life is in the form of islands that float in an endless ocean, so that when there is demand for more land, new islands appear on the map. The smallest unit of island is a square piece of land – pixel-like – named "region" (fig.2). Larger islands are made by many regions together, and in the case where these islands are very vast, these are named "continents". Residents are free to purchase parts

of regions ("parcels") or entire islands or even assortments of islands, and they are free to determine the terms of use for their privately owned land – whether they want it to be open to the public or not. The "*Second Life Grid Survey*" website shows that out of a total area of 1829.37 km² of land, there are 466.16 km² owned by Linden Lab Company and 1363.21 km² of private estates, which makes the world ample in both private and "public" properties. According to the statistics of the same website, the total number of Residents in Second Life, as in 19/1/2013, is 32 383 265, with an average of 60 000 avatars being online at any time. Cory Ondrejka, one of the creators of Second Life, in his article "A Piece of Place" (2004), explains that a world very similar to the one we live was favoured in order to create an environment "*broadly appealing as possible*" (p.1) and therefore easily recognizable, so that everyone would feel free to participate and experiment (fig.3). This decision aimed at establishing communities that would work in "*very real-world ways*" (p.4) and the development of a collaborative nature that would encourage residents to be creative and self-expressive.

Figure 3: "The Church of the Mac" (Antonopoulou, 2011)

Due to the Residents' active participation in its development, Second Life became an ever-evolving and growing world that aspired from the beginning, to "*provide a place that felt familiar and comfortable, while granting freedoms not possible in the real world*" (Ondrejka, 2004, p.1). Disengaged from all the real world limitations, as Ondrejka argues, one is free to create one's own representational, topological, and physical rules, drawing ideas both from one's everyday life and imagination. In order to engage users as much as possible, and also increase to the maximum the quality and the

quantity of the user-created content, Second Life displays strong economic and legal connections to the real world. Residents not only have full intellectual property rights to their creations, but they are also allowed to generate real world income and have different sorts of monetary transactions: they can make money by their activities within the world, they may sell [digital] products and services of their design, and they can profit by their virtual land. It is perhaps because of the real estate business and the monetary transactions – and also the establishment of the Linden Dollar (L$), which is the world's internal currency – that Second Life appears credible and thus "real" to its users.

Second Life is an immersive virtual reality social world in the sense that the user feels enveloped in the illusion created by the world. It is important to note that the virtual reality suggested here has little to do with the virtual reality developed in scientific research through sensory-input devices and space simulators, but has instead come from the computer game industry, which rather focuses on "*mentally and emotionally engaging software*" (Castronova, 2005, p.6). Thus, despite its similarity to the real world, Second Life is clearly inferior to it in terms of visual representation. However, the "immersion" in the environment suggests that the user becomes so emotionally and mentally engaged with the world through his avatar, that s/he disregards the fact that the world is artificial and imperfect. Second Life is worth studying then not as a visually perfect representation of a world, but rather, as an environment that, despite its imperfections, has the ability to trigger the imagination of its users to supplement and complete their experience. In the same sense, the avatar also becomes a field of investigation. As an object and a vehicle of the self intrinsically linked to its creator, it not only reveals, but also extends and supplements the character of the user. Therefore Second Life works as a "testing ground" in this research, a place where we may study the reconstruction of our body and ground from zero, and also question whether this "reconstruction from zero" is ever possible when everybody brings his/her "real-world baggage" with him. It is through these multiple reconstructions, and always in relation to the consequences that this has for our embodied "first" lives that we will be able to decode what the attachment to the ground means, to question what forms the need for "placeness" takes today, and finally, to understand the significance of place within digitisation.

The fact that the fiction of Second Life attempts to imagine a better and freer future and to visualise it with digital means places it within a context of a long tradition on conditions of transcendedness, with the utopic imaginings being a crucial precedent for that. As described extensively in Chapter 7, titled "Utopia: Transcending Placeness and Groundedness", Second Life, due to its immaterial construction, takes its part in narratives of detachment from the earthly surface in pursuit for the perfected, the ideal, and the utopic, and therefore relates, on the one hand to science fiction stories that imagine a liberating "out-of-body" existence in representational space (continuing a literature framed by writers such as William Gibson and Neal Stephenson in the late 70's and early 80's), and on the other hand to descriptions of utopia, heaven, and the afterlife. The name "Second Life" itself suggests both the need to separate from the weighty burdens of the physical life and the desire to start anew, if possible from zero. Most important, the absence of death from the context of Second Life makes its [virtual] territories ideal for those who wish to escape the everyday life and release themselves towards an eternal and exhilarating existence.

6. From Digital Creations of Space to Analogous Experiences of Places – An Overview of the Thesis

This research aims to examine the status of place as "groundedness" in the context of an increasingly digitised and therefore complex world. The first chapter presents a series of perspectives on place, in an attempt to create a framework for this discussion. Then the main body of this thesis is divided into two main sections. The first section, titled "Body_ Place_ Experience" focuses on the construction of the body as a technological object and its place in the world, by studying how bodies, crowds, and communities transform within digitisation. The second section titled "Body_ Ground_ Attachment", explores the construction and the reconstruction of the ground, both physically and digitally, aiming to explain the attachment to it and its relation to the process of emplacement. Separating the two sections, Chapter 5, "Body and Ground: Excursus on Public Space" discusses the role of public space in the digital age, marking the transition from the discussion on the body itself to the construction of the grounds that support it.

As mentioned above, Chapter 1 sets out the framework for this research by questioning the "where" of things and what makes this "where" significant, through contemporary theories of place. Place as a static and fixed thing is here juxtaposed with placeness within mobility and heterogeneity. The aim of the Chapter is not to create a catalogue of formulations regarding place, but rather to function as a review of ideas that will help us think about the question of place in relation to the case-studies and to pose issues of materiality and immateriality, fixity and mobility, pragmatism and imagination. Therefore it unfolds from the conceptualisation of place as being-in-the-world that happens through experience and the active participation in this world, to an idea of place thought in terms of motion and change. The issues of "placelessness", the emergence of "non-places", and the place as an event and a "place-to-happen" that arise as a result of the increasing mobility in the contemporary context are also part of this discussion and increase the need for meanings, narratives, and connections instead of rootedness and stability. The human body is here challenged as a biological, physical, sexual, open-ended and ever-changing entity, which makes place a non-topological question that needs to be discussed in social, historical, political, and sexual terms.

Chapter 2 then explores the experience of the body in the construction of place by asking whether there is a "first dwelling" and a "first place" for the body that is constructed as a technological object within the contemporary world. Donna Haraway's famous essay "*A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*" (1991) constitutes a very significant guide to this research, and therefore a close reading of it in this chapter becomes the starting point for a discussion of the construction of the human body, its boundaries, and its place within digitisation. The cyborg body here becomes a trope for the hybridity of things. If "we are all cyborgs" as Haraway claims, then our bodies must be conceived as complex assemblages that escape any conventional categorisation of gender, race, age, and sexuality. In a cyborg world where the "pure" and the "original" have no place, the "first place" and the "origin story" are also out of the question, and along with them any fixed and predetermined places and any established position of the human body.

Chapter 3 extends this line of study by looking closely at the construction of the avatar body in relation to the cyborg body as described by Haraway: as a technological object, as a hybrid of organic and mechanic parts, and most importantly, as the image of new subjectivity. Studying the reconstruction of the human body through programming

and through the fantasy of the out-of-body self-containment, it enables us to escape the nature-culture antithesis and to identify cultural values, past images and future visions, hidden fears and desires. Through this exploration, the enhanced and extended human body is seen as the new "monster" of the digital age, not in the sense that it appears physically deformed or modified, but in the fact that it gathers the "many" within itself, and therefore it connects in new ways to others and to its environment. It is the place(s) of this body in the world that this research attempts to identify.

The way in which these bodies connect to each other and compose communities in the electronic age, is examined in Chapter 4, by studying different crowd formations, from instant crowds in a science-fiction futuristic context of the 70s, to the way Flash Mobs operate within the city, to virtual crowds in Second Life. Taking into account the mass assemblies within the contemporary urban environment, this chapter discusses the emergence of a new sort of massing, the "playful crowd", as a hybrid form of gathering that ludically combines material and immaterial aspects of the city – the city itself and its superimposed networks, the urban dwellers and their digital connections – to form a mass that serves its specific purposes. Under this framework of a playful crowd that might be virtual or physical, protesting or celebrating, or simply a crowd for the "crowd's sake" coming out of the transformation of a virtual community as Flash Mobs purport to be, the question arises as to whether crowds constitute powerful elements of urban life due to their physicality or due to their image, and consequently to the significance of "physicality" and "touch" in their formations.

After this first section that focuses on the body and its relations to other bodies within current conditions of mobility, temporality, and connectivity, in Chapter 5 the growing publicness, its social implications, and people's right to privacy in the electronic age are discussed. Starting with communities that may be formed either by physical or by digital means today, as the chapter on crowds suggests, this small section examines the status of virtual space as public and thus questions identity, freedom, and action within digital culture. By presenting examples of "online" social activism and computer-mediated action in the streets, it poses the question of whether cyberspace expands the field of social action, or instead it tends towards the "virtualisation" of the physical world and its reduction into an image. For the same reason, it questions the role of the digital realm as a "safety valve" that releases the pressure and the anxiety of the times without affecting the established order. The issue of the virtualisation of the

physical space raised here becomes very significant in the following section that discusses the constructions and the reconstructions of the ground in an attempt to understand placeness.

Chapter 6 opens the second section of this thesis by examining the transition of the notion of "groundedness" from materiality to symbolism due to new technologies. It oscillates between the idea of the "native ground" as a repository of meanings and memories and the Heideggerian "being in the world" as "being on the earth" and as placeness, to conditions of "groundlessness", in which the ground is thinned into a surface that cannot carry anything within it. By observing how people invest in virtual worlds by acquiring virtual land and building on it, it examines the significance of the ground and its material and virtual "backgrounds". It argues that since, similarly to physical space, cyberspace is also capable of creating a "there" and a place, then the mechanism of attachment to ground, things, and places needs to be re-examined.

Where Chapter 6 deals with groundedness, Chapter 7 is about transcendence. This chapter focuses on Utopia as the negation of the ground and as a "no-place", its virtual construction, and its raison d'être. It examines how needs, hopes, and desires are projected in imaginaries of the future and the ideal, and how these imagined conditions construct a critique of the present. Utopia is here regarded as a narrative and a text that only creates projections of places, figures, and history, and therefore it is seen as the absolutely unrealisable place that opens up infinite possibilities and spatial configurations. The "no-place" as groundlessness is seen as the generator of the "new", the "other", the "alternative", and this suspension of the ground calls us to renegotiate gravity, materiality, context, and also connections and attachments. This chapter then shifts from the utopic context to the virtual context to ask whether virtual worlds may create such utopic projections, and through these, constructive criticism of the contemporary environment and it reflects on the necessity of both place and no-place, of both groundedness and suspension.

Finally, Chapter 8 discusses a different sort of suspension of the ground by presenting spaces of virtuality and hyperreality within the physical world and their relations to new technologies. From the "real" to the "more than real", the context of hyperreality is studied here as an attempt to achieve a realised – and as such a "degenerate" – utopia (Marin, 1984, p.240). This chapter extends from the virtualisation

of physical space to computer-generated virtual reality, and attempts to identify the connections between the two. It thus describes the transformation of the real world into a context of a virtual reality by using examples of spaces of leisure and theme parks, where illusion dissolves any distinction between reality and imagination for the visitor. From the development of the Coney Island and the first Disneyland parks before the emergence of new technologies, to contemporary fantasy lands such as the "Beijing World Park", it explains how spaces of illusion are constructed and how they manage to escape the boundaries of themes parks and spread within contemporary cities through digitisation.

"(W)e are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game." (Haraway, 1991, p.161)

This excerpt from Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is quoted several times in this thesis [in Chapter 2 to refer to the reconstruction of the body through communication technologies and bio-engineering, in Chapter 3 to explain the playful character, in Chapter 4 to describe the essence of the "playful crowds", and in the conclusions to discuss the illusion of play that has overwhelmed everyday life]. And it is implied many more. In Haraway's thinking, communication technologies and bioengineering give us the opportunity to reconstruct/revisit the human body as a complex system, to reconstitute the relationships among individuals, and finally to attempt a new world order. The transition to an era of "all play" highlights the significance of rearrangements at all scales, in relation to science and technology, and towards the abolition of all conventional distinctions. This is the context that this research wants to capture through the case studies. Flash Mobs have introduced the urban play and the playful experimentation within the contemporary city, while Second Life has emerged out of the field of computer games to simulate a world where reality and dreams meet, yet none of them is really a game in the sense of having no responsibilities or impact on a formal, "real", first life – besides no such distinction can be made in the digital age. Together, they delineate the transition to a world [physical and digital at the same time] that resembles fun and playful, but in which, at the same time, nothing is without consequences. The "deadly game" in Haraway's quote calls us to think about the possible consequences too: at what cost labour transforms into play, or even what sort of displacements it incurs, from the parts of the planet that enjoy the

high-end means of the digital age, to those in which these means are actually manufactured – in other words whose labour is the pre-condition of the digitised First World's "play".

Main Thesis

Chapter 1. Re-Thinking Place through Philosophy, Architecture, and Technology

1.1 Introduction: raising the question of "where"

The study of space and place reflects the attempt to approach the "where" of things in the world and to understand the environment not only in a condition of motionlessness, but also during movement and change. Therefore the much-contested dualism of the two mediates between materiality and context, abstraction and clarity, knowledge and experience, openness and limitation. Traditionally, space is conceptualised as an open, infinite, and unlimited field, as opposed to place, which is understood as a bounded, finite, and local construct. The concept of place has been always associated with stasis, "groundedness" and rootedness, and the desire for fixity and security, often reduced to location and site. Space, on the other hand, usually represents the wider context of things and the open platform on which things happen, the field inside which concentrations of meanings and experience constitute place, or better, sequences of places.

The aim of this section is to describe space and place through a series of perspectives in order to refine the understanding of this "where" of things and its significance. It stands between meanings, values, and cultures on the one hand, and bodies, physical spaces, and material objects on the other. It considers placeness within the technological world and via information. It questions geography and topology within mobility and heterogeneity. Taking as its point of departure the definitions of "chora" and "topos" and their understanding as space and place respectively through Plato and Aristotle, the chapter extends to Heidegger's philosophy in order to define place as experience and as being in the world. Then it challenges the concept of place in relation to the mobility, temporality, and connectivity introduced by post-modernity, and also in social, historical, and political terms. Finally, after integrating impressions, allusions, memories, and events in the discussion, it questions the role of the body as a biological, psychical, sexual, ever-changing entity in the conceptualisation of place.

1.2 Space and Place

1.2.1 *Chora and Topos: setting the ground for the conceptualisation of space and place*

The story of the original creation according to Plato as described in *Timaeus* is a progressive process of emplacement, and *chora*, the state within which things take place, takes a very significant role. The world [κόσμος - kosmos] comes together by a "Craftsman" who sets the pre-cosmic chaos into order [κοσμεῖσθαι – setting in a harmonious/decorous order (Plato, 53c)] by arranging the four most perfect bodies, air, water, earth, fire, the combinations of which constitute the material world. The process of creation involves three main conditions: that which becomes, that inside which it becomes, and that which provides the forms of the becoming (Plato, 50e). According to Plato, that which provides the forms of the becoming is the realm of ideas and of the unchangeable being, which is timeless and thus eternal, and can be understood by the intellect through reason. The state of the becoming is then the realm of its copy, a condition of ceaseless becoming and transformation, where everything becomes visible and as such available to the senses. Between these two conditions, that of the original forms and that of their projection/copy, a third term is necessary and this is the space of the appearance of this copy, *chora* [χώρα]. Chora is the "*eternal space*", the space of becoming, a state that is not subject to any sort of decay, a "third genus" [τρίτον γένος] in the process of creation, the base inside which – and only there – things come into being (Plato, 52b). Chora is locatory, but not located itself (Casey, 1997, p.37) since there can be no creation that happens nowhere at all: according to Plato anything that is/exists, exists only at a specific place [τόπῳ - topos – "in place"] and therefore occupies a certain space, as that which does not "take place" is in effect nowhere, it is non-existent (Plato, 52c). As the space of appearance, chora is not made by matter either, and for this reason is not sensible. The state of becoming is a process of impression of the original forms onto the chora, therefore chora is by definition "*well-prepared*" for this process, having no form whatsoever ["*invisible*", "*formless*" (Plato, 51c)]. Compared to the womb and to the mother, and to a kind of a receptacle for the forms, chora provides the neutral substance on which the father-figure of the Form will imprint itself. Having no qualities or character, it is the space where attributes are assigned to the material reality, leaving no imprint itself upon the copy-child.

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The Platonic discourse on chora cannot be clearly categorised within the contemporary discussion around space and place; however it sets the ground for both terms. Chora is at the same time a general space and an inhabited place, an assigned position and a territory, a place occupied by someone and a region, therefore both invested place and abstract space are contained within it (as nothing exists outside it, and nothing "is" without having a place). Because of its character to receive the attributes in order to give a place to them without possessing them properly (as it possesses nothing at all) and the fact that it is situating (assigning places) without being situated itself, Derrida argues that chora is "*anachronistic; it 'is' the anachrony within being, or better: the anachrony of being. It anachronizes being.*" (Derrida, 1995, p.94) Most importantly, chora stands outside being by giving nothing while allowing place – which initiates being – therefore is "*not*": "*It is not, and this nonbeing cannot but be declared, that is, be caught or conceived, via the anthropomorphic schemas of the verb to receive and the verb to give. Khôra is not, above all is not, is anything but support or a subject which would give place by receiving or by conceiving, or indeed by letting itself be conceived.*" (Derrida, 1995, p.95) Thus chora becomes the matrix for places and consequently of being, the general container of all things in the state of becoming, and the "somewhere" of the things to happen.

Although for Plato chora signifies the beginning of all things, since nothing can be conceived out of its space, Aristotle sees place as the starting point from which space, and also movement and change can be understood. Containment is conceived differently here, as place is that which envelops the body instead of simply receiving it. Since place is that which primarily surrounds each body, the Platonic Receptacle gives its place to a notional vessel that holds around a body or bodies within it. According to Aristotle, all things exist somewhere, as only the "no-thing" [μη-δεν, Aristotle, 208α] exists nowhere. Thus every being has a specific place (which is unique for every individual body), topos, and this place becomes very significant, as without which no other body can exist. At the same time, place is not a body itself, because otherwise two bodies would occupy the same place. Place comes "together" with the body/thing, so that being cannot be conceived without this double immanence: not only every body is in place, but at the same time in every place there is a body (209α). The body is active here so that place and body act together in defining the world. Thus place is conceptualised as the inner surface of the unmoved container of the body, an outer limit that appears as

the body's form and its configuration, out of which certain characteristics of this body such as the size and the matter are defined (Aristotle, 209β). Although defining the matter and the form, place is neither, as these are clearly the characteristics of the body that is in place (210β). This definition not only describes presence, but it also locates the body within its context, its environment. In effect this double limit between the body and its place is central to Aristotle's thinking and it symbolises the reciprocity between the two in the construction of the world. Since every body exists in a specific place and at the same time for every place exists a body, movement is not integral to the process of emplacement. Place is "unchangeable" (ακίνητον, Aristotle, 212α) so that motion is defined by the continuous succession of unchangeable places that envelop the body. It is through this continual emplacement that bodies exist in the world. Interestingly, place, a static entity at its conception, explains change and motion as it becomes integral to any sort of being. Every physical body (in order to "be" in the world) occupies a specific topos, "*a place-pocket*" (Casey, 1997, p.69) that is occupied by this body and can be re-occupied by another body at another time (since, reversely, a place calls for occupation by a body). This process makes the world a field of placements, displacements, and replacements.

1.2.2 *Heidegger: being as being in space*

This central role of place in the Aristotelian conceptualisation of being was revisited in the twentieth century in Martin Heidegger's thinking. Heidegger poses the question of "where" of the human existence, according to which "being" can only be conceived as "being-in-the-world" that is, specifically placed within the world. Although the Aristotelian container-vessel model is the starting point for Heidegger, this being-in-the-world is not merely a case of containment or location here, but instead an inseparable part of the human existence (Dasein), and an active involvement in the everyday world. In "*Heidegger's topology: being, place, world*" (2006, p.47), Jeff Malpas translates "Dasein" as "being there", clearly suggesting that this sort of being has its own, concrete "there". Then existence is a matter of situatedness, and consequently of familiarity and engagement that refer to being as dwelling in the world, constantly seeking "homeliness" in it. "Being" for Heidegger has to do with "residing",

"dwelling", "being alongside" the world[1], which makes the world an inseparable part of human existence. Thus being "in" the world means being primarily "in a place", engaging with activities and experiences, people and things, and with the environment itself, and also, caring and protecting this surrounding environment. On the whole, Dasein contains within itself, by definition, a "Being-in-space", therefore its *existential spatiality*" (Heidegger, 1962, p.83) has to do with a direct involvement in the affairs of the everyday world. And reversely, the world constitutes the vast "wherein" [worin] of Dasein's dealings, involvements, and activities (Heidegger, 1962, p.119). In order to explain the implication of places with one another and make the transition between the circumspective Being-in-the-world to the multiplicity and the heterogeneity of the three-dimensional world as space, and the way that things are ordered in it, Heidegger employs the notion of regions. If place stands for the "where" of things in the world, then regions stand for the "whither" to which things are placed in the world: "*to the totality of involvements which makes up the Being of the ready-to-hand within the world, there belongs a spatial involvement which has the character of a region. By reason of such an involvement, the ready-to-hand becomes something which we can come across and ascertain as having form and direction.*" (Heidegger, 1962, p.145) Since place is something we are "naturally" in (naturally in the sense that being cannot be construed outside place), and a result of the closeness of the Dasein, it is within regions that interactions and shared space takes place. Places and regions together provide the terrain where everyday relations and interactions are located and present being-in-the world and the world itself as a coherent entity. Within this context, space becomes the pure "*wherein*" of things in which positions, situations, and measurements are set to order (Heidegger, 1962, p.145). Space here is not an extension of place or

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[1] "*Being-in… is a state of Dasein's Being; it is an existentiale. So one cannot think of it as the Being-present-at-hand of some corporeal Thing (such as the human body) 'in' an entity which is present-at-hand. Nor does the term 'Being-in' mean a spatial 'in-one-anotherness' of things present-at-hand, any more than the word 'in' primordially signifies a spatial relationship of this kind. 'In' is derived from 'innan' – 'to reside', 'habitare', 'to dwell' [sich auf halten]. 'An' signifies 'I am accustomed', 'I am familiar with', 'I look after something'… The expression 'bin' is connected with 'bei', and so 'ich bin' [I am] means in its turn 'I reside' or 'dwell alongside' the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such way. 'Being' [Sein], as he infinite of 'ich bin' (that is to say, when it is understood as an existentiale), signifies 'to reside alongside…', 'to be familiar with…', 'Being-in' is thus the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state.*" (Heidegger, 1962, pp.79-80)

even of region, but is something that is in the world as disclosed by the Being-in-the-world (as part of the Dasein): "*space is not to be found in the subject, nor does the subject observe the world 'as if' that world were in a space; but the 'subject' (Dasein), if well understood ontologically, is spatial*" (Heidegger, 1962, p.146). Thus space may not derive from the human subject; however the subject is spatial and as such able to give space, in other words, make room for the things to happen.

1.3 Place as Experience

As described above, the philosophy of place has been developed around the concepts of containment and presence. For Plato "chora" as space becomes the general container in which place, "topos", occurs. For Aristotle place constitutes the starting point for any sort of existence in space. To Heidegger's thinking, the very possibility of being, in order to engage with the world and be able to make space in it for the things to happen, is tied to place. This involvement and active participation with the things suggests that emplacement is a process that happens only through embodiment and experience. Being-in-the-world signifies "dwelling" in the world, not simply in the sense of building a house and inhabiting it, but instead constructing a world and attaching to it through everyday experience. According to Heidegger, the Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to "dwell", therefore "*the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.145) Thus dwelling explains the way that human beings exist in the world, how they preserve and cultivate the earth, and also how they build constructions on it in order to create meanings, significant places[2]. The Black Forest Farmhouse represents genuine dwelling [and building] for Heidegger: a shelter designed and built by the peasants that aimed to protect the family and house the different generations under its roof, and a building that sits peacefully within the natural environment providing self-sufficiency and allowing the earth and the sky, the mortals and the

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[2] "*But if we listen to what language says in the word bauen we hear three things:*
1. Building is really dwelling.
2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth.
3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings." (Heidegger, 1951, p.146)

divinities [altogether being-in-the-world] exist in a simple oneness (Heidegger, 1951, p.156). Thus being as dwelling in the world signifies attachment, rootedness, and meaning that happen through experience, as place becomes a special and inseparable characteristic of human being, allowing space to be conceived as an abstraction, as the wider context of things, the platform or the room made for the things to happen. And as associated with the concepts of origin, rootedness, and groundedness, the idea of place comes out through different combinations of *"materiality, meaning, and practice"* (Cresswell, 2009, p.169).

Studying place as experience aims at conceptualising place neither in an "objective" sense of some spatio-temporal position, a site, or a location, nor as a "subjective" construct, but rather as something grounded in the human being and as a feature of embodiment. Far from place being reduced to location, it is human identity through place that ties itself to location. Moreover, it is not that the experience of people and things is linked to place, but that the very structure of conceiving people and things in the world and in relation to that world, and also the way these appear to us, are tied to locality and spatiality. The questions on subjectivity and materiality are very important here, as place needs to be defined not only in relation to physical space and the physical world in general, but also as opposed to the concept of space. In the book *Place and experience: a philosophical topography* (1999) Jeff Malpas argues that place as a characteristic of human existence cannot be based independently on subjectivity or independently on the physical world, neither it can be conferred upon an independent subject: *"place is instead that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established – place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place."* (Malpas, 1999, p.35) According to Malpas subjectivity – because of its foundation on place – appears tied to agency and embodied spatiality, linking to a wider system of objects, events, and persons. This makes place the context to include not only the physical and the subjective, but also the social, the intersubjective, and the event.

As such, place becomes a way of perceiving, knowing, understanding, and also forming and constructing the world. It comes down to attachments and connections, meaning and experience. In the context of humanistic geography, Yi-Fu Tuan defines

place as "*a centre of meaning constructed by experience*" (Tuan, 1975, p.152). For Tuan reality in general is a construct of experience[3]. It is through perception and involvement with the things that people relate to other people and to the environment and they understand the world as a series of places. The scientific notion of space comes together with the abstract perception of the sense of place: "*at a high theoretical level, places are points in a spatial system. At the opposite extreme, they are strong visceral feelings. Places are seldom known at either extreme: the one is too remote from sensory experience to be real, and the other presupposes rootedness in a locality and an emotional commitment to it that are increasingly rare. To most people in the modern world, places lie somewhere in the middle range of experience.*" (Tuan, 1975, p.152) Thus experience combines direct and indirect knowledge, feeling and thought to define places. Further, place is here regarded as a "type of object" (Tuan, 1977, p.18), a medium able to form space by giving it geometric characteristics. These places provide centres of meaning and value and fields of care and they can be found across the scales: a fireplace and a room, a house and a neighbourhood, a city, and a nation, may all constitute fields of attachment to individuals or to groups. Home, in particular is often seen as a fundamental place and a centre of familiarity, comfort, and security, the point of departure and of return of the everyday life. If home symbolises the primitive place, then according to humanistic geographers place is associated with homeliness, stability, and the sense of belonging, while space stands for openness and abstraction. It is space that transforms into place when infused with definitions and meanings. To Tuan's thinking, place signifies security and space stands for freedom: "*from the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.*" (Tuan, 1977, p.6) Then space symbolises the future and calls for action. According to Tuan, human beings exist in the world by constantly mediating between space and place, "*shelter and venture, attachment and freedom*" (Tuan, 1977, p.54). Consequently permanence becomes an important feature of place, and movement is perceived as a movement between fixed places, within open space.

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[3] "*Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These models range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization. Emotion tints all human experience, including the high flights of thought.*" (Tuan, 1977, p.8)

The experiential perspective sees place as the centre of the human activity in the world, and invested with meanings and attachments that help us decode this world and live in it, whereas space becomes the wider context of this activity, an open-ended entity that offers the possibility of place. This discourse attributes characteristics of fixity and stability to place, and at the same time a certain abstractness to space, leaving aside the relations of both space and place with motion and change. Although, as mentioned above, movement is perceived as a movement between fixed positions within space, this definition brings both concepts of place and space at stake, as the former can be reduced into a location and the latter into a coordinate system. In the "Phenomenology of perception", Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), aiming at understanding bodily movement and the experience of this movement as "productive of space" (p.284), distinguishes the "physical", anthropological space from a "geometrical" space: "*In the first case, I am concerned with physical space, with its variously qualified regions: in the second with geometrical space having interchangeable dimensions, homogeneous and isotropic, and here I can at least think of a pure change of place which would leave the moving body unchanged, and consequently a pure position distinct from the situation of the object in its concrete context.*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.284) The very experience of movement through anthropological space has a direct impact on the way in which places are understood and woven together. Following from Merleau-Ponty's "anthropological space", Michel de Certeau sees space as "*practiced place*" (de Certeau, 1984, p.117), made out of intersecting moving bodies. In de Certeau's definition, place remains static, a concentration of meanings and references, but space becomes a thread of places woven together into narratives. Thus place implies "*an instantaneous configuration of positions*" (de Certeau, 1984, p.117), determining the order in which things are arranged and their interrelationships, indicating a "proper" location and a stable condition. Space, on the other hand, becomes activated by the movements that happen within it, such as the way that the moving bodies of the pedestrians transform the streets or the way that medieval maps outlined itineraries and journey narratives. Space occurs by the activities that assign to it a present and a time, and render it meaningful, and is continuously transformed as the contexts change: "*space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities*" (de Certeau, 1984, p.117). Most generally, it is movement that makes places emerge and relate to each other, and it

is the embodiment, the animation, the transformation, and the appropriation of such places by the moving bodies that creates spaces.

1.4 Place and Non-place: thinking about placeness within mobility, temporality, and connectivity

De Certeau's conceptualisation of space as performed places brings together the rootedness, permanence, and motionless associated with place along with motion and change through experience. Nevertheless, the context of new technologies that make mobility, temporality, and connectivity integral of the everyday experience challenge place as a static entity and bring the juxtaposition of the need for placeness and the constantly changing time-space relations at the centre of attention. Concepts such as "placelessness" and "non-place" arise within this context.

In *Place and Placelessness* (1976) Edward Relph argues that in the contemporary world places are increasingly becoming placeless, forcing us to lose our attachments and also introducing the possibility of a "*placeless geography*" (Relph, 1976, p.79). Superhighways and railways, and the transition to a mobile world in general are responsible for the loss of the sense of place: "*Roads, railways, airports, cutting across or imposed on the landscape rather than developing with it, are not only features of placelessness in their own right, but, by making the mass movement of people with all their fashions and habits, have encouraged the spread of placelessness well beyond their immediate impacts.*" (Relph, 1976, p.90) This increased mobility and the lack of attachment that comes with it, extend beyond the transportation systems to include phenomena of mass culture and mass values that affect the "authenticity" of places. Thus Relph identifies multiple reasons for the construction of this superficial sense of place: mass communication systems that encourage a mobile world, mass culture that promotes uniform products and places constructed for people with uniform needs and tastes (Relph, 1976, p.92), tourism as a homogenizing process, the landscapes of suburbia, the phenomenon of "*disneyfication*" that creates artificial and illusory worlds, and that of "*museumisation*" (Relph, 1976, p.93) that restores regions and villages aiming to achieve a historical atmosphere. All these spaces suggest an outward and casual engagement with the environment that creates a rather "inauthentic" attitude to place. Therefore, according to Relph, mobility, temporality, and connectivity of modern

times do not allow space – and time – for authentic relationships to develop, and this eventually renders the world into a general condition of placelessness.

In a similar line of thinking, Marc Augé (1995) suggests that place as rooted and invested with meanings is being challenged by the mobile world of post-modernity. "Supermodernity", as he calls it, is responsible not simply for the increased mobility, but consequently for the dominance of the event and of anything that is fleeting, temporary, and ephemeral. Within Supermodernity, a dense network of means of transport is being developed, aiming not to accommodate everyday life activities but rather to facilitate movement. Thus significant places become increasingly unimportant, being replaced by "non-places". The more mobile everyday life becomes, the bigger the distance from the permanence of an intact soil and meaningful living that signify placeness: "*if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity is a non-place*" (Augé, 1995, pp.77-8). Non-places are places of transit, from highways and airports to supermarkets and shopping malls, which cannot develop an identity of their own, but rather indirectly refer to other places. In effect, there is nothing anthropological about them, no space for meanings, narratives, relations to develop. Augé sees the distinction between places and non-places similar to the place-space opposition. Thus non-places are characterised by abstraction and constant motion, due to which people fail to develop bonds with other people or with the environment itself. These spaces are thinned into images, composed by texts, screens, and signs that facilitate communication and travel, instead of appropriation and attachment. Moreover, since places are reduced to transit points, individuals are reduced to a single status within: they become either passengers, or customers or drivers, giving in to anonymity and to a passive identity loss, and reducing themselves into an image as well. Non-places outline the way that we live today, and maybe the end of the traditional notion of place. As the contemporary world is transforming into a field for the constant circulation of people and of information, non-places tend to replace places and become "*the real measure of our time*" (Augé, 1995, p.78). And as they expand in the forms of spectacles (places reduced to images), they relate to each other forming complex networks difficult to escape from.

Relph's thinking on placelessness and Augé's definition of non-places suggest, as Tim Cresswell argues, that "*mobility and mass culture lead to irrational and shallow*

landscapes" (Cresswell, 2004, pp.45) so that the contemporary world is gradually disengaging from rootedness and groundedness, at the cost of losing its significant places. Clearly a constantly changing world can no longer be considered as deeply rooted, consisting of fixed places with clear boundaries and solid identities, but could this be the end of place? In her paper "A Global Sense of Place" (1991) Doreen Massey suggests new mobile ways of thinking and calls for a "progressive", a "global" and an "extrovert" sense of place, at a time when "*things are speeding up, and spreading out*" (Massey, 1991, p.24). Massey suggests that when we study the "time-space compression" and "globalisation" we need to think about different movements of people – different social groups for different reasons – and the place of these people in relation to these flows and interconnections. Within a very complicated global context, Massey finds a sense of place based on rootedness and locality that simply satisfies the insecurity and anxiety of the new world problematic and reactionary, an evasion and a retreat from the dynamic of "real life"[4], and considers mobility as a constitutive element of place, rather than a threat. Massey calls for a new, progressive concept of place, based on networks of relations: "*instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated movements in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent, and this in turn allows a sense of place that Is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.*" (Massey, 1991, p.28) Following Massey, place is not a static entity, having nothing to do with homogenous identities and framed enclosures, but is instead a mobile experience and process that follows the fluidity of people and things.

1.5 Place as No Fixed Thing: Towards a More Dynamic Conceptualisation of Place

The experiential approach that associates place with the human being and its everyday actions suggests that the mobility and the changeability of the contemporary

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[4] "*On this reading, place and locality are foci for a form of romanticised escapism from the real business of the world. While 'time' is equated with movement and progress, 'space/place' is equated with stasis and pervasion.*" (Massey, 1991, p.26)

world are simply signs rather than reasons for a more dynamic and a less definitive conceptualisation of place. By reference to the work of thinkers like Bachelard, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Irigaray, and Nancy, Edward Casey asks: "*is it not time to face up to place? Or even to give it a new face, so that we can at last find it, and thus our own, ineluctably implaced selves, once again?*" and suggests that place is itself "*no fixed thing: it has no steadfast essence*" (Casey, 1997, p.286). Apart from connecting to the regional ground and embodying this connection, place can more widely be understood and defined through historical and cultural relations, through social and gender relations, and within changing and contingent environments, as long as these create the conditions for narratives to develop[5]. This suggests that place can be studied through a wide variety of topics, fields, and traits, therefore it is more of a case of different appearances and expressions rather than a standard value or a single story to be told.

To think about place in sexual, social, historical, and political terms, and thus through action and engagement, means to think about existence in transition rather than in stasis, and also to think about the body in its physicality, not only in connection to the permanence of dwelling, but also in relation to the historical, political, and social context. In "*Of Other Spaces*" Michel Foucault (1986) sees the experience of the world as a network of relations that juxtapose and intersect with each other designating sites. In Foucault's thinking, space itself has a history, and this is why it varies across time and societies. Thus space and place can never be the same from era to era, but are instead as variable as time, and historical entities subject to time (Casey, 1997, p.298). According to Foucault, medieval space was the space of "emplacement"[6], a "hierarchic

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[5] "*Each [of the authors] tries to find place at work, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else: in the course of history (Braudel, Foucault), in the natural world (Berry, Snyder), in the political realm (Nancy, Lefebvre), in gender relations and sexual difference (Irigaray), in the productions of the poetic imagination (Bachelard, Otto), in geographic experience and reality (Foucault, Tuan, Soja, Relph, Entrekin), in the sociology of the polis and the city (Benjamin, Arendt, Walter), in nomadism (Deleuze and Guattari), in architecture (Derrida, Tschumi), in religion (Irigaray, Nancy).*" (Casey, 1997, p.286)

[6] "*In the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places (all these concern the real life of men). In cosmological theory, there were the supercelestial places, as opposed to the celestial, and the celestial place was in its turn opposed to the terrestrial place. There were places where things had been put because they had been violently displaced, and then on the contrary places where*

ensemble of places", which turned on distinctions between sacred and profane, heavenly and earthly. But this space was ruptured by Galileo's infinite open space that reduced a body's place into a position and a location, a moment/point in its movement. Following from that, "*today the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement*" (Foucault, 1986, p.23). The site is now defined by relations between elements within series, trees, or grids. For Foucault the contemporary world is the "epoch of space", the epoch in which time – the dominant feature of the nineteenth century – has been absorbed into space. Simultaneity, continuity, transition, negotiation between the near and the far are all features of space as we perceive it today: "*we are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein*" (Foucault, 1986, p.22). The clear hierarchy of the Middle Ages, the sacred and the profane, has not ceased to exist in this context, but is instead much more hidden within sets of relations and connections and has transformed into oppositions "*between private space and public space, between family space and social space… between the space of leisure and that of work*" (Foucault, 1986, p.23). Foucault suggests that we live within a heterogeneous sort of space, inside which relations designate sites that might be closed, semi-closed, or open, others that can be fluid or clearly delimited, and others that can be superimposable on one another[7] or not. Heterotopias suggest "counter-sites" within this world, places of a different order within space, which create their own "other" reality, in which conditions normally held apart collapse into one another. They destroy any established order by undermining its very language as "*they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'*" (Foucault, 1971, p.xix). Such spaces juxtapose different sort of places and things in a way which makes it impossible to find a "common locus", a common place for all of them. In this sense, heterotopias dissolve our myths and function outside any law or geometry. Foucault's thinking allows the

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things found their natural ground and stability. It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement." (Foucault, 1986, p.22)

[7] "*We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.*" (Foucault, 1986, p.23).

"absolutely different" from its surroundings to be located within geographical space and also to be juxtaposed with reality.

While Foucault explains "other spaces" through "heterotopology", Deleuze and Guattari think of "other space" as the marginal space that exists on the side of settled civilisations. Nothing is settled and fixed here. In Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, the arborescent hierarchy of Western thought is replaced by the rhizomatic structure that enables heterogeneous connections outside pre-determined paths: "*any point of the rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.7). Rhizomes are composed of lines rather than points, of dimensions rather than units, or better, of "*directions in motion*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.23). The rhizome does not have a clear beginning or an end, but constitutes a "middle" (milieu) that develops in all directions and creates multiplicities constantly subject to transformation. Unlike the static and fixed structure of the tree, the rhizome appears in constant motion. Through the concept of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari develop the idea of the smooth and striated space and the "*war machine*" that functions in the margin of the "*State apparatus*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.390). Based on the model of the nomads in the steppes of Asia in the thirteenth century who fought against the state from the outside, the "war machine" suggests a "pure form of exteriority" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.390), fluid and changing, that combats the state in its static character. The "other" is here the outsider, the fluid that challenges the static and the fixed. Smooth and striated spaces are not simply two sorts of spaces that exist in opposition: the two not only co-exist, but the one is constantly being transformed into the other and vice versa. Hence the city, a clearly striated space, gives space to nomadic appropriation and movement that transforms it into smooth space, while the sea, a smooth space, is organised through meridians and parallels imposed by maps, and thus translated into striated space. Striated space is a homogeneous space, a space delimited and ordered, where movement happens from one point to another and their distance can be counted. On the other hand, smooth space is a space "*in no way homogeneous*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.525), but instead infinite, undetermined, and "amorphous" that is, without form. In smooth space the points are subject to the

trajectory, and movement within it is directional and not dimensional[8]. Space here is to be occupied rather than counted. Not only does it give space to multiplicities, but it constitutes itself as a multiplicity. The sea, the steppe, the desert suggest smooth spaces par excellence. As such, smooth space is a space for vagabondage, a nomad space devoted to wandering and roaming between regions, constructing sets of relations within infinite space. According to Deleuze and Guattari, in nomad space dwelling occurs within the journey: "*the nomad distributes himself in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; it is his territorial principle*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.480). Immersed in this region, he is identified by movement, always within the region, so that although he "deterritorialises", there is no "reterritorialisation" afterward[9]. His existence is not localised, as he exists through the whole region, yet this region becomes significant/local and the place where he actually is[10]. Thus the nomads inhabit the desert and also "make" the desert and are made by it.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest a significant connection between body and place, disengaging them at the same time from fixity and groundedness. The "where" of things has here to do with the way they are structured and how they act in space. Space becomes haptic and sonorous, and "*everything is experienced in relation to this ground, which is fully with the aesthesiological and kinaesthetic body*" (Casey, 1997, p.307). And since the ground becomes not something to be perceived, but something to be negotiated due to one's immersion in space, dwelling can be also construed within change and movement.

1.6 Place as Event: from Philosophy to Architecture

Identifying the "other" and its significance within space, and also approaching emplacement within a context of spaces and "other spaces" suggests an open-ended

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[8] "*A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own.*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.419)

[9] "*It is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritrializes on deterritorialization itself. It is the earth that deterritorializes itself, in a way that provides the nomad with a territory*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.421)

[10] "*The nomad space is localised and not delimited.*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.422)

world of heterogeneity, a world where meanings can be found within mobility and connectivity, and also political and social structures that create centres of attention and as such, places. The condition of possibility for place thus disengages from materiality and groundedness, and extends further than the "experience as being" to include the "something that happens", the event. Interestingly, the field of this fragmentariness, the space where the event takes – and makes – place, is the contemporary urban environment, that is, a fixed in terms of materiality space. Clearly architecture is capable of creating conditions of placeness, but what makes a built space turn into a place? In "*Point de Folie – Maintenant l'architecture*" Jacques Derrida sees architecture as less of a solid thing and more as a happening and as a "place-to-happen". Architecture takes place and also gives place, that is, makes room for things to happen or, allows events to occur. It makes space for the passage, the act, the event to occur, and as these compose into a "narrativity", a "choreography" and a "scenography" in space, they call for a particular place. Then the passage, the act, and the event take both temporal and spatial properties (Casey, 1997, p.313).

"*The just maintenant [just now] does not remain a stranger to history, of course, but the relation would be different. And if this happens to us, we must be prepared to receive these two words. On the one hand, it does not happen to a constituted us, to a human subjectivity whose essence would be arrested and would then find itself affected by the history of this thing called architecture. We appear to ourselves only through an experience of spacing which is already marked by architecture. What happens through architecture both constructs and instructs this us. The latter finds itself engaged by architecture before it becomes the subject of it: master and possessor. On the other hand, the imminence of what happens to us maintenant, announces not only an architectural event but, more particularly, a writing of space, a mode of spacing which makes a place for the event.*" (Derrida, 1986, p.570)

An architecture that "*constructs and instructs this us*" is not an architecture that creates place in our absence, but an architecture that "takes place" itself because of something that happens in it. In the same way that the event – the "maintenant" according to Derrida – does not just happen to a solid, established subject, but instead it has an impact on it and affects this subject, architecture does not merely take up place but instead makes place for the event to happen, and conversely, this event creates place within architecture. It is not just the subject that happens to be in the process of

becoming – and through this in the process of emplacement – but the building is in the same process too. Chance, wandering, experimentation, passing through spaces, all become media for this place-making process. To Derrida's thinking, the "passage" has to do with both being between places and having places through which to pass. "Photography", "cinematography", the "scenography of the passage" also come into play, introducing a sense of place that lies between materiality and context, between fragments and links, between locations and myths: this is the essence of the event. Architecture "folds out" and expands outward in order to accord with the event it embodies. This spacing out of the building to embrace the event, this interaction between the construction, the subject and the happening, define emplacement. Derrida calls this non-self-referential sort of architecture a "transarchitecture" [11] (Derrida, 1986, p.575). Transarchitecture is neither expressive nor impassive, but instead responsive to the event, the action, the movement, the sign, "*advanced by an advance made at the other – and maintenant architecture*" (Derrida, 1986, p.575). Transarchitecture is not at all a negation or a dismissal; rather, it deconstructs the traditional notions of place and habitation by allowing the subject to engage, inhabit or contemplate. Therefore the body needs to invent its own way within space and give rise to place through its motion, gesture, and action.

Derrida's point is to put into question, dislocate and destabilise anything fixed and, most generally, to suggest the impossibility of "ordering" in a conclusive way. The call for the event and the happening within the space-place discourse opens up the conceptualisation of place focusing on movement, performance, and role-playing and by extension pushes architecture, as suggested by Derrida, to its limits. Similarly, Bernard Tschumi in *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1981) speaks about death and love in architecture, and furthermore about violence, pleasure and madness. Both Tschumi and Derrida, instead of transcending the contradictions of contemporaneity, they attempt to maintain them in a dynamic and creative manner. Objects, movements, and events may be independent, but they are all fragments of reality, either material or immaterial, able to give rise to place through the body. Place-as-event becomes a combination of

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[11] "*Neither architecture nor anarchitecture: transarchitecture. It has it out with the event. It no longer offers its work to users, believers or dwellers, to contemplators, aesthetes or consumers. Instead, it appeals to the others to invent, in turn, the event, sign, consign or countersign: advanced by an advance made at the other – and maintenant l' architecture.*" (Derrida, 1986, p.575)

architectural and non-architectural entities, impressions and allusions, memories and experiences, all reconstructed to form a new order and create new meanings.

1.7 Place as a Non-Topological question: Placeness through the Sexually Specific Human Body

So far we have discussed the conceptualisation of place through selected works across time, from Plato and Aristotle to modernity and to recent times, across disciplines, from philosophy to geography, to anthropology and to architecture, and across different notions, from its conception as a static entity and its association with the earthly ground, to the association with the everyday human experience, even to the connection with the event and the happening. In these different viewpoints presented, apart from those referring to the post-structuralist philosophers, place has been considered in relation to the human body and its activity in the world, in which the body has been treated as an enclosed physical thing, almost as an animated object, unchangeable and complete in its construction. In his Postface, Casey asks: "*but what if 'body' is not merely inert physical body but something organic and ever-changing?*" (Casey, 1997, p.331) The lived human body, as a biological organism, as an ever-changing entity, and as sexually specific, comes into question here. Similarly to the fact that place has been set on a different basis, from fixity to flexibility and from the permanent to the eventmental, the body too shifts into a multiple condition and a biological, psychical, and sexual entity. Clearly body and place together suggest that there cannot be one fixed, standard base for their interrelation.

In An *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), Luce Irigaray approaches placeness through the sexually specific human body. For Irigaray there is no place for a body that is not already sexually differentiated and thus infused with sexual history. Place as an envelope of the human body is first and foremost a container that receives our corporeal identity and the boundary that differentiates our own from the other bodies (Irigaray, 1993, p.36). In this context, the body-as-place of a man is totally different from the body-as-place of a woman. According to Irigaray, a woman's body constitutes place in a double sense: first as a mother and then as a woman, and thus it not only envelops itself, but it also offers to envelope others. Although the concept of place-as-vessel is revisited here – referencing Aristotle – the object of containment varies: it might be the

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child, the man or herself, and these three appear to exist in a constant competition[12]. On the other hand, a man's body fails to provide place either to himself or to others, he is therefore "*attracted to the maternal-feminine as place*", and this "*maternal-feminine remains the place separated from 'its' own place, deprived of 'its' place*" (Irigaray, 1993, p.10). In this complex relation man finds shelter in the woman, whereas she cannot situate herself in place. Unable to make use of her own container, according to Irigaray, she creates artificial ones to conceal her nudity through clothes, makeup and jewels (Irigaray, 1993, p.11).

With the starting point of the Aristotelian vessel-as-place Irigaray suggests something that opposes the initial container-model. A woman's body is an open/enclosure (Casey, 1997, p.325), yet it proves that the organic body, which is porous, mobile, and ever-changing can as well constitute place. Casey comments: "*(the sexually differentiated) body and (its) place are so intimately linked as to be virtually interchangeable. The point is not just that there is no place without body, or vice versa, but that body itself is place and that place is as body-bound as the body itself is body-specific*" (Casey, 1997, p.326). Irigaray may have added another degree of complexity to the discourse about place, but at the same time she proves that the approach of the "where" of things can be a sexual, as well as a social, political, or ethical issue, instead of a merely geographical or philosophical one. What is at stake here is not the definition of the man's place or the woman's place, but instead the fact that neither of those is a matter of region. In effect, in "Choreographies", Derrida reflects on this "woman's place" to describe a world of heterogeneity, discontinuities, and differences in a more dialectical way. "*Why must there be a place for woman? And why only one, a single, completely essential place?*" he asks (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.68). The argument here is that if we are to revisit the expression "a woman's place is at home", then this "place" is no longer one of a topological question – or even an economical one – if we are to decide whether this place is or is not at home. Derrida argues that a new idea of place of woman cannot be of any topo-economical concern, because if it were, then there would be "*no one place for woman*", rather than a specific one. Instead, he approaches this "re-placement" through dance:

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[12] "*In that competition, the first place is virtually the only place. The second place is merely a sort of a perforation aiming towards the first: a passage, not really a place. The third is something forbidden or impossible – set up by the excision from the hyle perhaps?*" (Irigaray, 1993, p.41)

"*The most innocent of dances would thwart the assignation à residence, escape those residences under surveillance; the dance changes place and above all changes places. In its wake they can no longer be recognized. The joyous disturbance of certain women's movements, and of some women in particular, has actually brought with it the chance for a certain risky turbulence in the assigning of places within our small European space (...). Is one then going to start all over again making maps, topographies etc.? distributing sexual identity cards?*" (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.69)

The dance here stands for the lack of place and the multiplicity of places at the same time, the insanity of the moment and its endless possibilities. Through dance, a woman's place can no longer be registered in space or mapped; therefore it no longer refers to a topography. Then this could possibly be the essence of a non-topological place: to include places, and also moments, connections, contradictions and through these to create meanings, narratives, and attachments.

1.8 The Question of Technology: place in media space and its possible extensions

So far we have discussed the conditions of a possibility of place within the physical world, and whether these are a matter of materiality or immateriality, fixity or mobility, pragmatism or conception. In all of these cases, space, as the general field inside which this possibility happens, is conceived as the – partly or entirely – pragmatic and fixed surrounding. It is interesting to juxtapose this structure with the conceptualisation of space and place in media space, where space and place are both immaterial constructions by default, composed out of programming, connections, and flows of information. This juxtaposition is important for another reason here: after constructing the notion of place as inextricably linked to the human body, computerisation and new technologies call for the body to stand still in front of the screen and create spaces – and potentially places – through this screen and despite this distance. Then how are space and place understood through the interface?

In 1996, Paul Dourish and Steve Harrison, in their article "*Re-place-ing space: the roles of place and space in collaborative systems*" attempt to approach the notions of place and space in computerised environments and how these frame interactive

behaviour. They identify three kinds of spaces in collaborative systems: first, spatial metaphors to visualise informational landscapes and facilitate multi-user interaction; second, virtual worlds divided into locations that enable users to navigate from the one to the other, share experiences, and participate in events; and, third, multimedia communicative systems that draw analogies from the physical world to enable interaction. Spatial structures are here driven by the physical world: "*space is the structure of the world; it is the three-dimensional environment in which objects and events occur, and in which they have relative position and direction*" (Dourish and Harrison, 1996, p.68). Thus space is structured as the field inside which: the users can be orientated; they have an understanding of proximity that they can relate to other people's activities; they realise partitioning that separates different activities; and they understand the presence of other people and their activities within the same environment. Space provides the topological opportunities and constraints. And when this space is invested with meanings, cultural understandings, and appropriate behaviour, it is place that rises up. Thus "*space is the opportunity; place is the understood reality*" (Dourish and Harrison, 1996, p.69). Places happen within space and become a matter of use, appropriation, cultural meanings, associations, and expectations. As such, it is not place, but only space that can be designed through programming, in order to support the emergence of place. Dourish and Harrison see media space as part of the real world, since it is inhabited by real people and understand that the task here is to design this space in order to facilitate activity and interaction in it[13]. Place, on the other hand, cannot be constructed by designers of media space, just as it cannot be built by designers of physical space. As there is no physical or digital, material or conceptual place, all that designers can do is to set a space – physical, digital or hybrid – for place to develop.

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[13] "*After all, a virtual world filled with virtual offices and virtual desks isn't populated by virtual people, but by real ones. Drawing contrasts and analogies between, for example media space and the 'real world' is unhelpful, because media spaces are the real world. Their inhabitants are real people, engaged in real interactions in the course of doing their real work. And, as such, they will engage in the very real creation of forms of activity and work, just as they do in their everyday physical environments. This is what it's critical to design for; and this is what is lost when we fail to support the duality of space and place.*" (Dourish and Harrison, 1996, p.75).

Ten years later, in 2006, due to the integration of new technologies into the everyday life and the constant creation of hybrid spaces thanks to the proliferation of multiple portable devices and their connectivity to the telecommunication networks, Dourish revisited his article by publishing "*Re-space-ing place:" place" and" space" ten years on*", aiming to redefine spatiality. He argues that, similarly to place, space too needs to disengage from its static and inert character and to be studied as a social and cultural construction as the technological and the physical world merge: "*place comes first. Our experience of the world is not an experience of mathematically-derived uniformity and connectedness; what we experience are places, heterogeneous locales with local meaning, different extents, and individual properties. Space is something we can encounter only afterwards*" (Dourish, 2006, p.301). Thus space emerges only as practiced place – referencing de Certeau's "*The Practice of Everyday Life*" (1984) – so that places weave together to construct space socially and culturally – rather than in terms of materiality or even representation.

In the contemporary world, the question of context is subject to mobility, temporality, and connectivity. Dourish understands that due to the shift from immersive environments [either physical or virtual] to hybrid spaces, spatiality can no longer be defined by designers, but is instead conducted by use. Space comes up due to complex interrelations between the screen and its user, the user and the built environment, the screen and the built environment, the user and the other – remote or not – users. It is not that the body stands still in one – physical – sort of space in front of the screen and enters another – digitally created this time – space through the screen, but rather, that a significant space is outlined by his very special activity. Most generally, it is not the technological world that has dematerialised and eradicated space and place, but only the medium that made clear that both of them constitute neither physical objects nor rooted entities. Both [media] space and place are not created on the other side of the screen, but instead they exist nowhere and they are nothing, unless an activity, an interaction, an event, a narrative brings them to existence. This allows us to think about space and place in general as uprooted and independent from any sort of materiality, and therefore subject to narratives, meanings, and happenings – and this is what this thesis aims to explore.

Chapter 2. The [Cyborg] Body and its Place

2.1 Introduction: Shaping the World by Patterns of Information

"*Money is increasingly experienced as informational patterns stored in computer banks rather than the presence of cash; in surrogacy and in vitro fertilization cases, informational genetic patterns compete with physical presence for the right to determine the "legitimate" parent; automated factories are controlled by programs that constitute the physical realities of work assignments and production schedules as flows of information through the system; criminals are tied to crime scenes through DNA patterns rather than eyewitness accounts verifying their presence; right of access to computer networks rather than physical possession of the data determines nine-tenths of computer law; sexual relationships are pursued through the virtual spaces of computer networks rather than through meetings at which the participants are physically present.*" (Hayles, 1993, p.71)

In this passage from the paper "*Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers*" (1993), Katherine Hayles discusses how a series of everyday life activities, traditionally unfeasible without face-to-face contact and physical presence, are transformed within the electronic age. From financial transactions to the regulation of production processes, and from human communication to sexual relationships, flows of information, virtual spaces, and the ability to access specific computer networks have largely affected embodied interactions. Genetic patterns have become key in controlling reproduction, in determining parenthood, and in identifying criminals. Most generally, Hayes argues that in recent times, patterns of information and their opposite, randomness, shape the contemporary environment and the conditions of the everyday life much more than the presence-absence opposition. Moreover, she identifies the paradox of the technological age in the fact that, although information is crucial in the construction of the contemporary world, it is never present in itself, as it is conceptually different from the entities which embody it. Although in the process of patterning there always has to be something material to be patterned, according to Hayles' argument it is the pattern itself – in the sense of the signal that is transmitted – and not the materiality of its background

that shapes reality[1]. Within this context, the human body on the one hand brings together materiality and information, and on the other, along with information and the devices that manage this information they blend together in a complex reality, raising multiple questions about its boundaries and the significance of embodiment in the contemporary environment. In a world where the "where" of things and many significant processes of everyday reality range from electronically-mediated to electronically-reconstructed, how can we define where the human body begins and ends its presence, and how it inhabits this hybrid world?

This chapter draws examples taken from the phenomena of Flash Mobs and Second Life to conceptualise the body as a technological object and to question the "first place" of this body within digitisation. Having as a point of departure the image of the cyborg as developed in Donna Haraway's famous essay "*Manifesto for Cyborgs*" (1991) it discusses the construction of the human body, its boundaries, and most importantly, its place in the contemporary environment. Similarly to Haraway's text, the cyborg body metaphor stands as a cipher through which to question pre-given identities and pre-fixed places, and to approach the notion of "home" within highly technological and dynamic environments.

2.2 Two Case Studies

2.2.1 *The T-Mobile Advert: The Mobile Phone as an Extension of the Human Body*

Liverpool Street Station, London, on Thursday, 15th January 2009, 11:00am. The metro station is busy as normal. Suddenly something unexpected happens: loud music comes out from the station's sound speakers. The people passing by pause for a while, looking around and wondering. Then a lone commuter begins to dance along to the music track. As the track progresses he is joined by more and more dancers that eventually number three hundred and fifty, all of them performing synchronised dancing routines and encouraging members of the public to dance with them. The commuters gather around and seem pleasantly surprised, enjoying the act. Some of them dance with the dancers, others sing along. After realising that they are watching

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[1] There is always the question, however, as to whether we can clearly distinguish the two, the signal from the material, since the process of patterning depends on the presence-absence opposition.

some sort of a public performance, their first reaction is to take out of their pockets their mobile phones to capture the moment or to call someone and share their experience. Among their first reactions is to document the scene with cameras and microphones – in this way it will be easier for them to describe what they saw and heard to their friends and families.

Figures 1-3: Stills from: Life for Sharing (2009).

This Flash Mob-like performance – at a time when such actions were very popular and also frequent in the urban scene – is not actually a Flash Mob or even some sort of a spontaneous guerrilla act, but a very well planned performance, organised by professionals. "Dance" (Life for Sharing, 2009) , a commercial film commissioned by the mobile telecommunication company T-Mobile and created by Saatchi & Saatchi London, aimed at surprising the unsuspected commuters and capturing their immediate reactions as they watched the performance. The three-minute guerrilla-style ad constitutes a part of T-Mobile's 'Life's for Sharing' campaign, and it was produced using many hidden TV cameras within the station. Lysa Hardy, head of brand and communications at T-Mobile, argues: "*'Dance' brings to life the fact that there are often unexpected, wonderful, exciting things that happen that you want to be able to share with your friends and family*" (Bowser, 2009). The film was first played on television in less than 48 hours after the event, during a Celebrity Big Brother Show. At the same time the company also created a dedicated YouTube channel for users to upload and share their own videos and also to be able to view clips from the preparation of the performance. Soon, all these different perspectives were shared via blogs and Facebook profile pages that made the advert very popular and as such very successful (fig.1-3).

Although the choreographers and actors that took part in the commercial worked hard for its preparation, the aim of the film was not to capture the dancers' routines, but the commuters' reactions. The public viewers may become the protagonists of the

moment – this is what the company wants to highlight. In effect it seems that Saatchi & Saatchi London carefully predicted and planned this "spontaneity". As long as the commuters would realise that they are becoming part of a playful situation, they would immediately take out their electronic devices to record it. Hardly anyone is without a mobile phone today, and what could be better for a mobile telecommunications company than to capture hundreds of people sharing a unique experience through their mobile phones?

In situations like this – not only fun moments but also in cases of emergency or, more generally, when something unexpected happens – the mobile phone functions as an extension of the body and as an advanced sensory organ that may document everything more accurately and in greater detail than the human memory. It becomes a medium that saves and catalogues information, making it easy to reproduce, share, and edit. Multiple applications for mobile "smart" phones are designed and sold every day, promising to make individuals' lives simpler and easier. And the more people rely on it to record their activities and their tasks and recollect their experiences, the more it becomes an inextricable part of the everyday life. Thus in the electronic age participation and experience signifies also electronically documenting and publicly sharing happenings and events. As in this example, hidden cameras and portable cameras, train stations' sound speakers and mobile phone microphones, professional actors and unsuspected commuters blend together in a complex experience that although it appears instantaneous and fleeting, it will be permanently stored in multiple webpages, available for reproduction at any time. In this way the spectators become part of the spectacle and the main theme and at the end of the day, T-Mobile gets a three minutes film full of happy people using their mobile phones, which makes this a very successful ad.

2.2.2 *The Life 2.0 film: the Desire to Feel "At Home" within Virtual Reality*

Life 2.0 (2010) is a documentary film on Second Life made by Jason Spingarn-Koff (Director, Producer, and Editor), a New York-based documentary filmmaker who specializes in themes of science and technology. For the purposes of this film, Spingarn-Koff created his own avatar and immersed himself into the Second Life world following residents-players for about two years, aiming to study the stories of people that mediate their "reality" within "virtual reality", and whose lives have been radically altered by

their Second Life experiences. He presents three different cases. The first story is about two people – each married to someone else – involved in an affair. They meet initially in Second Life and they then keep "face-to-face" contact through web video calls and finally end up meeting each other several times in real life. The second scenario is about a young man, engaged to be married, whose avatar in Second Life is an eleven year-old girl that helps him overcome his traumatic childhood. Thirdly, the film presents a woman who finds in Second Life the opportunity to combine her talent for design and her love of gaming. As several health problems keep her at home, she sets up an enterprise in Second Life creating clothing, designer homes and landscapes and through this she experiences an intense "virtual" professional life. Most generally, Spingarn-Koff examines the intersection between physical reality and virtual reality and explores, via real people, what happens when online and offline worlds collide. Most of the documentary is filmed within Second Life and thus displays more of people's avatars and less of their physical selves. However the aim here is to present the avatars as nothing more than individuals' expressions – and even extensions – and thus part of their physical bodies. As it comes across, within digital worlds the residents not only experience alternative lives, but through their virtual existence they supplement and they improve their "first" life. Their avatars seem to be bridging the two conditions.

Let us focus on Spingarn-Koff's third story. In the film, Asri Falcone (the name of the designer's avatar) presents her virtual self while walking around one of the houses she has designed. She says:

"*My name is Asri Falcone and I am a content creator within Second Life. I have a housing company and we create fully furnished homes within SL. So when you come in to this home there is nothing you need; there is nothing you need to buy, extra furniture, nothing... you can just move right on it, to your dream home; and we specialise in high end and extreme luxury. You can actually have the house of your dreams, within SL, without the real life price.*" (Life 2.0, 2010)

The house is indeed luxurious and spacious. It has a green garden at the front and a pool at the rear. All the surrounding buildings are also modern and well-designed and there is plenty of open space all around them. As Asri walks in the house, the sign next to the door reads "L$ 49,995" which is equivalent to £135.31 (VirWoX). She displays firstly the kitchen-living room, a vast space minimally designed, then the bedroom, a pompous

and rather kitsch room, and finally the bathroom, spacious, luxurious and quite conventional. She poses proudly in each one of them and promises to make everybody's dream house "*real*", and also "*without the real life price*". Moreover, the house is fully furnished so that nothing else needs to be bought and thus the buyer can "*move in*" immediately (fig. 4-7).

Figures 4-7: Stills from: *Life 2.0* (2010) [DVD].

Second Life is a user-created world where the subject/player constructs his/her avatar and then the digital environment to envelope it accordingly. Then he/she inhabits this world with this avatar. The question raised here is, where does online existence stand in relation to the "real"-physical life? Does it function as an extension and a continuation, or as an expression of it, and in either case, how do we create its shelter? What is the proper environment for our weightless version of us? If information and communication have rendered the built environment illusory, what should we expect from virtual worlds where the phantasmatic becomes the established "real"? Given that in the virtual worlds it does not rain (and even if it does, due to special effects, one does not get wet) and it does not get cold, multiple questions arise on why avatars need a shelter, why it has to look like a real-life house, and most interestingly, why it needs to have utility rooms and bathrooms. Moreover, since the ground in Second Life is nothing more than a surface, and thus it is never liable to soil erosion or earthquakes, why does a house have to have conventional foundation, columns and beams? If we were to design the ideal place to accommodate our dreams and our bodiless existence, would it be so similar to our physical homes, only more stylish or luxurious? If the avatar constitutes a disembodied version of us, how is it possible that it needs a conventionally well-structured house in order to feel "at home" within virtual reality?

In the T-Mobile advert example the human body exists within the city extended with electronic devices that establish connections with others and with the environment. Face-to-face contact is supplemented with electronically-mediated communication in a complex experience. The more mobile the human body becomes in the contemporary world, the more indispensable its connectivity becomes. In the example of Asri Falcone, an avatar within representational space seems to need a "virtual" home, a shelter, a base, and a fixed starting point within the virtual realm. From the juxtaposition of the two, two different questions concerning the body and its place in the world come up: can we define the boundaries of the corporeal body in the electronic age – is the skin its outer limit? Moreover, is there a place for the body within the mobility, temporality, and connectivity of the times, and how do electronic devices contribute to its determination?

2.3 Is There a Place for the Human Body in the Digital Age?

"*In a sense, architecture is constructed for the body insofar as the body occupies a space. How are we to conceive of this space? If we think of it as a functional space, this means that we think of the body as a set of functions, and this is already a presupposition as to the nature of the body. A scientific, technoscientific or pseudo-technoscientific presupposition.*" (Lyotard, 1986, p.30)

In his "*Response to Kenneth Frampton*" (1986) Jean-Francois Lyotard questions the space of the body within the contemporary architecture by asking what makes the destination of the building, of architecture, and of space. If, architecture is to accommodate the human body as functional space, this, according to Lyotard presupposes that the body is considered as a mere set of functions, and as such a predetermined "nature". On the other hand, on a different, ontological – Heideggerian – and poetic perspective, the body is not a functional entity that needs to be enveloped, but instead a reason for space to happen and an "*instance of gathering: something gathers itself*" (Lyotard, 1986, p.30). The prototype for this space is then the mother's womb: "*one can say that the first model of this space is the mother's womb, as first dwelling*" (Lyotard, 1986, p.30). But within the contemporary context, where the human body becomes a technological object, the subject of bio-medicine and bio-engineering, can we still argue about the "inside" and the "outside" of this body, its boundaries and its functions? And are such features capable of explaining how the body relates to the others and its environment, and conversely, what makes its place within the world?

Lyotard sees the context of digitisation as an era when any distinction between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the intimate and the remote, is difficult to uphold, not because of the abolition of any sort of physical boundary, but because – despite such boundaries – the exchange of information becomes dominant. Inclusion and exclusion have thus to do with having or not the media to receive and send messages and communicate with others. This condition has a direct impact on the conceptualisation of dwelling and consequently the significance of the first dwelling. Lyotard reflects on the scientists' promise that in a few years' time it will not be necessary for women to bear their children as the period of gestation will entirely take place in vitro and asks: where does the first dwelling lay in this case?

"What is the unconscious of a child engendered in vitro? What is its relationship with the mother, and with the father? The mediatisation makes me ask the following question of Kenneth Frampton: can we still base ourselves on a phenomenology or an ontology of the body to designate one of the principal functions or destinations of architecture today?"   (Lyotard, 1986, p.31)

In this situation the body is considered neither as a plain set of functions – as these may be controlled by bio-engineering – nor as an instance of gathering – as it exists in a more complex relation with the outside world – but as a technological object – since it begins its existence in vitro. Within the context of genetic engineering and prosthetic surgery, and in a world where fertilisation and gestation may occur within a laboratory, the place of the body and the role of the first dwelling as an important determining factor in one's place in the world are in question. The body, transformed by technoscience in order to meet the needs of a world that is about communication and the exchange of information, ceases to be a "*site of resistance*" (Lyotard, 1986, p.31) to anything that that happens around it, and becomes an active component of this flexible and dynamic environment. And it seems that the more it connects to this telecommunicational environment, the more it disengages from its roots in the physical world. Are the memory of the first dwelling, the significance of the native ground, the bond to the mother then constants for its determination or do they need to be re-evaluated in this context? Can there be a "first place" for the body, and what is its status, when it is regarded as a technological object?

2.4 The Posthuman Body: The Body as a Technological Object

The case studies described above suggest that within digitisation both the body and its environment have undergone major substantial and conceptual changes. Smart phones, personal computers and the World Wide Web have forever transformed the way we perceive ourselves, our bodies, our relations with others and with the environment. At the same time, the development of cyberspace and Virtual Reality in particular, promising to fulfil the fantasies of connectedness-at-a-distance and of out-of-body experiences, have introduced new codes of behaviour and novel sociabilities. Apart from the equipment that keeps the body connected to others and becomes increasingly inseparable from it, the human body is also often enhanced by all sorts of different

devices that facilitate its biological functions, such as micromachines that clean out veins and arteries and microcomputers that work as heart or lung enhancements. The body is thus simultaneously reasserted, transcended, and augmented.

In the extended body, the aim of the prosthetic device is not to render the human body into a machine, but to assemble the embodied reality and the disembodied information. The human-computer interface that keeps the organic body's real life on the one side, and the avatar's illusionary experience of virtual reality on the other is a very simplified, almost naive, model of the human-machine interaction. For Katherine Hayles (1993) "*information circulates like the currency of the realm*" (p.69), so that the way that our everyday life functions, from financial transactions, communication, entertainment, to biotechnology and genetic engineering, suggests that information plays not a superimposed but a key role in it. Hayles employs the term "posthuman" to define an entity composed of an organic and a mechanic/electronic component in an inseparable system. The body as flesh-and-organs and as message, along with its prosthetic equipment that facilitates its being within the technological and informational environment form the posthuman: "*an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction*" (Hayles, 1999, p.3). The notion of the posthuman body is first of all about negotiating the boundaries between nature and artificiality, organism and machine, the human and the nonhuman. Negotiating the boundaries by no means implies leaving the body behind or even transforming it into a machine, but instead, realising that this "new" corporeality and accordingly this "new" spatiality in the contemporary environment would have been impossible without information. In effect, the role of all different technical artefacts is, according to Hayles, precisely to make information a part of everyday life and furthermore even create the impression that information may be more important than physical presence: "*from ATMs to the Internet, from the morphing programs used in Terminator II to the sophisticated visualisation programs used to guide microsurgeries, information is increasingly perceived as interpenetrating material forms. Especially for users who may not know the material process involved, the impression is created that pattern is predominant over presence.*" (Hayles, 1999, p.19) Nevertheless, what is renegotiated here is not physical existence, but rather any sort of clearly defined boundaries between the human body and the world. If "*we are all cyborgs*" (Haraway, 1991, p.150), as Donna Haraway

suggests, the purpose here is not to abolish the corporeal body, but to extend it in order to respond to a highly technological environment.

2.5 A Manifesto for Cyborgs: the Body as an Open-Ended Entity

The term "cyborg" was coined by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in their paper "*Cyborgs and Space*" (1960) to define the enhanced man that would be able to survive in extraterrestrial environments. At a time when travels in space were at the focus of scientists, Clynes and Kline attempted to define a creature in which exogenous devices would cause the necessary biological changes to the human organism in order to allow him to exist in space naturally: "*for the exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously, we propose the term 'Cyborg'. The Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments.*" (Clynes and Kline, 1960, p.27) What Clynes and Kline practically propose is that transforming the human body into a "*self-regulating man-machine system*" would enable man to consciously participate in his own biological evolution. The purpose was to create a system that automatically resolves all sorts of problems – using the appropriate biochemical, physiological, and electronic modifications in man's organism – and adapts – and thus survives – into any possible hostile environment, without having to permanently carry an artificially-created environment around it (fig.8). In other words, instead of altering the environment to fit to the human needs, the cyborg development suggests altering the human body accordingly in order to respond to any different conditions of space. This would grant man a greater degree of freedom and would open up possibilities of life outside man's field of operation, away from the earth, anywhere in space: "*the main idea was to liberate man as he flies into space – that's a kind of freedom – but it seemed necessary to give him the bodily freedom to exist in another part of the universe without the constraints that having evolved on earth made him subject to*" (Gray, 1995, p.47). Thus Clynes and Kline aimed at literally liberating man from the earthly ground, its gravity and its burdens and set him free – and also prepared to survive – in space.
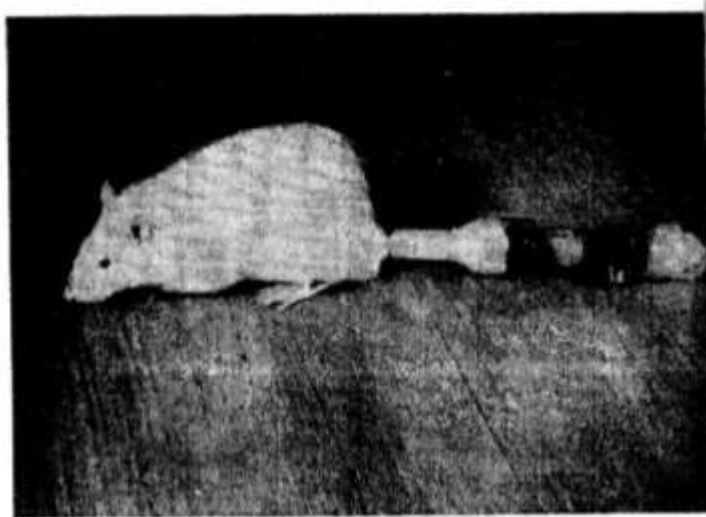
One of the first Cyborgs, this 220-gm rat has under its skin the Rose osmotic pump (shown in close-up below), designed to permit continuous injections of chemicals at a slow, controlled rate into an organism without any attention on the part of the organism.

Figure 8: Image from "Cyborgs and Space" (Clynes and Kline, 1960, p.27)

In a cyborg world it is not the environment that suits the body, not even the body that "gathers" the space in the ontological perspective, but the body that transforms to suit the environment, and any possible – even extraterrestrial – environment. The cyborg becomes a self-sufficient and self-generated creature that questions anything considered as "natural" or "normal", and consequently anything that has to do with authenticity, origin, and the significance of the native ground. By arguing that "*we are all cyborgs*", Donna Haraway employs the cyborg as a trope to explain the complex ways in which humans are currently involving into machine-like assemblages due to the new technologies, but most importantly, to discuss the "hybridity of things" in the contemporary world. Drawn upon the imaginaries of science fiction and of the Post-World War II period, the cyborg metaphor relies on the accomplishments of biotechnology and genetic engineering, attempting to reject all conventional modes of identification and any established distinction between the human and the non-human, the organic and the mechanic, and most generally between nature and culture. Therefore, if we are "all cyborgs", not only we can function properly in a high-tech environment, but we can also create alternative forms of political and social identity in order to liberate ourselves from the categorisations of gender, race, age or sexuality that are conventionally considered as "natural" and are associated with specific social and cultural roles. In that way "*the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human,*

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organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically" (Haraway, 1991, p.163) and thus the body and its environment, the home and the workplace, the public and the private space can all be seen differently. In the cyborg metaphor, the body as part of a highly technological and dynamic environment is reconceptualised, and in this "new" body subjectivity and embodiment follow the dynamism and the flexibility of social discourse and it is then responsible for establishing new social relations in the world. And since the cyborg body stands against any sort of pre-given and fixed identity, the place of the [cyborg] body would be also far from anything pre-given and fixed.

The definition of the cyborg in the *Cyborg Manifesto* blends fiction and lived experience, imagination and material reality, to describe "*a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction*" (Haraway, 1991, p.149). Haraway sees cyborgs in all the different domains of the contemporary everyday life, animal and machine hybrid creatures in science fiction, organism and machine assemblages in modern medicine, cyborgs taking over production within the workplace, and cyborgs taking protagonist positions in warfare. Therefore the cyborg creature here takes the role of an entity that brings together social and bodily reality and suggests new readings of the contemporary world. If "*we are all cyborgs*", it is not only because we may carry devices that connect us to the world or because our bodies may be enhanced with micro-machines that facilitate biological functions, but most importantly, because no one can be categorised as "pure" and "original". Due to the multiple transformations that take place every day, we all constitute compressed images of both imagination and physical reality, and this contradictory mixture opens up infinite possibilities in the deconstruction and the reconstruction of the boundaries of anything considered as established and fixed within the contemporary world[2]. This is why Haraway employs the cyborg model to break down the dominations of "race", "gender", "sexuality", and "class": the world that it represents and brings together is potentially a world without gender, and also without a clearly defined beginning, and because of that, potentially without an end too.

"*Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through a fabrication of a*

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[2] "*An argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction*" (Haraway, 1991, p.150)

heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not want to re-member the cosmos." (Haraway, 1991, pp.150-1)

The cyborg betokens a "*post-gender world*" (Haraway, 1991, p.150) that has neither an origin story nor any sort of original unity, therefore it bears no connection to the nature in the sense of an attachment to a primitive state of authenticity and originality. Since it does not recognise the Garden of Eden, it does not carry with it any memory of a long-gone order – a specific "happy place" – that would function as a model for its reestablishment. Instead, its purpose is to establish new orders in an ever-changing and possibly without-an-end environment. Besides, being "*wary of holism, but needy for connection*" (Haraway, 1991, p.151), the "nature" of cyborgs according to Haraway becomes an antidote to the apocalyptic imaginary of returning to dust (as it is not made of mud). And since connectivity matters the most, notions like the public and the private, social relations within and outside the household, and oppositions like nature and culture need to be reworked.

By definition, the cyborg begins its existence only when the boundaries, first between human and animal and then between animal-human (organism) and machine, are breached. Against biological determinism, it incorporates the idea of "human animality" and explores the possibility of bringing together people with other living beings. This unique coupling opens up infinite possibilities and new forms of bestiality. Further, modern machines are coupled with organisms in complex amalgamations that make "*thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines*" (Haraway, 1991, p.152). Haraway notes that while machines become increasingly active, we ourselves incline towards indifference (Haraway, 1991, p.152) and this also questions the role of the body as an absolute and self-existent entity in the world. Altogether, the cyborg body embodies powerful fusions and extreme possibilities among previously non-negotiable entities. Most importantly, the concept of nature as "innocent" is through the cyborg metaphor forever undermined.

Humans, animals, machines, connections come together in unions that make the natural very difficult to identify. And the more machines become microelectronic devices subject to connectivity[3] – and as such minimal and omnipresent, yet invisible – the more indefinite all sorts of boundaries become. As Haraway argues, "*the ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially.*" (Haraway, 1991, p.153) If cyborgs are hard to see, the physical-natural is also impossible to identify within the context of these clean, light, and invisible machines. Within this promised world of infinite possibilities and reconfigurations, the question is, in what directions can this new order occur? Haraway describes two opposite perspectives. On the one hand a cyborg world could evolve into a "*Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence*" (Haraway, 1991, p.154) and an imposition of a new order of control on the entire planet, drawing references from the militaristic background of the cyborgs. On the other hand, a cyborg world could be about social discourse and newly constructed bodily realities that are not afraid to explore hybrid identities and contradictory viewpoints. Haraway calls us to see from both perspectives at the same time: "*the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point*" (Haraway, 1991, p.154). Besides this is the essence of the cyborg, to bring together conditions considered as incompatible, and create monstrous unities that may establish new lived realities. Haraway aims to explain that identities are no longer bound to categories such as race, class, and gender, but instead contradictory, fragmented, and incomplete. The cyborg fiction stands against the unity and wholeness landed by patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, and anything categorised as "natural" and "innocent" due to them. It is an opportunity to question the relatively recent construction of groups[4] such as "women" and "homosexuals" in favour of multiple, complex, and ever-developing personalities. Moreover, it is no accident that

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[3] "*Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile – a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore. People are nowhere that fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence.*" (Haraway, 1991, p.153)

[4] "*In another context, the French theorist Julia Kristeva, claimed women appeared as a historical group after the Second World War, along with groups like youth. Her dates are doubtful; but we are now accustomed to remembering that as objects of knowledge and as historical actors, 'race' did not always exist, 'class' has a historical genesis, and 'homosexuals' are quite junior.*" (Haraway, 1991, p.160)

we started to understand and appropriate this complexity at a moment when networks of connections started to develop among people on the planet, establishing new forms of relations.

"*I argue for a politics rooted in claims about fundamental changes in the nature of class, race, and gender in an emerging system of world order analogous in its novelty and scope to that created by industrial capitalism; we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game.*"(Haraway, 1991, p.161)

To Haraway's thinking, communication technologies and bioengineering constitute the tools for the reconstruction of our bodies, and through this, for the establishment of new relations among people worldwide. The new order is built upon communication technologies to the degree that the contemporary pathology will be a communications breakdown (Haraway, 1991, p.163). Moreover, conventional hierarchical dominations give their way to the "*informatics of domination*" (Haraway, 1991, p.161), a complex system of networks. Among others, in Haraway's long list of transitions, representation gives its place to simulation, organism to biotic component, depth and integrity to surface and boundary, perfection to optimisation, reproduction to replication, the public and private opposition to cyborg citizenship, sex to genetic engineering, mind to Artificial Intelligence, and White Capitalist Patriarchy to the Informatics of Domination. As long as the latter formulations cannot be categorised as "natural", the concepts from which these have come from cannot be considered as natural either, which means that there is no way back to the former condition either conceptually or materially. Instead of attributing object properties to the laws of nature, everything becomes a matter of design and programming, and the whole world translates into a problem of coding (Haraway, 1991, p.164), the biggest threat of which is a suspension of communication. In this way sexual reproduction is only one kind of reproductive method, and human diversity can no longer be based on race and origins: "*any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; no 'natural' architectures constrain system design*" (Haraway, 1991, p.162). Thus objects, bodies, and spaces cannot be categorised as natural and artificial, but are made by compatible components – components that communicate in a common language – towards an absolute hybridity and collectivity of things. And if the dichotomies that concern the body are all in question, spaces such as the home, the workplace, the

market, and the public space are accordingly in need for reconsideration. Since the cyborg suggests a disassembled and reassembled self, such spaces should also free themselves from the standard and conventional roles that have been assigned to them.

"*The new communications technologies are fundamental to the eradication of 'public life' for everyone. This facilitates the mushrooming of a permanent high-tech military establishment at the cultural and economic expense of most people, but especially of women. Technologies like video games and highly miniaturised televisions seem crucial to production of modern forms of 'private life'. The culture of video games is heavily orientated to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare. High-tech, gendered imaginations are produced here, imaginations that can contemplate destruction of the planet and a sci-fi escape from its consequences. (...) These are the technologies that promise ultimate mobility and perfect exchange – and incidentally enable tourism, that perfect practice of mobility and exchange, to emerge as one of the world's largest single industries.*" (Haraway, 1991, p.168)

Then the cyborg identity is about mobility and exchange, transformation and communication, and against original innocence or Universalism. It is about the confusion of boundaries and contrary to any original wholeness. This confusion of boundaries suggests that it is neither clear who makes whom between the human and the machine, nor what constitutes the mind and what the body in terms of coding. There is no constitutive separation between the organic and the mechanic, so that, just like science fiction literature, the body does not have to end at its skin, but it may be extended and augmented. Blending imagination with social reality, machines can be "*prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves*" (Haraway, 1991, p.178), creating cyborg monsters that open up to new possibilities on the notion of embodiment – since the machine is part of the process of the embodiment – and consequently on the question of the place of the body in the contemporary world. The fact that the cyborg has not come from the womb and does not carry the memory of the Garden of Eden clearly rejects any characterisation of the female embodiment as organic, given, and essential, and introduces the notion of a body that is "out of place". Within this human-machine hybridity, cyborgs are more concerned about regeneration rather than birth. Moreover, they are "out of place" rather than grounded, and fluid and fragmented rather than closed and finished entities. As such, they stand for personal viewpoints and partial identities, and therefore against universalism and the domination of any common code:

"*this is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia*" (Haraway, 1991, p.181). Then if we are "all cyborgs" as Haraway suggests, we are about building connections and destroying categories and predetermined spaces.

It is worth noting here that this idea of being "out of place" signifies the opposition to the fixity of place and consequently any established position on the human body, and not the abolition of place itself as a concept. In effect, Haraway introduces the idea of "*situated knowledges*" (Haraway, 1991, p.188) to argue that the perception of anything is always a matter of an embodied, located subject and its geographically and historically specific perspective, and this perspective is always being structured and restructured by the current conditions, which makes place a very important determinant of the conceptualisation of each individual state. Against the belief that new technologies give us the means to see things objectively, Haraway sees the situated knowledges as the only way to move forward within the technological age: "*these prosthetic devices, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life*" (Haraway, 1991, p.190). Therefore "*situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground, or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of 'objective' knowledge.*" (Haraway, 1991, p.198) According to Haraway, the view of infinite vision, that is seeing everything from nowhere, is nothing but an illusion; therefore she suggests that instead of giving in to a constructed and simplistic "*doctrine of objectivity*" (Haraway, 1991, p.190), we should focus on embodied and personalised visions. This means that there are only highly specific visual perspectives and consequently people will have to learn how to see the world from each other's points of view. In situated knowledges any personal perspective is specifically grounded, and reversely, place becomes an active component of the specific view/interpretation of the world. Therefore, to favour partiality against universality, Haraway argues that only critical positioning and situating may create the view from the body as a complex and contradictory entity, and, by extension, all the different views from all the different bodies may create a multiplicity of situated knowledges and thus a more elaborate understanding of the world.

Then the cyborg world that Haraway describes is not about the degradation of the human body in favour of the machine, or the abolition of place in favour of constant

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mobility, but it is about breaching boundaries, questioning origins, and defying established identities. As argued by Lyotard above on the failure of the "universal", Haraway suggests that the "global" and the "universal" are not pre-existing values but "*deeply fraught, dangerous, and inescapable inventions*" (Haraway, 1995, p.xix). Therefore the cyborg stands as a medium that would explore those inventions and will attempt to evaluate and redefine them. A few years after the *Cyborg Manifesto*, in *Cyborgs and Symbionts: Living Together in the New World Order* (1995), Haraway sees the cyborg as an ever changing entity that may help us decode the world we live in and our relationships with it: "*Cyborgs do not stay still. Already in the few decades they have existed, they have mutated, in fact and fiction, into second-order entities like genomic and electronic databases and the other denizers of the zone called cyberspace. Lives are at stakes in curious quasi-objects like databases; they structure the informatics of possible worlds, as well as of all-too-real ones*." (Haraway, 1995, p.xix) Then the cyborg is at the same time a medium to understand the world and a reflection of our current state of being, an image of our reality supplemented by our fears and desires, in a process of constant transformation, always in interaction with its environment.

2.6 The Mp3 Experiment Seven by Improv Everywhere: Challenging the Traditional Perception of the Body in the Contemporary City

Midtown Manhattan on Saturday, 2nd of October 2010, a few minutes before 6:00pm. The retail stores in the area are quite (one would say unusually) crowded, and many of the customers are wearing headsets, but that is something that very few people would note as strange. Suddenly something happens inside each one of them. The people with the headsets begin to wave and wink at each other, they straighten up the displays, each one holds a product in the air, and then slow dances with it (fig.9-11). After that, they all leave the stores, they walk on the sidewalk, blending in with the New Yorkers and the tourists and performing funny activities: marching like in a marching band, silly walking, and "high fiving" strangers. Pedestrians all around them watch and laugh. The "mobbers" are walking towards Bryant Park, in the middle of which, a man is sitting all alone wearing a birthday hat and holding a cupcake. The participants (always wearing their headsets) surround the guy and "surprise" him and then they all

engage in party games, they exchange gifts, they turn each other into "Toilet Paper Mummies" and, as in a proper birthday party, they dance.

Figures 9-11: Images from: Improv Everywhere (2010)

The "*mummy dance party*" described above was one of *Improv Everywhere'*s latest missions. Improv Everywhere is a performance group based in New York City, formed in 2001 by Charlie Todd. The actions/pranks they carry out, called "missions", are very much similar to the Flash Mobs and their stated goal is to cause "scenes of chaos and joy in public places" (Improv Everywhere webpage). Their name can be read either as "Improvising Everywhere", which might be inaccurate as the missions are largely pre-planned, or as "Improve Everywhere" (Todd) and they claim to create events for no cause other than having fun: "*We are focused on creating comedy for comedy's sake and staging events that purposefully have no explicit reason behind them, other than the goal of spreading chaos and joy throughout the world.*" (Todd) Potential participants join the group's mailing list and are notified about future projects and their programmes via email. The "birthday party" described above was the seventh performance in their Mp3 Experiment series.

Figures 12-4: Images from: Improv Everywhere (2010)[5]

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[5] "Here's how it works: we put an original mp3 file online (usually around 45 minutes long) that people download and transfer to their iPods. Participants then synchronize their watches to an atomic clock on our website, head out to the same public location, and blend in with others. At the predetermined time, everyone presses play. Hilarity ensues as participants carry out ridiculous, coordinated instructions delivered to their

In this mission, the over 3000 people with the headsets in the retail stores of the wider area around Bryant Park, had downloaded an mp3 file and pressed play simultaneously at 6:00PM. Unlike past events, they wore no identifying clothing, which made it difficult to tell a participant from a non-participant before their activities began. The theme for this year's performance was "Steve's birthday party" and right after six o'clock everybody started acting according the instructions of the narrator, or, the "*omnipotent voice from above*" (The Mp3 Experiment). In the stores, participants were told to do simple things like "*pet a product*," "*neaten up a display*", "*find a product that's close to $21 without going over*" and slow dance with a product. The acts continued in the streets as the people were heading towards the park where "Steve" was sitting alone: "*March like you're in a marching band*", "*Form a long line behind a stranger, copying their every move*", "*See how many strangers you can high five*" (Improv Everywhere, 2010). The people who happened to be at the park at that moment suddenly faced 3000 individuals wearing headsets performing absurdly (fig. 12-4). Always following the recorded instructions, the participants played games, exchanged gifts, took toilet paper out of their bags, wrapped each other and then started dancing. When the party (and the mp3 track) came to an end, people cleaned up the park and the crowd dispersed within few minutes (fig. 15-7).

Figures 15-7: Images from: Improv Everywhere (2010)

The event may have ended at that point, the people had disappeared, the park was clean and empty, but the whole experiment was not just a memory and an experience for those who took part in it. Apart from their mp3 players, most of the participants and all of the Improv Everywhere "agents" also carried their mobile phones and their cameras

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headphones via narrator "Steve" and everyone else tries to figure out what the hell is going on." (The Mp3 Experiments)

with them, and were able to document their personal experience. Videos and images of the performance, each one from a different viewpoint, are now (and most likely forever) uploaded in websites like YouTube, Flickr, Facebook and, of course, in Improv Everywhere' s webpage. In this urban field, everyone is a cyborg: the participants along with their mobile phones and their cameras, their email accounts and their Facebook profiles and friends. And it is because of their complex profiles that they have participated in this game. The experiment ran from the digital realm to the physical, and back to digital again: it all started by an email circulating among people that have nothing in common apart from their interest in such events, it attempted a physical performance in the city and ended up by being digitally documented and posted on the Internet. A message became an ephemeral act that later became a permanent video online. This is another characteristic of the contemporary technological age: that the digital may be much more enduring and fixed than the physical.

The mp3 experiment challenges the traditional notion of the body in this multidimensional and heterogeneous city. The body within this city becomes augmented by mobile phones, mp3 players, cameras and other accessories and devices that allow us to understand and also share the way the body functions, performs, and exists in its environment. Improv Everywhere, Flash Mob and related forms of performance art work in a similar way: they use the urban space as a terrain and they create events with the help of new technologies. Such performances illustrate the different levels at which the contemporary city functions. The city as the built environment may be fixed and adjusted to a specific point on the earth, but it is also shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints. In the electronic age the perception of spatiality is also affected by mobility, temporality and connectivity. New technologies have illustrated that the urban environment develops and transforms in relation to the events that take place in it. Via such actions the city itself becomes a field of mobility and connectivity, and at the same time a place for the event to happen.

2.7 Flash Mobs: against the Fixed Body and the Fixed Place

Although at the time that the term *cyborg* was coined the scientists must have imagined the forthcoming cyborgs to look mostly like the *Terminator* (1984), the future proved them rather wrong, as cyborgs today do not look much different than what these

scientists would have called "natural bodies". In effect, the contemporary cyborgs that we all are – and which Haraway references – are not so much based on the physical modification of the self and the extension of the physical body with the appropriate equipment, as they pursue the extension of the mental self through connectivity. As long as individuals carry with them the proper technology (compressed within micro-devices), they have access to information and communication and they are capable of producing and sharing "virtual space" and interacting with others in different ways through this space. Digitisation does not necessarily suggest that we are always connected to our networks, nevertheless it changes the way we perceive [virtual or physical] space and our behaviour in it as it gives us the possibility to connect with anyone we want at any time. To do so, we spend time and effort to build and maintain our "second selves" because these avatars will be the media to share information and experiences online. As Haraway predicted in 1995, contemporary cyborgs have mutated to meet the requirements of a world of connectivity and also cyberspace and their most powerful "weapons" to do so are databases and informatics that help those who possess the adequate technology to live their lives through communication, interaction, and participation. And as the human body turns hybrid/cyborg, the world around turns hybrid/cyborg too (or vice-versa, as the world turns hybrid, the body turns hybrid too), combining the physical with the digital presence, the instant communication with the geographical distance, the specific place with the infinite expansion of space. This is what experiments like the T-Mobile commercial, the mp3 project by Improv Everywhere, and the Flash Mobs illustrate: that it is no longer a matter of physical presence or virtual presence, but about the synthesis of the two and the possibilities that this opens up in terms of the creation of new complex spaces and our activity in them. Flash Mob-like performances playfully – and with the help of digital media – highlighted that the idea of "non-fixed place" is not necessarily a characteristic of cyberspace, but it equally occurs within the physical world. A simple e-mail was enough to activate a virtual community (a group of people that did not necessarily know each other but shared common interests) to assemble and do something different in the city.

"*I wanted to use e-mail to get people come to some sort of show, where something surprising would happen… the point of the show would be no show at all: the e-mail would be straightforward about exactly what people would see, namely nothing but*

themselves, coming together for no reason at all. Such a project would work, I reflected, because it was meta, i.e. it was a self-conscious idea for a self-conscious culture, a promise to create something out of nothing." (Wasik, 2009, p.19).

This "something out of nothing" (the "something" here being the event, while the "nothing being the cyberspace that exists nowhere) that Bill Wasik attempted to create through the Flash Mobs (and by extension the T-Mobile commercial and the Improv Everywhere performances) was made possible by using volunteering individuals and their electronic extensions, in this case, their emails. In his book (2009) Wasik describes his first – failed – and his second successful attempt to organise these initial mob projects. On May 27, 2003 he sent an e-mail (titled "MOB#1", without knowing whether this would be followed by a "MOB#2") to sixty-three friends and acquaintances, asking them to participate in the "MOB", a project that would last ten minutes or less, and to forward that e-mail to any of their friends that would be interested to join (Wasik, 2009, p.5). At precisely 7:24pm the following Tuesday – June 3 – the mob was to assemble at a small chain store that sold hair accessories in central Manhattan. At 7:31, after exactly seven minutes – watches were advised to be synchronised with the U.S. government's atomic clocks – the crowd would disperse: "*NO ONE, the email cautioned, SHOULD REMAIN AT THE SITE AFTER 7:33*" (Wasik, 2009, p.6). On the day that the event was scheduled, and while Wasik was preparing to go to the mob site – not knowing what to expect, a friend of his called him to let him know that six policemen and a police van were standing outside the little store, not allowing anyone to enter. Wasik arrived at the site, yet he never saw his "mob" realised, as no one could understand how many of the people that had gathered watching the policemen – some of them filming them – had been there to take part in it. However, sensing that the principles that he had set up were right, he soon went on organising Mob#2 by amending Mob#1. Wasik realised that the mistake he had made was that he revealed the final destination to the participants at the first place. Two weeks later at the second event, the participants gathered at four bars – split according to the month of their birth – around the intended destination that Wasik had chosen. Ten minutes before the scheduled event, slips of paper revealing the mob site and the action were distributed at the bars (Wasik, 2009, p.21). The mob site was the rugs section, at the ninth and uppermost floor of a large department store of Manhattan (Macy's): "*all at once, in a giant rush, two hundred people wandered over to the carpet in the back left*

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corner and, as instructed, informed clerks that they all lived together in a Long Island Commune and were looking for a 'love rug'" (Wasik, 2009, p.21). Shortly after that, *Wired News*, a technology-news website posted an article titled "*E-mail Mob Takes Manhattan*" (Wasik, 2009, p.21) and Wasik's anonymous webmail account was swarmed with interview requests. As the news spread, potential "mobbers" in other cities were asking information and advice for organising their own mobs. Since then, the mobs have spread in hundreds of cities around the world, through popular themes such as the "freeze", the "dance", and the "pillow fight", and through others, more original and "localised" ideas.

Flash Mobs are here examined within the cyborg-world framework because they suggest a playful way to breach the boundaries between the physical and the non-physical, of what is considered as "real" and what is considered as "virtual", towards a new order of hybridity of things. Although they cannot be considered as a miniature of the contemporary world, but rather as an absurd outburst of it, Flash Mobs suggest an interesting phenomenon of the context of digitisation that has been transformed and extended in various versions ever since[6]. Besides, if, according to Haraway's argument above, we are moving "*from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, informational system – from all work to all play, a deadly game*" (Haraway, 1991, p.161) , then it might be easier to read the characteristics of this new order, in which "we are all cyborgs", in playful urban conditions like the Flash Mobs. This transition to a polymorphous informational system does not, of course, come without consequences. The transformations that digitisation promotes are not applied evenly in the world, with only a small percentage of the world's population being able to enjoy the technological advances and the endless connectivity that the forthcoming era is promising. The "deadly game" in Haraway's words suggests that, despite this playful attitude, what needs to be acknowledged here is the fact that disparities in the world tend to widen and not everybody is in a position of privilege in relation to this new order of presumed equality and hybridity of things.

In the cyborg-world analysed above, the body transforms to suit its environment. Similarly, in the Flash Mobs the body embraces connectivity – with the help of the adequate devices – in order to gain access to the urban play and the hybridity of the

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[6] from organised performances and synchronised actions in different cities around the world, to political demonstrations and riots instantly organised via text messages

world. Physicality and connectivity, digital profiles and physical bodies mix in a complex reality. In this complex reality, the natural is impossible to distinguish from the cultural – if it could, the game would have been pointless: an email activates a group of people to leave their desktops and participate in a public performance, but this performance would not have been possible if these individuals were not connected through a virtual community. Fiction and lived experience, imagination and material reality that easily blend in virtual communities, are here realised within the urban scene (fig.18). Apart from the transformation of a virtual community into a physical performance, Flash Mobs illustrate that there is not so much distance between one's digital and physical self, and that in a cyborg-world all the different fragments of us may come together in multiple ways. Further, dominations of race, gender, class, and sexuality that Haraway aims to break down using the cyborg metaphor have no place in a Flash Mob. The mob's sole origin is the virtual community that forms for the event and disappears thereafter. Just like our avatars stand for us in a virtual reality world, the role of the physical body in a Flash Mob comes to represent the digital profile from the virtual community in the physical world, therefore classifications have no place here.

Figure18: The first Augmented Reality Flash Mob[7] (SNDRV).

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[7] On Saturday the 24th of April 2010, the first Augmented Reality Flash Mob took place in Dam Square, Amsterdam. People were asked to prepare their smart phones by installing the adequate Augmented Reality software, chose their favourite avatar-character (from a list of popular characters) and swarm the square with "virtual human sculptures" (SNDRV). Sander Veenhof conceived this interesting event taking up from

Then the body in the Flash Mobs escapes all conventional roles assigned to it, and enacts the digital persona that stands behind it. Accordingly, the space around the body escapes established categories too. Flash Mobs illustrate that we cannot distinguish between the virtual space that envelopes digital profiles and personae, and the physical space that envelopes the physical body and the self. If, according to Haraway, objects, bodies, spaces can no longer be listed as natural and artificial, but are made of components that communicate in a common language, then the world around us is a hybrid space that combines our online activity and our digital interactions with our physical activities and actions in the city. The place in Flash Mobs, following the mobility of the body that follows the flexibility that connectivity has introduced, escapes any notion of fixity and stability. Due to connectivity, central locations within the city change for a few minutes and soon change back to normal. If placeness has to do with meanings, attachments, and narratives, then place here follows the mob: the "mobbers" create this "instant" sort of place, they bring with them new narratives and meanings in the city that develop within a few minutes and last as long as the mob lasts, and then they transform into digital stories stored into servers and hard discs. Interestingly, Wasik's initial mistake – described above – outlines one of the key features in the success of Flash Mobs. By thinking conventionally, Wasik revealed the final destination of the performance in the very first mob announcement. But location in Flash Mobs – and by extension within digitisation – is temporary, and as such fleeting and instant. For this reason it should have been kept secret until the last moment.

2.8 Is There a Place for the Cyborg Body?

In William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984), the novel that started the cyberpunk movement and in which the term "cyberspace" first appeared, Case, the novel's protagonist, believes that life is worth living only when in the space of computer

the "live sculptures"-performers that occupy public squares and invite tourists to take a picture with them. Instead of photographing the live sculptures, people in Dam Square had the chance to document themselves next to virtual statues that were visible only through the interface of the smart phone. Simple (well, as long as one possesses the proper device), fun and unique, this flash mob attracted indeed a large turnout. Throughout their mobile devices, participants and viewers had a completely new view of the well-known square: Spiderman, Batman, Darth Vader and the Beatles were also there. The members of the digital community of this Flash Mob that became real in Dam Square had brought along their virtual statues, or maybe, their imaginary friends.

simulation. Although he still has a physical presence in the story, he considers his body to be a plain container of his consciousness until he enters cyberspace – a "consensual illusion" accessed only by a computer – and anything he experiences through his body a merely "*meat thing*". He therefore leads his life bodily isolated, but "*jacked*" into cyberspace. With the help of electrodes that create a direct neural link between the brain and the computer, he uses this brain-computer interface to access the global network. Thus whenever he wants to go out on the streets he simply rides someone else's sensorium through this network. Going back to the initial argument on the advantages of pattern over presence in the electronic age, Katherine Hayles suggests that in a world that is becoming overpopulated, overdeveloped, environmentally poisoned, and potentially inhabitable, cyberspace possibilities "*make physicality seem a better state to be from than to inhabit*" (Hayles, 1999, p.36). Existing in a state of immateriality within computer simulation makes pattern the constitutive reality, reducing presence into an optical illusion, and questioning the notion of inhabitation within digitisation. But at the same time it is never simply a "*meat thing*" as Case argues. The situated body and its fluid electronic extensions, the heft of embodiment and the weightlessness of information are intertwined and hybridised in complex ways. And then, turning physical spaces more and more simulated and temporal, on the one hand, and creating digital worlds resembling the real one on the other, is part of this complex and unresolved relationship.

"*No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture can no longer be the resources for appropriation or incorporation of the other.*" (Haraway, 1993, p.150)

Following this quote, and aiming to raise the question of what would constitute "home" to a cyborg, Andrew Benjamin reflects on the relations between time, place, and presence in another significant science fiction story, that of the film "*Blade Runner*" [8] (Scott, 1982). According to Benjamin, the film brings together history (here the

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[8] The film is based on the novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" by Philip K. Dick and takes place in a dystopian Los Angeles in 2019. The majority of the population have left the earth to inhabit "Off World" colonies. These colonies are also the place for the genetically engineered organic robots called "replicants". Replicants are forbidden to be on the earth and those who ignore this are hunted down and "retired" by special agents known as "Blade Runners". The protagonist,

future), architecture (here the dystopian Los Angeles), and the body (more precisely, the task being to identify the replicants within the humans) in a specific formation. The three elements are not only connected to each other so that altering the one would affect the others, but are also inextricably linked to the present as their interpretation can only be made following the current way of thinking. Thus the body not only functions as an analogue to the architectural, but moving away from the human body to the "replicant" body and further to the cyborg body has to do with a process of its reformation and repositioning that directly affects the architectural, the "where" and the "home" of this reformed body. As the body transforms, the analogy between body and architecture is reconstituted by the change: "*relation here is the site of critique; it is moreover critique's condition of possibility*" (Benjamin, 2000, p.162). Then having set up this framework, and going back to Haraway's quote, what could be the house, the place for a cyborg? Benjamin argues that the reason why replicants appear as a threat to the film is because the opposition between the human and the machine is so clear, leaving no place to the cyborgs. Decay in both humans and their environment is what makes the replicants represent the other, and as such the placeless:

"*the transformation in question is decay. What comes to be juxtaposed within the cosmological urban fabric is decay – the continuity rather than the teleology of decay – and the modern vast. The replicant is seen as a threat within this context. It is at this point that the constraint governing both architecture and film need to be reintroduced.*" (Benjamin, 2000, p.164)

The replicants may seem indistinguishable from the humans – differentiating themselves from robots, androids, and other constructions – but it is this resemblance, along with the fact that they do not grow old and they do not fall sick (they simply die when their predetermined period of life expires) that makes them a mediating feature in the film. They are the same within their differentiation, and both at home and not at home, according to Benjamin. They can never be at home because the architecture of the film cannot provide shelter to them, as it is made to provide a shelter to humans. Thus if we want to see what being at home with replicants – and by extension with cyborgs – means, Benjamin suggests, we should rework the analogy between architecture and the body, having as a point of departure the replicant body. Then,

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Deckard, is a blade runner who has to track down and terminate 4 replicants that have hijacked a spaceship and have returned to earth seeking their maker.

conversely, having as a point of departure the cyborg body that we all are, that is, the body that does not end at one's skin but is subject to connections and attachments and reformed by information, we could reconceptualise "home" as anything that may give space to our heterogeneous components and would be able to follow our transformations along with our displacements.

By challenging the notion of "home", this chapter has attempted to conceptualise the body as an open-ended construction that connects to the world in multiple and complex ways. The cyborg body becomes a trope against anything pre-given and fixed, and thus it opens up towards a more dynamically conceptualised world too. Taking further the opposition of the cyborg body to any conventional categorisation, the following chapter regards the human body as a machine in a world of machines and connections by examining the construction of the avatar body, its relation to the corporeal body, and the world that it represents.

Chapter 3. Monsters and Machines: the re-construction of the body by new technologies

3.1 Introduction: the Illusion of an "Out-of-Body" Experience

As noted in the previous chapters, digitisation is marked by a series of juxtapositions: on the one hand we augment the human body in order to meet the needs of complex environments, and on the other hand we create digital environments that the human body experiences through its representatives – its avatars. These theoretical displacements from physical to virtual and from body to mind – theoretical because no matter what, during the construction of the avatar and the experience of cyberspace through this, there is always a physical body attached to the subject, although sometimes inert in front of the computer – call us to rethink issues of matter and corporeality. Although the body is never left behind, the power of cyberspace consists in the illusion of an out-of-body experience. This out-of-body experience, along with the contact at-a-distance that Virtual Reality promises, has first and foremost to do with the transcendence of the delimited organic body and the creation of a conceptual, open-ended and liberating one at its place. The disembodiment that cyberspace requires makes the physical body transparent, almost unimportant, and at the same time renders its representation crucial for any sort of interaction. In her book *Architecture from the Outside*, Elizabeth Grosz (2001) associates the fantasy of disembodiment with that of autogenesis, a totally-controlled fantasy: "*a megalomaniacal attempt to provide perfect control in a world where things tend to become messy, complicated, or costly*" (Grosz, 2001, p.43). It is the fantasy of the reconstruction of the human body, and that of the out-of-body self-containment, along with the impression that one can log out at any time, which make cyberspace a platform for unlimited experimentation and suggest the abolition of all the old presumptions about difference.

The aim of this chapter is to study the construction of the avatar body and its relation to the cyborg body as delineated by Haraway: as an existing technobiological object, a hybrid of man and machine, and at the same time as a powerful promising image of new subjectivity. It is also about digital monsters, their construction and their signification. It attempts to approach the human body as an entity that has escaped the

nature-culture antithesis, and as a machine in a world of machines and connections. The aim here is to study the creation of the body through programming and to identify in this constructed body cultural values, past images and future visions, fears and desires. It therefore challenges the avatar-body as shaped by pure desire and its role in the representation of the identity and the recreation of the self. This chapter initially sees the human body as a swarm of machines through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and questions the role of the avatar in cyberspace in parallel with the body without organs. It then explores the way the human body is produced and reproduced within Virtual Reality. Non-anthropomorphic and grotesque avatars are here juxtaposed with the carnivalesque body of the Middle Ages, while fashion and appearance choices in anthropomorphic avatars suggest ways of thinking about the connections between Second Life and the "first" life. Finally, it questions how the multi-referencing avatar body comes to represent visions of the contemporary world.

3.2 Cyborgs as the Monsters of the Digital Age

The transition from the physical world to the cyborg world and from the organic body to the enhanced and extended body – either physically or mentally through connectivity – has turned anyone who participates into the this new digital age into a new kind of "monster" that may not necessarily appear physically deformed and modified, however it stands far from whatever has been previously considered as "natural". In effect, if we take the monster as a being whose existence opposes nature – with the term "nature" referring to the physical world as a cosmic established order – then the open-ended body that Haraway's cyborg metaphor outlines will be a monster and a discursively-constructed norm as long as the nature-culture distinction remains the dominant way of understanding it. Although the conceptualisation of the "monstrous" may vary across the different historical periods, it seems that the monsters of the past and the monsters of the future have more similarities than differences here.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) analyses the grotesque body as an ever-developing entity, a non-static body "*in the act of becoming*", that is "*never finished, never completed*" but "*it is continually built, created, and builds, creates another body*" (p.317). Against the closed, geometrical, Classical body of a unitary nature that refers to a certain cosmic order, the grotesque body escapes the limits of its

surface to establish connections with the world and affect this order, and consequently it becomes itself a "*building material*" (p.313). Definite lines between bodies and objects are erased, allowing space for endless possibilities. The grotesque is therefore "*universal*" in the sense that it connects with elements that compose the cosmos and merge with natural phenomena as part of the entire universe (p.318). At the same time, it also contains the social, historic, and utopian reflections (p.325) of its contemporaries, and as such it projects worries and hopes, fears and desires. Most generally, and comparing to the classical aesthetics, the monstrous enables free play with the human body and its organs, and as such it is built upon either "*the fragmentation of the body*" or on the "*multiplicity within unity – the fear of the 'many in one'*" (Dorrian, 2000, p.310), while, as regards the reference to roots and origins, the monstrous according to Aristotle is that which denies its parenthood and rejects the authority of its father (Dorrian, 2000, p.310). Since the coherence, the unity, and the connection to the past of the body break down, classifications and discriminations of all kinds, assigned roles and places collapse as well. The monstrous stands against any closed network of references in favour of an open-ended and transgressive construction of a body. And since the conventional, well-defined, organic body represents a microcosm of the well-ordered universe, the monstrous body, reversely, reflects a world of disproportionality, multiplicity, and fragmentariness, and a world without a distinct beginning or an end, where everything is possible.

Then, going back to the framework set in Chapter 2, the cyborg body as an entity of fragmentariness and disproportion that favours the multiplicity within unity and is not afraid to juxtapose the "many within the one", can be read as a monstrous and grotesque existence within the contemporary context. Just like the monsters of past eras – although very different in appearance – cyborgs oppose any established order and whatever is conceptualised as "nature", and reject any reference to their origins and the figure of the father as a prototype. Against a static and coherent understanding of the body, they open up into prosthetic extensions and digital connections, and to multiple digital and physical profiles that project realities and future imaginaries, in order to create hybrid assemblages of organisms and machines and to establish links with others and with their environment. Then the contemporary monsters as swarms of machines and connections, similarly to the monsters of the past, challenge the "natural" to suggest new, as Haraway puts it, "*possible worlds*" (Penley et al, 1991, p.22).

3.3 The Body as a Machine in a World of Machines and Connections

In the cyborg metaphor the human body transcends the dichotomies between organism and machine, animal and human, nature and culture. Its material and conceptual structures come into question, and technology becomes integral to its construction and conceptualisation. The "new body" can be anything, organic and/or mechanic, material and/or virtual, isolated and/or connected to others, and opens up to possibilities of bringing together organisms, mechanisms, concepts, social bodies, and collectivities. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), a book dense in allusions, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari see the world as a swarm of machines: machines that drive machines and are driven by others, machines building connections and disconnections, and machines assembling themselves and constructing an identity and an image of their own. The body itself becomes at the same time a machine and a system of machines, and the world previously divided into "natural" and "constructed", or "physical" and "digital" is now analysed into a system of machines and their connections. The term "machine" is not here to necessarily suggest artificiality, but instead to escape the polarity between the natural and the artificial. The body as machine can be anything, so that the physical world translates into a line of production: machines that use raw materials, process them, and reject others.

Deleuze and Guattari employ the concept of schizophrenia to articulate the idea of experience as intensity and to develop a formulation of desire that comes as close as possible to matter. Everything becomes lived experience. Schizophrenia, they argue, is a "*harrowing, emotionally overwhelming experience, which brings the schizo as close as possible to matter, to a burning, living centre of matter*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.19). The schizophrenic "*does not live nature as nature, but as a process of production. There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.2). The schizophrenic embodies the force of desire.

Desiring-machines are the key to deciphering the world according to Deleuze and Guattari. Anti-Oedipus starts off aiming to locate desire within the mechanism of production – social production as well as material production: "*what a mistake to have*

ever said the id. Everywhere it is machines – real ones, not figurative ones...with all the necessary couplings and connections... For every organ-machine, an energy-machine." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.1). The concept of the machine has to do with the way various components are organised to form any given entity, and applies at all scales and at different configurations of materiality and immateriality. By breaking the world down to machines and connections, Deleuze and Guattari escape the organic-mechanic dualism and the idea that it all comes down to a fixed and set identity. The organism becomes a swarm of machines that establishes connections with other machines. The body itself becomes a system of machines that breathe, heat, eat, rather than a natural entity. Nature does not cease to exist, but becomes itself an artefact, an outcome of production. As machines, we extract raw materials from nature and we return them to nature. This makes man and nature not two opposed entities, but the same reality, that of the producer-product system. Therefore the man-nature, industry-nature, society-nature tensions that are responsible for the production-distribution-consumption distinctions are now seen as one, as the concepts of production and consumption collapse into one another. For matter, nothing is independent from the other, everything becomes production, ready to be consumed, consummated and reproduced[1]. The organs of a body, the corporeal body itself and also the social body, equally produce and consume throughout complicated but analogous procedures. And if the world, organic or non-organic, is made of machines, then it needs to be defined by relations rather by component parts. Both its construction and its identity depend on connections and interactions.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that the desire-machine is a more useful medium to understand the world than the nature-culture opposition. It is desire that produces reality and desiring machines that constitute the base for this production. Again, man and nature are not opposites but "one *and the same essential reality, the producer-product*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.5) run by the productive unconscious, desire. Desire here is not merely an external factor of things but a constitutive element of any process of production. Therefore every investment of desire is social: "*there is never any difference in nature between the desiring-machines and the technical social machines*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.31). At all levels and scales the desiring

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[1] "*production of productions, of actions and of passions; productions of recording processes, of distributions and of co-ordinates that serve as points of reference; productions of consumptions, of sensual pleasures, of anxieties and of pain*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.4)

machines are the cause rather than the effect: they operate through the unconscious to produce consciousness. From the individual to the social and from the organic to the non-organic, machines steadily ensure material flows and in that way they establish rhizomatic connections and network configurations: "*every machine is a machine of a machine. The machine produces an interruption of the flow only insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow... But it is such only in relationship to a third machine that ideally — that is to say, relatively — produces a continuous, infinite flux*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p.38). Then every machine has a double function, it breaks the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, and at the same time it produces a flow in relation to another machine connected to it. The networks of machines that constitute the world signify the continuous flux, the interruption and the connection that fuse into one, created by desire. Finally, through desiring machines, large-scale networks connect with the networks of the body: "*all systems from the 'biological' to the 'social' and economic are made up of machinic assemblages, complex foldings, and movements of deterritorialization that serve to cut across and derange their stratification*" (Ansell-Pearson, 1997, p. 183).

Deleuze and Guattari developed the concept of desiring machines in the early 1970s, many years before the evolution of the Internet and the emergence of cyberspace. By this they attempted to escape the dualism between the organic and the non-organic and to reconstruct an idea of the world as network and relation. Long before the creation of the first digital avatar, they studied the body in its environment in the context of connections. The body here is regarded alternatively as engaged in processes of production and consumption, in connection with itself and its environment, and constantly at work. Organic parts and prosthetic extensions work equally at this open-ended scheme. Clearly today, due to new technologies, the connections between the networks of the body and the wider networks of the world have become much more apparent and a part of everyday life (Ballantyne, 2007, p.32). The extended body can be easily read as a machine connected to other machines connected to the world. Electronic connections tend to transform every aspect of contemporary life and by extension the conceptualisation of the body and its relations to identity and to place. For some "*our body has been replaced as the principal site of power by our profile*" (Buchanan, 2009, p.144) and our digital inscriptions are more important than our physical presence, and this makes desiring machines a key to understand the contemporary world. Within this

context, it is a question whether digital personae constitute simple extensions of the body, or instead they stand for the body's digital recreation and in a complex interaction with it. By extension, it becomes clearer that cyberspace is not merely an alternative to the "natural" world – especially since it would be very difficult to define the "natural" world today – but its reconstruction within a technologically-mediated representational space that affects and becomes affected by this world.

It is exactly this "reconstruction" of the world that creates confusion regarding the conceptualisation of cyberspace. The idea of recreating something within representational space signifies displacement and relocation to a seemingly "*disembodied datascape*" (Hillis, 1999, p.xv). When communication is presented as adequate to replace any embodied experiential reality, it is difficult to keep up the connections with the reality of the body-subject and the materiality of its existence. Therefore cyberspace becomes this idealised place and a visualisation of the real world's utopic extensions, a place where everything becomes possible. But it is something more than that. If "*inside the little box are other people*", as Allucquère Rosanne Stone suggests (1996, p.16), then this ideal space is constructed and inhabited by real people and as such it is real and utopic at the same time. Presence here takes on a different meaning and relates to agency, signifying the transcendence of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and simultaneously of the locus of human agency (Stone, 1996, p.16). The concept of "multi-presence" also enters the discourse through the "*windows metaphor*" (Turkle, 1999, p.644),[2] employed in the design of computer operating systems, suggesting that the fragmented self exists in many worlds and through different roles at the same time, with real life being simply one of them. The body within cyberspace, deterritorialized and desocialized, has the chance to reconstruct its identity and its place. In the world of the virtual, where everything is suspended and anything may happen, the body comes closer to pure immanence, almost to the "*body without organs*":

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[2] Also, in the "*Plague of Fantasies*" Žižek argues that "*When the user playing with the multiplicity of the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels says to himself: 'What if real life (RL) itself is just one more IRC channel?'; or, with respect to multiple windows in a hypertext, 'What if RL is just one more window?', the illusion in which he succumbs is strictly correlative to the opposite one – to the common-sense attitude of maintaining our belief in the full reality outside the virtual universe.*" (1997, p.169)

"Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.167).

The "body without organs" is a concept that Deleuze and Guattari develop to oppose the bodily organism and the functional specificity of the organs. Free of the constraints of its organism, the body without organs reveals its decoded reality and its deterritorialized flows of desire. This is the field of immanence and the plane of consistency of desire: connection of desires, conjunction of flows, and continuum of intensities find their place here. It is the construction of a machine ready to be connected with other machines. The body without organs according to Deleuze and Guattari does not stand against the organs, but against the organisation of the organs, the organism. "*The BwO is that glacial reality where the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, foldings, and recoiling that compose an organism – and also a signification and a subject – occur*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.167). The argument here is that the organism is not the body, but rather, the enemy of the body that extracts useful effort from the body without organs, conceals the reality, and imposes itself upon forms, functions and bonds. Released of this organism, the body is free and virtually open to all possibilities. Deleuze and Guattari suggest the body without organs as the "anti-organism" of the body, a non-organic place of multiplicity, and a state of absolute creativity. It is what remains when everything is taken away, a state in which anything becomes possible. It is the catatonic body, a body where identity, habits and traits are suspended, pure desire is released, and therefore anything can happen.

The body without organs is a virtual entity, liberated from any physical constraints, and signifying absolute freedom. It stands outside the scope from human classification and outside the discourse for gender and human reproduction. It is the place for disembodiment and autogenesis that opens the self to new territories of signification and meaning. Since by definition it is about the non-organic body and the revelation of pure desire, the body without organs is often used by many thinkers as a metaphor for the disembodied existence within cyberspace. But the real question here is not whether the avatar represents the body without organs, but instead what is the relation between the cyborg body and the avatar body and how they come to express the body without organs together in a world conceived as machines and connections. Within this framework it is

important to study how bodies, identities and desire are constructed through representation, along with the way the human body is conceived, inscribed, produced and replicated by new technologies.

3.4 Nude Descending a Staircase: the Relationship between the Avatar Body and the Subject's Physical Body
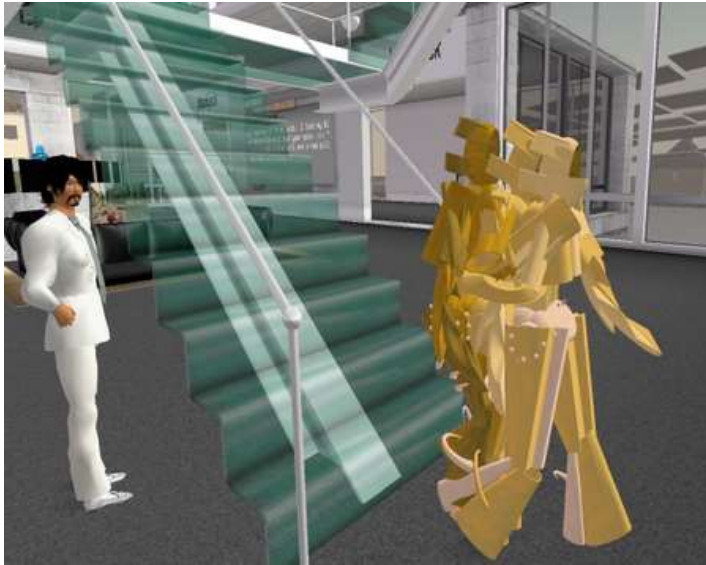
Figure 1: Tasrill Sieyes' "Nude descending a Staircase" avatar (Au, 2007)

In 2007, James Wagner Au (named Hamlet Au in Second Life), a researcher on Second Life who keeps a very popular blog on virtual worlds called New World Notes (http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn), published a series of web articles titled "All about my Avatar" presenting interesting non-conventional avatars in Second Life. The one called "*All About My Avatar: Tasrill Sieyes*" (Au, 2007) is about Tasrill Sieyes, a Second Life Resident/"avatar artist" in Second Life. In the first image of the article Sieyes appears in an abstract-robot-like avatar (fig.1). It is in effect a three-dimensional recreation of Marcel Duchamp's famous painting "*Nude Descending the Staircase*". She describes the "embodiment" of Duchamp's artwork a liberating and exciting experience that provoked enthusiastic reactions to avatars in the world. Interviewed by Au, Sieyes says she has never been happy when confined within the limits of anthropomorphic avatars. Instead she loves experimenting with different forms and references and creating abstract avatars: "*when I am abstract, I don't have to worry about the preconceived notions of gender, race, or anything else but someone's view on abstract art. I can just*

be pure intellect" (Au, 2007). The "*Nude*" is only one of the avatars she uses when in Second Life. She declares being an "*avatar vagabond*" (Au, 2007), as she moves from one form to another on an impulse. During her interview she changes her avatar into a purple fox with octopus tentacles, then into a black barbed-coiled creature, and then to a chrome-surfaced anthropomorphic form (fig.2-4). She says she has avatars that express her more and others that she likes experimenting with. Some avatars have a deeper meaning to her and others capture particular emotions: "*I just pour my emotions into them and see what comes out*" (Au, 2007).

Figures 2-4: Tasrill Sieyes' alternative avatars (Au, 2007)

At first one has the impression that Second Life is exclusively inhabited by "hyperreal figures", avatars inspired by advertising, fashion and entertainment, "*a colony of extremely generic, homogenous representations rooted in prevailing constructions of successful commodification and accumulation: pop icons, juvenile fantasies, dumbed-down cartoon characters, and racially pure, white, young, 'perfect bodies'*" (Little, 1999). In his book "*The making of Second Life: notes from the new world*", Au (2008) estimates that seventy to eighty per cent of the Residents in Second Life stay within the human register. Such exaggerated generic representations are of course very frequent, but they are not the only case; many players choose to test their body-image and try out extreme appearances that escape classifications such as race, sexual orientation, beauty or age. Those who decide to keep out of this spectrum, on the other hand, pick up their references from a wide variety of cultures: mythological creatures and robotic machines of all kinds, famous pieces of artwork like Marcel Duchamp's artwork or Vincent Van Gogh's self-portrait created by Daniel Linden (Au, 2007b), vampires, elves and aliens, hybridised animals, amoeba-like forms and exaggerated body organs, and many more. Some users see the construction of their avatar as a surface experimentation and as the development of an image that will endow

identity upon their digital persona, while others see it as a more profound transformation, testing the boundaries of the body and questioning the relationship between the representation and the represented. Building an avatar is just the beginning of a process of self-re-presentation and re-placement that explores the realisation of the self and the world. Given the extent of the role-playing possibilities within Virtual Reality – with anonymity and the ability to log out any time giving it an extra degree of freedom – this is the place to play with different aspects of identity and to explore identity performance.

Tracing its origins from the incarnation of Hindu deities (Little, 1999), and having become popular through science fiction stories and virtual reality games, most generally, the term *avatar* stands for the appropriate representation of the self in a given environment. According to Gregory Little, "*the avatar is a mythic figure with its origin in one world and projected or passing through a form of representation to a parallel world. The avatar is a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world.*" (Little, 1999) While the cyborg suggests the modification of the physical body in order to operate in another environment, the avatar leaves the original body intact in its environment and creates a projection – an image – that will act as a delegate and a transmitter of signification into this other "parallel" world. As a representation of the original body, the avatar is thus always inseparable from it, a "*strap on*" (Little, 1999) visual agent that represents the user and is always subject to the user's choices for identity, appearance, behaviour. By definition, the avatar may be completely dependent on the user, but at the same time it does not necessarily constitute the user's double, as its construction involves a complex selective process of pairing opposite entities such as the corporeal and the immanent, the real and the imagined, the established and the desired, the represented and the representation. As such, it expresses certain aspects of the subject, sometimes it reveals unknown aspects to the subject, and others it reflects its Virtual Reality experiences back to the subject, so that the two engage in a dynamic relationship.

In her paper "Technics of the Subject: The Avatar Drive" (2008), Emily Apter reflects on the technical constructions of the subject and defines the avatar as "*a way of construing the ontology of 'what-ness' and 'who-ness', or the 'It in the I' of agency, once the subject is framed as cognitive and affective algorithm, or a systemic configuration of the drives*" (Apter, 2008). According to Apter, since any expression of

the Self constitutes a self-selective process – and as such is subject to various factors and dependent to others – the avatar acts as a totem and a "*puppet-homunculus*", "*less a second self or alter-ego than an animal companion or emblem*" (Apter,2008). Thus the avatar identity is not a fixed identity, drawing references sometimes from the materiality, others from the imaginary, and others from the unconscious of the subject. At issue here is not only the opportunity for re-construction and self-transformation that the user has, but also the aspect of "play" involved at the process and the impression that whatever one does has no consequences in the real world. All these activate the "It" within the subject, a force "*beyond intelligible grasp*" that conducts both the user's decisions and his experiences: "*the 'itness' of 'I' underscores the element of foreignness within the subject, a force-field of blind energy that serves as thought's predicate. Thinking as 'itness', other to or outside of self-consciousness becomes key to any theory of subject technics.*" (Apter, 2008) This "It" becomes a causative force, a "*desubjectivated*" (Apter, 2008) agent, beyond our understanding, that drives the drive. Thus the avatar becomes the concretisation of the mechanism of the drive, and as such it stands between personalisation and independence, not so much a double but rather a proxy for the subject.

If the avatar functions as the "*prosthetic extension of desubjectivated agency*", as Apter (2008) argues, then in the context of Haraway's cyborg world, the avatar does not merely represent the subject, but it becomes an inseparable part of the cyborg body – in effect yet another layer in the multiplicity of the cyborg body – an embodiment of the otherness of the Self – the "I" as the other by virtue of which I become myself. Although a digital – and as such an immaterial – construction, and despite the fact that it may change at any time into a completely different form, the avatar comprises of a body and a face, a cloud of information fixed into a specific body image for the given time. This body image does not only enable the user to experience virtual worlds and interact with others in them, but it also functions as a filter for the actual body, sometimes visualising and other times masking the drive and its relation to the subject. Therefore, going back to Little's definition of the avatar as an agent that transmits meanings into a parallel world, the avatar is not a mere reflection but a delegate that invests the virtual worlds with meanings and also a medium that enables us to inhabit these real-world-driven virtual worlds. Within these complex relationships between the cyborg body and its avatars, and between the physical and digital environments, the construction of the

avatar may be a key in deciphering the [cyborg] body and its world [physical and digital seen as one despite its fragmentariness and discontinuities].

3.5 The Avatar Body as the "New" Grotesque Body

Given that in virtual reality worlds the avatar body functions as a filter creating a shield of anonymity, invisibility, and multiplicity, but also enabling the interaction between the physical and the representational condition, with the avatar body we may be seeing the construction of a "new" grotesque body, a reconfiguration of the carnivalesque body for the digital age. Due to their complex relation with the physical world described above, virtual worlds combine the real-world experience with the users' desires and imaginaries to create an alternative domain of endless possibilities and play, an environment that, similarly to the carnival world of the Middle Ages, enables the liberation from any societal and physical limitations of the everyday life.

The medieval carnival attempted to take the "inner meaning" of the world, in its good and bad aspects, out to the surface. In *Rabelais and his world*, Bakhtin sees the carnival as life re-shaped according to patterns of play (Bakhtin, 1984, p.7). Play, life and art become closely linked and interwoven as "*life itself is on stage*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.258). Its strong element of play and inclusive character, along with the fact that it did "*not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.7), allowed the carnival to suggest a different, nonofficial experience of the world. In this process of constant change, time is very important. The carnival is a play of time itself, "*which kills and gives birth at the same time, recasting the old into the new, allowing nothing to perpetuate itself*" since "*time plays and laughs!*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.82) The feast is a temporary process that alters everything, only for a while. For a short period of time the carnival offers a new order of things that questions the universally-accepted and suspends the hierarchies of the social system. All established conventions are of no importance here. And since the carnival has absolutely no practical or utilitarian connotation, all the people have the chance to escape their everyday life, their oppressions and their fears, and enter a utopian realm. This droll projection of everydayness thus became the people's weapon against the everyday fears, and most importantly the fear of death, and made the man of the Middle Ages realize the world to its full extent. It is this play between life and art that the carnival creates, its temporality,

and the fact that it suggests a spectacle not to be watched but experienced, that makes its juxtaposition with virtual environments very significant. As Bakhtin states, "*the carnival is the people's second life, organized on the base of laughter*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.8). In both cases the way that the body is transformed, inscribed, produced and replicated represents the vision of the self and questions its place within the universe.

Within a jesting atmosphere, the carnival imposed the abolition of all social hierarchy and a world turned "inside out", dominated by the folk humour. During the days of the feast, special types of communication and interaction were employed by the people. The mask became the object that transformed the human body into the grotesque and the medium that put all conventional categorisations in suspension. Behind the mask, all people were considered equal: community, freedom, equality and abundance were the characteristics of the carnival world that blurred the boundaries between the utopian ideal and the realistic. The mask is not only the object that signifies the change, but it also symbolizes the reincarnation. Among its multiple symbolisms, it is associated with transition, metamorphosis and transgression of physical boundaries. "*Manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are per se derived from the mask*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.40), and the whole essence of the grotesque is thus expressed. Moreover, by being the medium between reality and imagination, the mask reveals the playful aspect of life and it emphasizes on the temporal event, the spectacle of the moment. Following the hidden face, the travesty of the body's appearance and its degeneration reflected the social and the historical transformation. The renewal of clothes symbolised the renewal of the social system and in that way all hierarchic levels were reversed: "*the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected*" and "*kings and queens were elected for a day*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.81). Wearing the clothes inside out and the trousers on the head implied this shift from top to bottom and the degradation to the bodily lower stratum. This transformation of the everyday life celebrates the constant renewal of the body and the world, and also the death and the rebirth, the cycle of life.

Cyberspace itself introduces a playful realm that, outside everydayness and its oppressions, everybody who has the means is invited to explore and experience. In Virtual Reality, the user-computer interface takes the role of the mask that stands for the threshold from the physical to the representational and transforms fragments of the physical world into this "other" reality of cyberspace. The human – here cyborg – body

translates into an avatar body that is open into infinite possibilities, drawing its references from both reality and imagination, fears, hopes, and desires of the conscious and the unconscious. The rapidly changing environments created within cyberspace, and the impression that one can easily log out of this world and erase everything immediately, increase the temporal character of this new world and emphasize on the spectacles of the moment. On the other side of the interface, similarly to the carnival, everybody is considered equal and all classifications are potentially suspended. The transition that Haraway saw "*from all work to all play*" (1991, p.161) begins here: within a playful atmosphere, the user is invited to reconstruct oneself and be the "other" that he would like to be, or the one that he pretends he is, or even the person that he does not dare to be in the physical world. With genetic heredity being non-existent here, and race and sexual orientation being mere checkboxes in the creation of the avatar, cyberspace becomes this place for freedom and the realisation of the ideal. In here the world can be turned upside-down, deconstructed to its basic components, or reconstructed anew.

Following the world that changes during the carnival, the human body goes through a major transformation itself. Aiming at turning fear and darkness into joy and brightness through laughter and play, the aesthetics of the carnival grotesque is associated with the aesthetics of the monstrous. Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are the principle attributes of the grotesque style. Contrary to the finished, complete and cleansed classic ideals, the carnival body is incomplete and ever-developing. Exaggeration has a rather positive and imposing character here. The grotesque images are peculiar, unfinished and constantly renewed: "*they remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.25). They provide a unique mixture of traditional contents and new meanings: projections of copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration and dismemberment (Bakhtin, 1984, p.25) constitute the bases for this transformation. The body may be ugly and repulsive, but aims at travestying the images of bodily life and everyday human existence. It becomes a caricature with fantastic dimensions, opening up a satirical world. Extraordinary human beings are the canon here, bodies of mixed parts, half-human and half-animal creatures, giants, dwarfs and pygmies (Bakhtin, 1984, p.345). Cyclops with only one eye on the forehead, monsters without a

head or others with six arms are some examples of the wild anatomical fantasies that populated the Middle Ages. The human face becomes a field of experimentation as well. The mouth and the nose become expressively grandiose, adopting animal forms or shapes of other objects. The protruding eyes also become a very important feature of grotesque imagery.

This free play of the human body and its organs suggests a continuous act of becoming. The grotesque image is an unfinished phenomenon of transformation and constant metamorphosis. It plays with the new and the old, the beginning and the end. The body here is not at all a private, self-centred form, separated from the other beings. Instead, it is open-ended and undelimited, inseparable from the world. The grotesque body is blended with other bodies, animals, objects and the world in general and as such it represents the world in total rather than its individual self. It becomes a building material for the world. To designate the connection between the body and the universe, the grotesque body is usually presented at an age approximate "*to birth or death, to infancy or old age, to the womb or the grave, to the bosom that gives life or swallows it up*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.26). Sometimes, both images are merged and presented as one: one giving birth and then dying and the other conceived and born, referring to the cycle of the genetic development. Such projections of fertility and growth, birth and death connect the body to the body of all the people and by extension to the world. Whatever belongs to the sphere of the ideal and the spiritual comes down to a material level. The play between the upper and the lower stratum, the top and the bottom, the earth and the heaven is the carnival's most important aspect. The body opens up to the world; in fact it becomes cosmic, part of the world[3]. In this universal freedom, the carnival grotesque aims at liberating man from any conventional/established truth and put him closer to the new order of things and the search for the "other". It is within this world that the body feels "at home" and has therefore nothing to fear. The death of the individual is only a moment that motivates renewal and improvement. The body and the world participate equally at this metamorphosis[4].

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[3] "*It is cosmic; it represents the entirely material bodily world in all its elements. It is an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which one's shoots are preparing to sprout*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.27).

[4] "*The grotesque, including the Romantic form, discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. (…) The existing world*

Similarly to the carnivalesque, the construction of the avatar body opens up to all sorts of experimentation. Although a good percentage of the avatars in Second Life stay within the field of generic and homogeneous human representations, the avatar construction itself entails great freedom and possibility. The monstrous and the grotesque take on different forms and respond to new challenges. Mythological figures, half-human and half-animal creatures, giants, dwarfs and pygmies may still be found, but cyborg-like forms seem to get all the attention among non-conventional avatars. The players are free to exaggerate with body shapes and body parts and to create their "monsters" referencing the mythological past or the apocalyptic future. Size is an important parameter in this exploration: many avatars turn up greatly oversized for their environment, causing a fearful appearance, while others appear minimised and scaled down, aiming to pass unnoticed in their entourage. Just like the medieval grotesque, the avatar body as subject to programming and following the mobility and the temporality of the digital culture is constantly changing and continuously developing, opposing the complete body image of the classic ideals. Thus the avatar body can be huge or minimal, fantastic or realistic, animal or human or hybrid, comical or repulsive, as part of an endless process of transformation. And as a cloud of information within an informational environment, the avatar is always open-ended and unlimited, always connected to, and also affecting, and being affected by its digital world.

In her book The Second Self (1984), psychologist Sherry Turkle argues for a postmodern concept of the Self born of new technologies, in which one can represent oneself with different personae in different online worlds, and yet these alternative selves can brought together as one unitary piece. Turkle sees the construction of the avatar as a process of deterritorialisation. Through displacement and immersion into something foreign, one has to reconstruct oneself and one's relations with others and the rest of the world. This process of displacement of the physical world and re-placement into an artificial environment reveals the multiple invisible versions of the self. The concept of the one and only, real and ideal self is in question here as multiplicity and flexibility come to play. Living through multiple electronic self-representations give

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suddenly becomes alien precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendly world, of the golden age, of carnival truth. Man returns unto himself. The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed. While dying, it gives birth. The relative nature of all that exists is always gay; it is the joy of change." (Bakhtin, 1984, p.48)

people the power to re-create and re-present themselves and also the chance to be *many in one*. The idea of one having "multiple selves" is not new and does not owe its existence to the emergence of virtual reality. Although people have always been living double lives, the Internet has managed to intensify this potential by allowing them to realise their multiplicity and also to experiment with their personality in a safe, anonymous and playful environment. The model is simple: one can approach one's story by freely navigating among the different aspects of the self[5]. Building our avatar refers directly to our cultural, psychological and social backgrounds and reconfigures the relationships among them. The boundaries between everyday life roles and self-presentitons are therefore blurred. One can construct several identities and fluctuate between them. All these alternative identities constitute disconnected fragments, different parts of the self that altogether outline one's full personality. The "true" self is here replaced by the flexible self that unfolds to a lot more possibilities. As Turkle argues, it is through the realisation of our inner diversity that we come to know our true limitations (Turkle, 1984, p.261). As a consequence, we become conscious of our incompleteness and we get to understand that we cannot know completely either the world or ourselves. And, conversely, it is this acknowledgement that enables us to open up and connect with others. All these technologies, networks and virtual worlds aim at a greater awareness of a sense of self – or selves – and the avatar becomes the image of the "many in one" that the cyborg body really is.

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[5] "*We are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralised multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process. The metaphors travel freely among computer science, psychology, children's games, cultural studies, artificial intelligence, literary criticism, advertising, molecular biology, self-help, and artificial life. They reach deep into the popular culture. The ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity is heightened by the presence of these metaphors.*" (Turkle, 1984, pp.263-4)

Figures 5, 6: Slade Onizuka (Au, 2007c)

Figures 7, 8: Kazuhiro Aridian (Au, 2007b)

Slade Onizuka is a well-known in Second Life for his "exoskeleton-based" avatar designs (fig.5-6). When interviewed by James Wagner Au in March 2007, his avatar looked like a winged armoured human body, a dark, gangly frightening figure, a celebration of prosthetics, or an anthropomorphic machine. The person behind Slade is not a professional designer. He developed his design skills in the attempt to create a personalised avatar. The reason for his experimentation on exoskeleton-like creatures was his feeling that conventional avatars were too delicate and fragile for the given environment: "*here we communicate our minds to others, we know nothing about each other, and only communicate, for the most part, in a virtual setting. My goal is to create a layer for myself that isn't tied down by the general template. I can manipulate it to how I want to be observed*" (Au, 2007c). His aim was to be expressive and protective of himself at the same time. The agent behind another avatar, an overscaled

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robot exoskeleton named Kazuhiro Aridian (fig.7-8) suggests of her appearance: "*it is painful, skeletal, ethereal and almost human, but things like the inverted knees and enlongated hands make it not human at all. Even with all this painful metal, it retains a human face, almost as a mockery of humanity*" (Au, 2007b). As mentioned above, although Second Life seems to be overwhelmed by these hyperreal, white, young, "perfect bodies", figures likes these are not rare, indicating the exploration of the constitution of the body within cyberspace. During the carnival, the travesty of the body had two main goals: to agitate the established social relations and to represent the cycle of life and the bodily connection to the universe. Just as the carnivalesque is cosmic, inextricably linked to its world and a building material for this world, connecting to the universe here signifies connecting to the digitisation of things. This suggests that if we take for granted that the boundaries between nature and culture have collapsed, then, as Stone argues, we live in the mode of the "*technosocial*" (Stone, 1996, p.42), where it is not nature that has been technologized, but instead we need to experience the technological space as a social and physical environment and as a kind of nature. Therefore, looking more like robots than humans, such avatars – and the creators behind them – express this need to emphasise on the connection to the technological environment that has – partly – produced them. The universe here entails projections of the cyberpunk, the technologically extended body, and the robot, and the means are connectivity, communication, and programming. Thus the "*mockery of humanity*" that Kazuhiro Aridian describes is no different than the carnival mockery. It articulates a commentary on the organic-mechanic dualisms and confronts the universe as a cyborg world, analysed into machines and their connections.

3.6 On the Appearance of the Avatar in Second Life

In his book, Au argues that during the first few months of Second Life almost half of the avatars had extraordinary and weird appearances, exaggerating with sizes, forms, textures and colours. Soon after that, when users started developing their own scripts to customise their appearance and others began to set up their own design businesses, things got completely different. Today, one can easily (and at a low cost) buy as many bodies and skins as s/he likes, and also hairstyles, clothes and accessories choosing from a wide variety of styles. To a great degree, it seems that playfulness and

experimentation (as equivalent to the grotesque construction of the body) gave way to commodification and accumulation (fig.9). Cyborg-like avatars and hyperbolic creatures as those described above were largely replaced by hyperreal bodies. Instead of reflecting the utopic and the ideal, as one would expect in an entirely artificial and user-created world – free from real world limitations – the average body in Second Life appears confined to the popular ideals of everyday life. The majority of the characters consist of well-built bodies and perfectly shaped faces, extremely long-legged, big-breasted blonde female figures with fully formed lips and tall muscular male figures with tattoos. Emily Apter suggests a kind of "digital Darwinism" to be taking place "*as they adapt the principles and procedures of cosmetic surgery—augmentation, enhancement, nose jobs, liposuction, botox—to virtual body-construction*" (Apter, 2008). Interestingly, real-life restrictions seem to prevail here. Many people tend to create their digital representations as if they re-designed their physical bodies, only attempting to make them more appealing in terms of bodily structure and facial characteristics, and often very much affected by the current fashion models. This extreme morphology may project an exaggerated image of the physical world, but at the same time such images appear static rather than evolving. Although one can change his avatar's shape, racial characteristics and outfit easily and at low cost– even gender is a checkbox that can be altered at any time – experimentation is highly restricted (fig.10). The avatar body refers directly to the human body, but the question that comes up is what does this suggest about the desire for exploration or any reference to the universalism that the physical body contains?
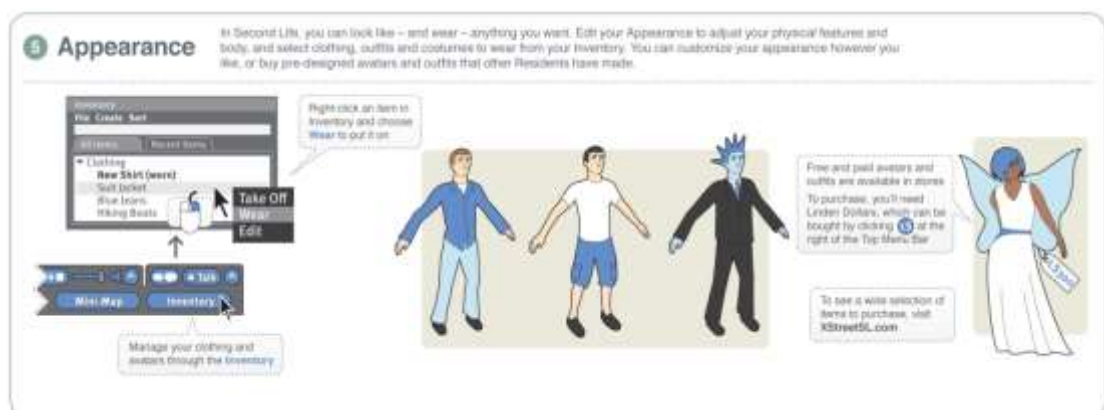
Figure 9: The appearance of avatars (Second Life Quickstart Quide)

Figure 10: Choosing an avatar in Second Life

In effect, "mainstream" Second Life appears to constitute more of a reflection than a negation of the contemporary environment. Ever since the avatar customisation has progressed from a free-time hobby to a very profitable design industry (Bardzell et al, 2009, p.1), the opportunity to explore the possibilities that the re-construction of the body offers has been partly replaced by the exploration of an extended variety of fashion trends. Hairstyles, body skins and shapes of every kind are reduced to accessories and as such are widely sold in virtual shopping malls. However, as in real life, the role of fashion in Second Life, although often rejected as superficial and unimportant, is not merely ornamental. Apart from setting the framework of the occasional consumer culture, fashion plays a significant role in the construction of modern identity. And if this is the case in real life that clothes and accessories have both a functional and a symbolic character, then in Second Life, where avatar bodies need not to be protected from rain or cold, fashion choices stand only for the representation of the agent's identity. The construction of the body and the self can be interestingly studied through these choices.

Figures 11-4: Images from Second Style (issue44, pp. 47, 48, 39, and 11).

The paper *Emerging Standards in Virtual Fashion: an Analysis of Critical Strategies Used in Second Life Fashion Blogs* (Bardzell et al, 2009), which explores virtual fashion and its impact on the personalisation of avatars, highlights the close relation between real life fashion and Second Life fashion. The study challenges the notion that virtual worlds like Second Life are distinctly separate from the real world. It suggests that although virtual worlds enable designs and styles that would not be possible in real life, real life is deeply involved in Second Life fashion. A close look at *Second Style*, a fashion magazine for Second Life illustrates this double role, revealing the direct connection between the two worlds and at the same time enabling a close reading of the ways that these appearance choices are made (fig.11-4). Second Style is by no means inferior to a real-life fashion magazine; it has a similar layout (articles and advertisements), very engaged contributors (fashion editors and fashion photographers), and organizes fashion shows inside the world of Second Life. Moreover it addresses avatars of all genres and styles, at least those who choose to participate into this real-world-like hyperreality: "*fashionistas*" and "*grunge groups*", "*cyberpunks*", "*steampunks*" and others (Second Style, issue 13). The fashion is not restricted to the diverse selections of avatar clothing and accessories, but it extends to a presentation of a corresponding lifestyle in total: home design, entertainment, holidays. Real-people-looking avatars may enjoy the diversity of accessories and services suggested. And the connections to physical life are straightforward. The March issue (Second Style, issue 44, March 2011) is looking forward to the spring when "*we are all itching to strip off a few layers and get out and enjoy ourselves...*" (Second Style, issue 44, p.4) The clothing section under the title "Country Living" celebrates the upcoming summer with light clothes and a photo shoot at the [Second Life] countryside, whereas the house design section presents a luxury house, perfect for recovery from the cold winter: "*to me*

nothing says cozy like a big homemade breakfast, a warm bubblebath and a comfortable spot to curl up and read a book" (Second Style, issue 44, p.18). The boundaries are not transgressed here, but confused. Second Life looks like the relaxation place for the physical body (fig. 15-6).

Figures 15, 16: Images from Second Style (issue 44, pp. 18-9, and 26-7).

An earlier issue of Second Self (Second Style, issue 13) features an extended presentation on cyberpunk style (fig.17-8). The quality of the images presented here is equal to professional fashion photography. On the side of each image there is a detailed description of all the accessories presented along with their designers/sellers. The presentation is completed with a "mini-guide" of the most popular cyberpunk places to visit inside Second Life. Although Cyberpunk and Steampunk are both genres that the mainstream fashion scene typically overlooks (as argued in the editor's note: Second Style, issue 13, p.4), they are exhibited here as yet another fashion style. The avatars-models that are photographed are by no means different than the conventional avatars: white, young, perfect-skinned, idealised bodies with beautifully shaped faces. The cyberpunk features are displayed here as mere accessories, just like hairstyles or body skins. It seems like it is not about the construction of the body any more, but rather, about its accessories. Electronic devices and prosthetic enhancements that constitute the main components of cyberpunk figures can be attached and detached from the body just like an outfit or a purse. Instead of viewing the body as open-ended or exploring the "digital grotesque" as they could, these figures appear, again, fixed and complete, shiny and perfect, as if they were taken out of a real-world life-style magazine. In his article *A Manifesto for Avatars*, Gregory Little (1999) laments the conversion of the avatar from a tool of the user behind the screen to an instrument of multinational capitalism. His argument is that a field of great opportunities is left unexploited here because it has

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surrendered to global consumerism[6]. The question raised here is to what extent are these digital representations extensions and expressions of the self? And if they do mirror the self, then do we all desire to become commodities?

Figures 17, 18: Cyberpunk fashion (Second Style, issue 13, pp. 52-3, and 66-7).

In 2007 IBM published the IBM Virtual World Guidelines, a very detailed code of ethics and behaviour for the company's employees. IBM is a very active company within Second Life, owning an extensive region-island that is used for public relations, meetings, presentations and advertising, therefore employees are encouraged or even required to have a "business avatar" and participate in events. The IBM Virtual World Guidelines call for "appropriateness" and professionalism and ask the employees to "*explore responsively*", to use their "*good judgement*" and protect their – and IBM's – good name (IBM Research, 2007). In terms of their appearance, employees are suggested to "*make the right impression: Your avatar's appearance should be*

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[6] "*a tool with the potential for the playful generation of territories of signification and empowerment, the avatar is being used instead as a weapon against its own referents to seize this terrain of potential as part of a rapid process of accumulation*" (Little, 1999)

reasonable and fitting for the activities in which you engage (especially if conducting IBM business)" (IBM Research, 2007). Just like in real world, dress codes and also behaviour codes apply here, since the IBM Island in Second Life is regarded not as a virtual reality alternative field but as an extension of the company's office space. And the avatar is not simply an image or even a tool for the purposes of a game, but a representative in terms of appearance, behaviour and ethos. Then clearly the construction of the avatar cannot be reduced to the creation of a mere image. If one is renting a luxurious country house in Second Life to escape from the burdens of everyday life and enjoys inflating his/her body muscles or intensifying his/her facial characteristics instead of having a real-life cosmetic surgery, then at issue here is the existence through an avatar, rather than the outline of a representation. Fashion choices and look become crucial for the understanding of the relation between agency and identity in cyberspace. The avatar concentrates important information and converts data into a specific visual presentation that reveals what the physical body desires.

3.7 The Body as a Vision of the World – Two Avatar Projects

Figures 19-24: Manifesto for Avatars [7] (Little, 1999)

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[7] *"To combine visual codes, signifying signs, and social images into avatars that take a combative stance toward the forces of capital:*
1. Seek, rarify, and valorize disintegration and instability
2. Resist unified identity relative to race, gender, age, human, animal, or machine.
3. Refuse participation in wholeness and actively dismantle myths of transcendentalism.

In the physical world, the avatar is nothing but a concept, a conceptual image of the self that becomes a visual representation in Virtual Reality. In is only in cyberspace that it transforms into a fixed representation that enables the agent to exist in the given environment. As an idea, the avatar is the place of freedom of the material body, a place of suspension of identity, traits and habits, a place of pure desire. But as the avatar comes to be visualised, then it evolves into something more than pure immanence. Even as a mere piece of software the avatar becomes a set picture. Here all the oppositions that the avatar stands for come together into an image so that it brings together at once the corporeal and the immanent, the body and the mind, the represented and the representer, and as Little laments, "*the self and the commodity*" (Little, 1999). Then the avatar is no longer the body without organs, the unconsumable body, but instead a hybrid system, a "*strap-on persona*" (Little, 1999) to the body to represent the individual's presence to the specific space – reinforcing the idea that "we all cyborgs".

"*The avatar, under the semblance of a representation of one, democratic individual free to construct his or her "own" mythic fantasy or satiation of personal desire, is actually returned to its original function as a top-down tool, the embodiment of post-modern multi-national commerce.*" (Little, 1999)

Gregory Little's project "Manifesto for Avatars" aims at seeing the avatar as a site of resistance and as a symbol for the unconsumable body, the body without organs. Going back to the cyborg's partiality and incompleteness, Little suggests escaping the framework of any biological, cultural, economic, or religious discourse. His avatars (fig.19-24) reject biological connections, detach from all real life traits and behaviours and favour fragmentation, suspension and hybridity. Like contemporary monsters, they

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4. Create tensions and conflicts through the simultaneous presentation of the desiring subject and the fetishized object of desire.
5. Draw from narratives of abjection, the alien, and the other
6. Pierce the skin, do the taboo, show the insides, destroy the internal/external binary.
7. Refuse the temptation to succumb to the slick, seamless special effects of emergent technology
8. Avoid personal or social fantasy, step out of bounds, lose your boundaries altogether
9. Avoid mystery, make analysis of the unconscious impossible, be hyper literal
10. Use images that speak of hyperembodiment, of extremes of physicality, like the visceral, the abject, the defiled, and the horrific" (Little, 1999)

stand against completion, singularity and unity, celebrating difference, open-endedness and free desire. Similar to the carnival body described above, these figures of exaggeration and excessiveness are far from the complete and cleansed ideals, opposing not only to classic aesthetics, but also to the processes of production and accumulation. Little's avatars differentiate from the generic representations that flood cyberspace. They are repulsive and ugly comparing to the "perfection" of conventional avatars. Body parts are blended with other objects, organs are multiplied and exaggerated in growth, while others are completely absent, rejecting any established proportionality or symmetry of the human body. By playing with races, genders and age, experimenting visual codes and social images, and combining animal, human and mechanic characteristics, they explore the "digital grotesque" and visualise a body without organs.

Figures 25-8: Allegories: Pasiphae, the Architect, the Inkmistress, the Philosopher (Greenaway, 1998)

In a different project, Peter Greenaway creates his own hybrid figures to represent visions of the world. *100 allegories to represent the world* (1998) is a work that Greenaway developed as a visitor at the University of Humanities in Strasbourg in 1995. For this project over one hundred and fifty citizens of Strasbourg volunteered to pose nude for him. Greenaway worked with mixed collaging techniques on those images, computer processing, painting and graphic work, to "dress" his figures (fig. 25-8). "*The 'clothing' was subjective and wide-ranging in its eclecticism, building up layers of allegorical referencing, which, on the one hand, fulfilled the function of allegory as a mode of public communication and, on the other, investigated all manner of private meanings which can be seen to be most germane and essential to making the image arresting, instructive, entertaining and contemporary*" (Greenaway, 1998, p.5).

The body here becomes a field of investigation where different materials, patterns and techniques meet. It becomes one with its "clothing" and always in interaction with its world displayed on the background in order to describe a specific "allegory". The one hundred figures produced draw their references from the historical and the contemporary realm, from the artist's past work on cinema and painting, and from the history of body-imaging. Greenaway, himself a Second Life player and an artist who likes to experiment with the construction of the body (an incident from Second Life that involves him is described in the following chapter), creates his unique "avatar project": based on the participation of a local community, he creates avatars/representations of the world that attempt to stand between the classic conception of the cosmos and the contemporary world. Through these 100 "allegories" Greenaway aims at portraying the world. He revisits ancient archetypes and gives them new life. The rich man and the poor man, the king and the queen, the beggar and the thief, the clown and the philosopher, meet the Muses, the Fates, the Past, the Present and the Future, and gods and heroes such as Mars, Pluto, Jupiter, Hercules and Prometheus. And at the same time in these archetype figures one may recognise contemporary pop-idols and television stars, the homeless and the wealthy, the politician, the intellectual, the worker and the student. Each figure is presented within a specific context to indicate the character's place in the world. Greenaway plays with bestiality and hybridity, sexual fantasies and myths to present the truth about the body in the world through the ages (fig.29).

Figure 29: The Minotaur[8] (Greenaway, 1998)

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[8] *In the 78th allegory, under the category "hybrids" we may find The Minotaur, a half-human and half-animal creature, "the bull-man, a traditional allegory of*

3.8 "In the Belly of the Monster"

The depiction of the body has never been merely a composition of an image, but it carries with it a series of meanings and connections. Two or three-dimensional, in painting or in cinema or in Virtual Reality, moving or static, the body has always been the place where the material world meets the conceptual world and "virtual realities", where physicality meets ideas, fears, hopes and desires. Virtual Reality is probably an appropriate environment for the visualisation of these relations, as bodies and environment are user-created, three-dimensional and interactive in real time, yet immaterial and disembodied. But going back to the question at the beginning of this chapter, what does the construction of the avatar signify here? Does this out-of-body experimentation illustrate the need to return to the physical body and restructure its conceptualisation, or oppositely, the demand to liberate from it and live through disembodied existences? What do the monsters of the digital age have to say about the human body? In her essay, *The Actors Are Cyborg, Nature Is Coyote and the Geography Is Elsewhere: Postscript to "Cyborgs at Large"* (1991b), Donna Haraway calls simians, cyborgs and women *monsters,* as boundary creatures that always had a destabilizing place in the evolution of the contemporary culture. Haraway's monsters "demonstrate" and "signify" possible worlds and constitute signs for worlds "*for which 'we' are responsible*" (Haraway, 1991b, p.22). The worlds that Haraway suggests are built by deconstructing others, by decomposing established beliefs and ideas, and by fragmenting selves into multiplicities. They bring together existing entities and fantastic visions. Within this framework Virtual Reality reinforces the idea that embodiment is not about a fixed location or a static body, but about critical positioning and relativity. Haraway argues that "*the best place to locate this work remains 'in the belly of the monster', that is in the fictional and technical constructions of the late twentieth-century*

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monstrosity, a warning symbol of the likely outcome of bestiality" (Greenaway, 1998, p.265). Although traditional iconography represents the Minotaur with a bull's head and a man's body, this is here reversed. The carnivore mythological creature is here represented by a smiling, teasing young man with hairy legs that holds the horns to his head in order to persuade us of his monstrosity. This beast can hardly be seen as evil or threatening, giving a second chance to people to love him. The Minotaur's world is composed of a series of contradictory elements: "exotic background to make the Cretan fantasy feel at home" (Greenaway, 1998, p.78 – The Minotaur). The Cretan labyrinth, the home of the Minotaur is combined with an Egyptian landscape, while a slaughtered bull at the centre of the maze connects this allegory to the allegory of Europe and that of Pasiphae, the Minotaur's mother.

cyborgs, site of the potent fusion of the technical, textual, organic, mythic, and political" (Haraway, 1991b, p.24). It is in the belly of the monster that we can rethink the body's place in the world in terms of materiality and virtuality.

After addressing the body as a technological object, this chapter has examined how one of its controversial extensions, the avatar, as the monster of the digital age, disembodied and embodying at the same time, becomes a medium to discard obsolete ideas, to deconstruct and reconstruct worlds, and reposition selves. It has attempted to re-code the human body and its connections to the world by looking into its multiple manifestations and appearances. At this point and extending this line of study, it is important to question how this newly conceptualised body connects to other bodies as well, and forms communities and crowds in the electronic age.

Chapter 4. The Playful Crowd and the Digital Present

4.1 Introduction: Crowd Formations within Digitisation

"It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming.

Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd."

Crowds by Charles Baudelaire (1896)

For Baudelaire the experience of the urban crowd is the play of masks and masquerading, the abandonment of home and the passion for wandering. It is the interplay of multitude and solitude, two terms that have become identical and interchangeable for the poet, which one has to construe in order to enjoy both self-existence and co-presence. The "urban flâneur" of the nineteenth century opposed the anonymity of the urban crowd in the modern metropolis to the safety of the "home", and thus turned the world into a collection of unrelated fragments. To navigate through these fragments, one had to become a stroller, to find one's own way through the city, to enjoy its spectacular effect and welcome chance encounters in it. In order to join the crowd, the urban dweller had to abandon his identity, or conceal it behind a "public mask", and through this constructed anonymity he could immerse himself within the collectivity of the metropolis. The attitude of the wanderer wove places and experiences together, found himself with others and created a personal representation of the city. Such was the nineteenth-century crowd: it originated primarily with the physical proximity of individuals and it occurred in the streets, the marketplace or the public square. The contemporary crowd may still retain this image, but it in fact can be something completely different: often virtual and constituted through the exchange of information, it experiments with the features of digital culture. When it transforms into a physical crowd in the city, it bridges the urban environment with its superimposed

networks, but when it remains in the digital realm it is often supposed figurative and ineffective. The mass assembly today, where co-presence takes a broader sense to include, apart from face-to-face contacts, other forms of socialities, still plays with multitude and solitude, identity and anonymity, presence and mobility, but all these terms need to be re-examined in relation the digital age.

The aim of this chapter is to study different crowd formations within the electronic age. It explores the contemporary public assembly within the conditions of the increased mobility and intense connectivity of the present. Focusing on three different crowd formations – instant crowds in the futuristic environment of science fiction of the 70s, Flash Mobs within the cityscape, and virtual crowds in Second Life – it seeks to examine the conditions of co-presence and its relation to space. Using as a starting point the metaphor of a short science-fiction story, the "Flash Crowd" written by Larry Niven in 1973, this section initially discusses the significance of electronic communication in human interaction and the phenomenon of hypermobility in the contemporary environment, and it approaches public gatherings and meeting space as a result of both physical and digital connections. Then, by theorising modern crowds it attempts to explain the emergence of the "playful crowd" within the context of digital culture and the threefold of mobility, temporality, and connectivity. Through the example of Flash Mobs, it studies how digital culture may be embodied and performed, creating an action and a happening in the city. Finally, by describing two cases of protest organised and performed within the Second Life world, it examines how co-presence may be achieved virtually and how cyberspace may create conditions for public assembly, and it questions the significance of "physicality" and "touch" in the formation of a crowd, and whether these may be reconfigured within the digital realm.

4.2 Flash Crowd: Electronic Communication as a Precondition for Physical Co-presence

"Flash Crowd" is a short science-fiction story written by Larry Niven in 1973. The story unfolds in a time where inexpensive teleportation has become popular enough to replace all other means of transportation. Niven explores the social consequences of having "displacement booths" that could transfer one anywhere on Earth instantaneously. The protagonist, Jerryberry Jensen, is a journalist who broadcasts a

fight at a shopping mall that quickly evolves into a riot facilitated by the technology of the teleportation booths. Jensen is blamed for the event, as the broadcast coverage quickly attracts the attention of more and more people who teleport to the spot immediately, intensifying the riot. He struggles to prove how technology is to blame for the scene, as telecommunication and teleportation networks together allow innumerable people to immediately gather at the spot of anything interesting, potentially creating confusion and disorder. In 2003, Sean Savage, a thirty-one-year old graduate student in Berkeley keeping a blog named Cheesebikini (Savage) named the Flash Mobs after Niven' s story, previously called "Mob Projects" by their creator, Bill Wasik (Wasik, 2009, p.21).

While the *Flash Crowd* story begins in Los Angeles, it unfolds globally due to the displacement booths, at an age not very long after the abandonment of the conventional transportation system: "*At twenty-eight he was old enough to remember cars and trucks and traffic lights. When the city changed, it was the streets that had changed most.*" (Niven, 1973, p.101). Remains of this past era are still to be traced all around the city. The streets are exclusively used as walkways and the airports as terminals for the "long-distance booths":

"*Once there had been white lines on concrete, and raised curbs to stop the people from interfering with the cars. Now the lines were gone, and much of the concrete was covered with soil and grass. There were even a few trees. Concrete strips had been left for bicycles, and wider places for helicopters carrying cargo too big for the displacement booths.*

...Wilshire was wide for a walkway. People seemed to hug the edges, even those on bikes and motor skates. A boulevard built for cars was too big for mere people.

...Outlines of the street still showed through. Ridges in the grass marked where curbs had been, with breaks where there had been driveways. Some stretches in Westwood had a concrete centre divider. The freeway ramps were unchanged and unused. Someday the city would do something about them." (Niven, 1973, p.99)

People go to their short-distance destination on foot or cycling, and use the booths for any longer displacement. Their everyday movements are largely restricted to and from the booths so that random encounters in the street are very rare; besides, "*meeting*

people was for the clubs" (Niven, 1973, p.100). The once full-of-traffic roads are now usually empty. Therefore the riot that breaks out at the shopping mall suggests something long forgotten to people, the possibility of a spontaneous public gathering. The idea of creating an instant crowd soon attracts people's attention, so that *Flash Crowds* soon evolve into a new cult that takes advantage of the current technology. Eventually people embrace this new trend, they find out about places and teleport there forming different sorts of crowds, aiming at protesting and demonstrating on the one hand or engaging in social activities and having fun on the other. The phenomenon seems to concern the authorities as well, as a teleporting crowd can easily get out of control and threaten the social order.

"Craziest damn thing." Wash Evans lit a cigarette and talked around it. "You know Gordon Lundt, the 'zine star? He was on the Tonight Show, and he happened to mention the red tide down at Hermosa Beach. He said it was pretty. The next thing anyone knows, every man, woman, and child in the country has decided he wants to see the red tide at Hermosa Beach."

"How bad is it?"

"Well, nobody's been hurt, last I heard. And they aren't breaking things. It's not that kind of crowd, and there's nothing to steal but sand, anyway. It's a happy riot, Jansen. There's just a bitch of a lot of people." (Niven, 1973, pp.162-3)

The Flash Crowd story might have offered a precedent to the theorisation of Flash Mobs, but the world it describes can be equally seen as an analogue to Second Life, where avatars principally use teleportation to transfer from one place to the other. What is at stake here is the relation between physical contact and digital communication. Within Niven's futuristic environment, physical interaction is largely determined by the characteristics of this new technological age: it is mostly ephemeral (although it is almost always digitally recorded and as such, it can be infinitely reproduced), it depends very much on connectivity and it is based on the increased mobility of the times. In effect, the story articulately describes the emergence and the unpredictability of an instant crowd at an age where massive street gatherings have long been forgotten. A Flash Crowd is a crowd for no reason, maybe a "*happy riot*" or a demonstration, and a crowd out of nothing. Although by definition crowds constitute temporal formations, since they are always organised for a finite period of time, a Flash Crowd is even more

an instantaneous and self-generated mass assembly. It builds up through people's tendency to get interested in things that they see others getting interested in. The bigger the crowd, the more individuals it attracts within it. Moreover, it comes out of nowhere, or equally, from everywhere. The only thing that matters here is not each individual's starting point, but the crowd's final destination. Hence it constitutes a conscious and immediate displacement of people from practically any possible place to a very specific location.

Although a science-fiction story from the 70s, Flash Crowd predicts the significance of electronic communication in human interaction. Electronic communication not only challenges physical presence, but it also increasingly constitutes a prerequisite for physical co-presence. People's need to find themselves with others at a place and be a part of a collective body materialises through connectivity. Similarly, a Flash Mob becomes a gathering activated by an electronic medium, either an email or a text message. Just as in a Flash Crowd, the participants have nothing in common apart from their interest in this particular event, and at the end of it they disappear as fast as they appeared. Due to their connectivity, Flash Mobbers first assemble digitally and then become real, at a specific location. Thus they form a virtual crowd before realising it in the city. Based on the virtuality of their formation, they create an event-based landscape, exploring the characteristics of digital culture.

What could happen if anyone could live at any place in the world and transfer anywhere instantly and at a low cost? Would there be any reason for the existence of the cities as we know them today, or would that cause their dissolution? The fictional idea of teleportation here stresses the concept of mobility within the contemporary cities to the extreme. If we are to blame increased mobility for the decline of public space and the loss of the opportunity for unpredicted encounters in the city, this story, conversely, suggests that the decline of the transportation system and the use of teleportation would render the world into a collection of fragments, places within an undefined "nowhere" (fig.1). But even in the case where the world is deconstructed into potential event-places and transit points in-between, Niven's story and virtual worlds like Second Life suggest that the desire for co-presence remains. Flash Crowd and mass assemblies in Second Life illustrate people's need to be found with others in public and be part of a collectivity by all means. The instant crowd metaphor here becomes an opportunity to

rethink about mobility in the city, and to understand public gatherings and meeting spaces as a result of both physical actions and digital connections.
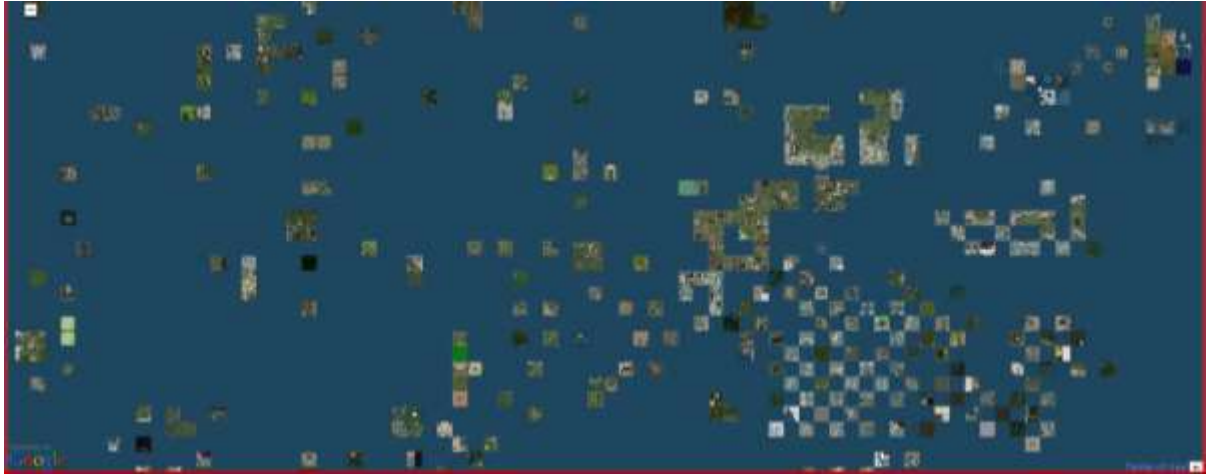
Figure 1: The world as a collection of fragments: screenshot from the Second Life map.

4.3 Mobility: Walkers, Passengers and Strollers in the City

"Freeze" (fig. 2-4) is a classic theme for a Flash Mob and a very contradictory one at the same time. If Flash Mobs in general emphasize on mobility in the city, this one does so by asking participants to freeze in place at the exact same moment for approximately 5 minutes. Many well-known public spaces around the world have successfully hosted "Freeze" events, such as Grand Central Station in New York (31/02/2008), Trafalgar Square in London (16/02/2008), Eiffel Tower, Paris (08/03/2008). Simple in both its conception and its accomplishment, this Flash Mob focuses on public spaces with great concentration of people as well as increased motion, such as the central train station in the case of New York. As many people normally rush through the place towards a specific direction, when part of them suddenly comes to a sudden halt, confusion is created. Both commuters and tourists slow down for a while, perplexed about what is happening and how and whether they should react to this. It is only after the Mobbers freeze and the people around them slow down that everybody realises how fast everything moves when in the city. Further, when the five minutes go by and participants re-join the moving crowd as if nothing happened, the bodies' speed becomes the focal point.

Figures 2-4: Frozen Grand Central.

The "freeze" performance has a double role: on the one hand, it indicates the fast pace at which everything appears and disappears in the city by applying its opposite, absolute stillness, and on the other, it points out the phenomenon of the virtualisation of the real in the contemporary environment, in which a public space instantly transforms into a filmic scene. Both of them together illustrate the different layers and the different speeds in which the contemporary city functions. The movement, communication, and temporality that Flash Mobs suggest may oppose the traditionally static concept of place, but at the same time open up to a more progressive, global and extrovert problematic. At an era "*when things are speeding up and spreading out*" (Massey, 1991, p.24), mobility becomes a central feature of the world today and a constitutive element of place, rather than a threat. Within this context Flash Mobs produce an event-based place using contradictory elements: a public space, the people within it, and a surreal fun scenario. In less than ten minutes they manage to create a scene and assign specific roles: the space becomes a stage and the people turn into the performers and the audience, only for a short period of time. They might be just for fun, but they have something important to say: cities today are not just about the built and fixed environment, but are equally about the event and the ephemeral. Contemporary cities may well be outlined by movement, the rapidly changing scenes and the cinematic experience of space. The most flexible and heterogeneous component of the city, the urban crowd, consisting of walkers, commuters and tourists, may suggest a spatialising process.

Studying the world through the urban crowd means exploring it through constant motion. The traditional concept of place that is associated with rootedness and the desire for fixity and security is currently being challenged due to mobility. Increased motion denotes equally breaking the world into fragments and weaving places together. For Michel de Certeau walking becomes a spatialising process. The city becomes a

stage "*that has neither author nor spectator*" (Certeau, 1984, p.93) composed out of multiple intertwining paths. In this act of moving, space is experienced as a series of performed places. Space and place together outline the contemporary city as a field of fragments and alterations. Place constitutes an "*instantaneous configuration of positions*" (Certeau, 1984, p.117) indicating fixity and stability, and consequently space is "*practiced place*", composed of "*intersections of mobile elements*" (Certeau, 1984, p.117). Then the space of the city signifies the action and the intersection of everyday life movements. It is the animation, the transformation, and the appropriation of places by the moving bodies (Certeau, 1984, p.95).

De Certeau sees the urban experience through walkers and voyeurs, as these are the protagonists that make up this constantly changing scenery. At a further deconstruction of walking, on ground level, their footsteps form the systems that compose the city. "*Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shapes to spaces. They weave places together.*" (Certeau, 1984, p.97) Walking is thus defined as a "*space of enunciation*" (Certeau, 1984, p.98), since it makes places exist and emerge, it establishes relations between them and finally it creates sequences. Thus the ephemeral and the temporal do not refer to anything that breaks through the world's reality, but instead, to all these allusive and fragmentary stories that come out of everyday life and transform space. Movement and non-fixed images become the characteristics of this everyday scene. Instead of homogenous and continuous, the urban environment is then produced by "*masses that make some part of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order*" (Certeau, 1984, p.102). It is the mass, the urban crowd as a collectivity that signifies placeness through mobility.

Articulating the city through the mass movement clearly signifies a different attachment to the ground and a different conceptualisation of "home". If to walk means "*to lack a place*" according to de Certeau (1984, p.103) then in the contemporary world of increased mobility "home" is nowhere, or equally everywhere. People today seem to "*dwell within mobilities*" (Urry, 2002, pp.257-8) at all levels, they commute and they travel to a degree that constant displacement is undertaken almost for its own sake. In his essay "Travel and Dance", Siegfried Kracauer questions mobility in the modern world through the practices of travel and dance. Kracauer suggests that both practices emphasize on the detachment from the ground rather than the interaction with space:

"*they are no longer events that happen to unfold in space and time, but instead brand the transformation of space itself as an event*" (Kracauer, 1963, p.67). Space becomes an event, a temporary configuration, as long as there is no chance of attachment or appropriation with the things that surround us. But, going back to the Flash Crowd metaphor, if movement becomes detached from significance, do we progress from a world of places-fragments to a world of non-places?

In "*Non-Places*" Mark Augé (1995) argues that the contemporary world [Supermodernity] is dominated by transit points, mediating places that transfer individuals from one place to another. These transit points are "non-places" and constitute the "*real measure of our times*" (Augé, 1995, p.79). Non-places refer to a wide range of spaces, from means of transport and commercial places to virtual space:

"*all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircrafts, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilise extraterrestrial space for the purposes of communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself*" (Augé, 1995, p.79).

Places and non-places are then opposed polarities, the former never being entirely deleted and the latter never completely fulfilled, composing together the contemporary everyday life. Clearly a world dominated by transit points is a temporal and ephemeral world, full of screens, signs and texts, machines and electronic devices that establish specific behaviours and suggest "wordless" means of communication. Non-places constitute the expression of supermodernity that has everything in excess: "*overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and the individualisation of references*" (Augé, 1995, p.109). And since transit points are to be passed through, they can only be measured in units of time; hence everything is temporal and refers to the present. By extension, anything fixed and relational, even history, has to be transformed into spectacle in order to survive. Everything becomes an instant image and an event ready to be consumed, and then replaced by something else after a short while.

Although Augé considers non-places to be habitable, this makes individuals in supermodernity more passengers than dwellers. Putting oneself in the position of the passenger results according to Augé to the loss of place and the loss of identity.

Journeying through non-places and hence increasing the time spent there, makes individuals more powerful and omnipresent. This relates to a loss of focus and an indifferent attitude against place. Following Augé, the accumulation of places signifies the negation of place (Augé, 1995, p.85), but also, interestingly, the indifference to the spectacle itself: "*as if the position of the spectacle were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of the spectator were his own spectacle*" (Augé, 1995, p.86). This makes the traveller's space the archetype of non-place. Consequently, the rapidly-changing environment of non-places imposes a different way of behaviour upon individuals. Journeying signifies the passage from the "*passive joys of identity-loss*" to the "*more active pleasure of role-playing*" (Augé, 1995, p.103). The "traveller" hence proves his identity entering into this system, and then, becomes a passenger, receding into a state of solitude and similitude.

In Niven's future, the movement through non-places that Augé describes will be replaced by teleportation. Instead of commuting as anonymous individuals through non-places, people will be able to teleport instantly only to significant places and important events. Hypermobility will give place to instant displacement and meeting will be "for the clubs". The image of the "urban dweller" and the opportunity for chance encounters in the streets will become a nostalgic past. Non-places will cease to exist; nevertheless places in the form that we know them today may also disappear. The story of Flash Crowds suggests that within the electronic age place become "instant" too, it appears whenever something triggers a public gathering and it quickly disappears thereafter.

4.4 Crowds and Placeness

4.4.1 *Theorising Crowds*

The idea of the crowd, the mob, the throng has become central to social and political theorising from mid-nineteenth century and onwards. From threatening established social patterns, to questioning political order and to challenging cultural standards, each specific crowd articulates its own response to the particular historical context and expresses ideas that would not have been easily manifested individually. Theorists like Gustave le Bon (1896) and Elias Canetti (1962) have studied and analysed crowds according to their expressions, their ideological implications and their relation to power.

The body as the basic unit and the space as the general container are constituent elements of the crowd, regardless of its different categories and classifications. Within the crowd, the body passes beyond its own limits and surrenders into a new, collective structure and this mass body is very much physically-shaped by the space within which it occurs.

The most important principle that needs to be achieved for the individual's transcendence of personal boundaries according to Canetti is "*the reversal of the fear of being touched*" (Canetti, 1962, p.16). The fear of having physical contact with anything that is not familiar, the fear of the touch of the unknown, determines the body's boundaries and establishes the appropriate distance around it. From the way that man conducts himself in the social context to the way that he creates a shelter in which no one may enter, he puts special effort to materialise these boundaries, to guarantee his security and avoid any unintentional contact. It is only in a crowd that this fear of being touched is no longer valid; on the contrary it is reversed. To achieve unity and coherence, a crowd needs to be so dense that the bodies not only need to touch but also to be pushed against each other. Canetti suggests that man anticipates this condition in order to overcome the fear of being touched: "*the more fiercely people press together, the more certain they feel that they don't fear each other*" (Canetti, 1962, p.16). The body of the crowd is now more important than any separate body. It has new boundaries, it occupies space in a different way than any of the bodies that compose it do, and it interacts with its environment differently. It has a clear boundary, the permeability of which varies depending on whether it constitutes an open or a closed crowd. The open crowd aims at growing and consisting of more people; "*it means open everywhere and in any direction*" (Canetti, 1962, p.16) and it exists only as long as it grows. Although there are "*no limits to its growth*" as it "*does not recognise houses, doors or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect*" (Canetti, 1962, p.16) according to Canetti, the physical boundaries of the environment are in fact the crowd's only boundaries and the ones that shape it. On the contrary, the closed crowd has a strong definite boundary. It creates a container to be filled: "*the entrances to this space are limited in number, and only these entrances are can be used*" (Canetti, 1962, p.17). In that way it protects itself and avoids its dissolution.

Within the crowd the body feels secure and protected. By abolishing the distance with other people, man also abolishes all sorts of differences. He frees himself of all

hierarchies and distinctions of race, status or property. Nationalities, professions, gender are of no importance. It is only when there is no space between bodies, when one is pressed against the other, that everybody feels equal (Canetti, 1962, p.15). By transcending the limits of his own person, the individual feels he possesses absolute freedom, although always within the boundaries of the group. One also feels capable of actions that he would not perform individually. It is the "*sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint*" (Bon, 1896, p.10). In the formation of the crowd, a combination of many heterogeneous elements results into the development of a new, collective mind. Clearly this "new body" is only a temporary condition. Distinctions are abolished as long as the crowd sustains its coherence. Then everybody returns to his everyday life: "*it is based on an illusion: the people who suddenly feel equal have not really become equal; nor will they feel equal forever. They return to their separate houses, they lie down on their own beds, they keep their possessions and their own names.*" (Canetti, 1962, p.18) The crowd is then itself a temporary event. Similarly to the carnival described in chapter 3, it offers liberation of the burdens of the everydayness, only for a short period of time.

The character of a crowd is subject to both the social context and the environment. A crowd may be created due to fundamental ideas, or to accidental ideas, or even to common interests, it may be spontaneous or well organised, it may serve a great cause or it may exist just for fun, but it will be always attached to the specific place within which it occurs. Rather than merely providing the terrain within which the crowd is formed, physical space plays a more determinant role. If space is not simply a natural entity but also a social construction (Lefèbvre, 1991), it interacts with social actions in a complex way. Social actions are here regarded more as expressions of the society in general, referring to the wider range of everyday life, than restricted to social movements specifically. Consequently gatherings of people, from protesting crowds to playful crowds, constitute expressions and representations of the social space and as such are closely linked to both their social and the spatial context.

Clearly there is nothing new in the idea of the crowd. Crowds have been actively present in the political and social context since classical Greece and perhaps before then. From the Athenian democracy, where the mass of citizens (*demos*) directly decided about their own government in mass meetings, and onwards, history is replete

with crowd images: the crowd bawling for blood in the arenas, the Nika riots of the Byzantine Empire, the medieval carnivalesque crowds. Each particular crowd provided a response to the current political and social context. However the mid-nineteenth century is probably the turning point in the conceptualisation of the crowd as we identify it today. Having as a starting point the outbreak of the French Revolution, the crowd ceases to exist as a passive subject of history and becomes the powerful decision maker. It soon becomes a symbol of power and freedom and a threat to any established order. No longer reducible to tribes or clans, modern crowds are "*heterogeneous and unstable, they arise as the result of the promiscuous intermingling and physical massing of social classes, age groups, races, nationalities, and genders along the boulevards of the industrial metropolis*" (Schnapp and Tiews, 2006, p.x). Since then, the crowd becomes a permanent threat to all levels, "*to the established patterns of social living, to a stable political order, and to a received notion of culture*" (McClelland, 1989, p.3). Within the metropolis it becomes the protagonist of the public realm, taking political action in its hands and embodying popular sovereignty through demonstrations and protest marches in the city streets. Then due to the mobility, the anonymity and the compression of the metropolis, crowds came to represent modernity and reversely, "*modern times are crowded times. Modern man is the man of the crowd*" (Schnapp and Tiews, 2006, p.x). From well-organised mass political actions to the mass of people in the streets, the modern city is a crowded place of compression.

From the beginning of modernity to the present, mass assemblies – from festival crowds to street riots – have marked urban life. In recent times, peaceful demonstrations, protests that give rise to street riots, and occupations of public spaces, have become ever more visible as expressions of mass opposition to current political and social conditions. But, within digitisation, the question arises as to whether these expressions still constitute meaningful elements of public life in the contemporary city or if they have, instead, been reduced to mere symbolic images and public spectacles. Even in the case of the Arab Spring, during which governments actually collapsed due to mass demonstrations, how can we be sure that it was the demonstrations themselves and not their electronic image that was broadcast around the world that has created this effect? Would they have been equally effective had the rest of the world not been able to watch the events in real-time?

In *Crowds* (2006), the catalogue of the Stanford Humanities Lab (SHL) Crowds project that started in 2000, Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp and Matthew Tiews trace the evolution of the modern crowd between the eighteenth century and the present and question the power of public assembly today. According to their working hypotheses, the era of the popular sovereignty expressed by mass assemblies and collective social action reached its apex in the first half of the twentieth century and then gradually dwindled. The reasons for this decline are both technological and spatial: "*as a result of the proliferation and ever-increasing prevalence of virtual or media-based forms of 'assembly' over physical assemblies in postindustrial societies, as well as to long-term trends promoting economic decentralisation, suburban sprawl, increased mobility, and political disengagement*" (Schnapp and Tiews, 2006, p.xi). As a result, the public gathering experience has more to do with entertainment and leisure (or maybe "fun-like" protests) and less with people's participation in the public life, restricting the large-scale mass political actions to "*times of exception (war, acute social conflicts, and the like)*" (Schnapp and Tiews, 2006, p.xi). Consequently, Schnapp and Tiews suggest here that the crowd has been transformed into a symbol, either as a representation of a powerful feature of the past – almost nostalgic, or as a configuration to be displayed via the electronic media. If the urban crowd becomes more of an icon rather than a physical formation, multiple questions arise as to what makes it effective and powerful, and in what way it is different from the virtual mass assemblies.

4.4.2 *The Playful Crowd: Towards Hybrid Forms of Gathering*

In her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" Donna Haraway argues that due to science and technology "*we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system - from all work to all play, a deadly game*" (Haraway, 1991, p.161). The transition to an era of "all play" signifies the abolition of all conventional distinctions and the employment of different media at all levels in order to create complex effects. In the age of digitisation, mobility within the urban environment, the connectivity of individuals and the intense ephemerality of the times suggest new, "hybrid" forms of public gatherings that involve both the spectacular and the meaningful, the iconic and the substantial, the playful and the political. The first thing that we need to recognise in digital culture is that classifications are no longer simple. A Flash Mob may create an instant crowd in the city just for the spectacle's sake, whereas its filial formation, the Smart Mob may produce a powerful political

crowd using exactly the same means[1]. Similarly, a virtual crowd within a virtual reality world like Second Life, although immaterial, may create a movement and express its opposition to the policy of a multinational company. Thus out of the mobility, connectivity, and temporality of post-industrial times emerges a new sort of massing, a kind of a "playful crowd". Rather than comparing with festive crowds or opposing to protesting ones, this "hybrid" form of gathering is not necessarily about entertainment, but rather uses a playful combination of the features of contemporary urban life in order to form a mass that serves its purposes. Material and immaterial components of public space, the city itself and its superimposed networks, the urban dwellers and their digital connections participate in a complex game.

The book "*The playful crowd: pleasure places in the twentieth century*" (Cross and Walton, 2005) describes the emergence of a new type of crowd from the industrial urban culture of the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on two leisure resorts of that time, Coney Island in New York and Blackpool in North West England, the predecessors of theme parks such as Disneyland. The playful crowd refers to the visitors of such resorts in the pursuit of pleasure: music and dance entertainment, freakshows and mechanical spectacles were amply offered, along with social interaction and play. Contrary to Gustave le Bon's crowd (1896) of the nineteenth century, which threatened political stability and order, this book suggests that the conditions in the twentieth century encouraged the formation of the *playful crowd* that was "less *threatening politically but more threatening culturally and morally*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, p.7). The playful crowd by no means replaced the ideologically-motivated gatherings; nevertheless it is worth mentioning here as a new phenomenon of public assembly that reintroduced the spectacular effect of crowds in the nineteenth century, while at the same time attempted the release of the social pressure of the masses. Emanating from the urban crowd, the playful crowd constitutes an ephemeral formation for the crowd's sake. In effect, the people visiting these seaside resorts of 1900 and 1930 were promised pleasure and liberation from the restrictions of the urban industrial everyday life. Comparing the release of social pressure in Coney Island and Blackpool to the short-time liberation of the carnival during the Middle Ages, Cross and Walton refer to this

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[1] The political function of Smart Mobs, the phenomena of street riots, indignants, and the Arab Spring in relation to public space are to be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

crowd phenomenon as "*industrial saturnalia*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, p.5). Like the medieval people who longed for the feast to escape from the burdens of everyday life, industrial city dwellers, who often lived under very poor conditions, resorted to these places to free themselves from anxiety and fear, enjoy a short enjoyable collective experience, and reconcile themselves with their ordinary lives. The aim was the escape from social reality and the stimulation of the imagination: "*they shared with their ancestors many saturnalian customs, social inversion, mockery and a fascination with the supernatural and abnormal, but they did so with industrial means in novelty mechanical rides, fantastic exhibits, and the playful but often innocent sexuality of attractions like the Human Roulette Wheel*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, p.95). Similarly to the medieval feast crowd, the playful crowd hardly poses any threat to the social order – one could argue that instead it reinforced it since it allowed a controllable release of tension. At the same time, however, it constitutes an expression and a representation of social reality and it is closely connected to the urban environment.

Both the carnival of the Middle Ages and the "industrial saturnalia" turned the world "upside down" only for a short period of time, aiming at the release of pressure of the mass. Interestingly, body and place play a different role in each type of crowd. The carnivalesque crowd is "*concrete and sensual*" (Bakhtin, 1084, p.255). The physical contact of the bodies is very significant so that every member of the crowd feels more as part of the collectivity rather than an individual body. By participating at this "mass body", people "*become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community*" (Bakhtin, 1084, p.255). Within the mass, each individual body is transformed and concealed. The mask is the object that signifies the change and symbolizes the reincarnation. It constitutes the medium between reality and imagination, it reveals the playful and droll aspect of life and it emphasizes the temporal event, the spectacle of the moment. The masked face and the grotesque appearance of the body are necessary for the transgression of physical boundaries. The carnival crowd is formed within the town, in the public spaces that everyday social life takes place. The marketplace and the plaza are temporarily altered due to the feast. Since the place stays the same, it is the body that needs to be covered and transformed to mark the change. In the industrial saturnalia, on the other hand, the body acts differently. The crowd is freely organised and the bodies are distanced from each other rather than in physical contact. The mechanical spectacles – attractions like the "Barrels of Love" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35) –

help them overcome the estrangement and the distance of the metropolis and come closer to each other. Neither the body nor the face are hidden here, but well-displayed instead: "*people in the street crowd interacted, not personally, but indirectly through the display of their clothes and the passive sharing of theatre or moving images. This culture of the street seemed to suppress individuality and what was left of traditional social interaction and constraint*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, pp.100-101). It is the culture of the streets that binds individuals together and the mass that creates the spectacle. Anonymity is not achieved by the mask here but instead by the displacement of the everyday environment. By keeping themselves at a distance from the town/city and escaping to "*replicas of exotic places*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, p.84), people feel liberated from the everyday. In the twentieth century, the body ceases to constitute a public spectacle and to experiment with the grotesque in the way that it did in the Middle Ages – it is not until the electronic age that the experimentation with the body, the play with anonymity, and the need to escape the everyday life are displaced to the digital.

In saturnalia the place of the everyday life remains the same, but the body is transformed to distinguish the feast. In industrial saturnalia, the appearance of the body does not change, but the place of the feast is taken outside the Metropolis. If we consider Flash Mobs as the playful crowd of the recent times, then here both body and place seem to remain unchanged. The place is the city itself and the mass body comes out of the everyday urban crowd. However, due to digitisation, a constantly changing environment is created. Both place and body are engaged in a role-playing game creating something temporary within the everyday context: the body becomes the enactment of a digital profile and the city transforms into the event that this enactment provokes. The features of this play also come from ordinary modern life: the constant mobility of the mass, the ephemerality of many sorts of interactions, the anonymity within the crowd and the connectivity of the individuals to the telecommunication networks. In fact this connectivity gives yet another dimension to public gatherings: before it releases them out in the streets, it brings them together digitally into a kind of "virtual crowds". Virtual crowds may appear ineffective due to their apparent immateriality, nonetheless they bear multiple characteristics common to physical crowds, they may be formed to support a specific cause or just for fun, they may be protesting or celebrating and they may be open or closed. Sometimes they may remain

in the digital realm and never result in a physical action in the city, questioning the corporeal significance of crowds.

4.4.3 *From the Virtual Community to the Physical Crowd*

What makes Flash Mobs a significant phenomenon of digitisation is the fact that they attempted to materialise a virtual crowd and transform it to an actual event in the city. Bill Wasik came up with the Flash Mob idea in an attempt to experiment with the tools that the Internet provides: "*the 'viral', whether e-mail or website or song or video, was gradually emerging as a new genre of communication, even of art*" (Wasik, 2009, p.7). Within this "viral culture" Wasik identified four key attributes: speed, shamelessness, ephemerality and interaction, which he tried to apply into a physical mob in the city. The email that he sent to his friends and acquaintances asking them to take part to the "MOB" was accompanied by a "frequently asked questions" (FAQ) section that contained only one question:

"*Q: Why would I want to join an inexplicable mob?*

A: Tons of other people are doing it." (Wasik, 2009, p.6)

The viral might well be associated with digitisation; however it suggested a cult long before the spread of the Internet. "Word-of-mouth" marketing has always been a successful practice, based on the fact that people tend to find attractive what other people do (or, what they say they do) and that they seem to become interested in things that they see others getting interested in. The Internet simply applied this characteristic at a larger scale and addressed more people at the same time, enabling them to effortlessly know what much more others like to do. Wasik identified this characteristic specifically in the people of New York City, who were always looking forward to the "next big thing" in the City, and for this reason he thought that they would quickly embrace the "mob" idea. In effect the MOB project created a crowd bearing the characteristics of the viral: short [speed], fun, almost spontaneous [shamelessness], Flash Mobs created a scene out of nothing [ephemerality], in which participants came out of the urban crowd and constituted the show and the audience at the same time [interaction]. Sometimes seen as self-expression and others as anti-expression, Flash Mobs suggested a happening, and in that way a movement and a statement. They were about a playful and rapidly-forming crowd that interacted with urban space. But they

attempted something more than that: they established visible links between the city and its superimposed networks, between the people and the city, between the people and their virtual communities. Wasik's experiment had one main goal: to "realise" a virtual community and display how an e-mail circulating through the Internet can result in a physical performance in the city.

Being simultaneously the show and the audience for no reason may constitute an odd behavior for a crowd, but is in fact an important feature of digital culture. On the Internet everybody becomes a character on stage, a public figure that watches others' activities and is being watched. From keeping blogs that express their ideas to participating in social networks, people that use the telecommunication networks construct digital personae and perform them, both "online" and "offline". This changes dramatically the way one sees, acts, and presents oneself to the public. Being online signifies having a public presence and being tracked, not only by friends, but often by strangers as well, and engages individuals into a game of surveillance and self-surveillance at the same time: they write blog articles and post photographs aiming to be read, seen, and reproduced by others. On the Internet, unlike in physical life, everything is measurable and therefore everything can be evaluated and controlled, turning the field of cyberspace into a field of "culture-making" since most of its content is user-created, but also of "culture monitoring", and thus into a great field of cultural experimentation (Wasik, 2009, p.12). Flash Mobs take all these features of digital communication out in the streets. Through the lens of anonymity virtual communities are activated "show their numbers" physically and also expose themselves in public and experiment with themselves within the urban environment. Anonymity is not achieved here due to the crowd, but rather to the fact that each person represents his digital (anonymous) character.

Although playing with all the aspects of digital existence at their conception, Flash Mobs equally test their relationship with the physical world – and potentially with the virtualisation of this world. They introduce a new sort of urban play that applies the characteristics of digitisation within the life in the streets. Space becomes a inseparable component, therefore Flash Mobs are always carefully placed in the city. Well-known and lived parts of the city, often public or semi-public, are suddenly transformed into an urban playground. Train stations and shopping malls (transit points as Mark Augé would argue), public squares and parks become significant due to people and their

actions. Just for a short period of time, people create an illusion in the city: they adopt roles – different from their everyday-life ones – and they make a performance. By being anonymous, representing their digital selves and as part of the crowd, Flash Mobbers feel free to act differently and attach new meanings to the very same environment. The city hosts an alternative ephemeral activity that changes its tempo. Mobility, temporality, and connectivity are here employed to create place and not to act as agents of its destruction.

4.5 Virtual Crowds

4.5.1 *IBM Second Life Protest: Protesting within a Virtual World to Change a Real Life Situation*

In September 2007 a "virtual strike" was organised within Second Life due to a dispute between IBM and its employers. More than 1800 avatars swarmed the IBM campus in Second Life and participated in a twelve-hour protest. The demonstrations were reported within Second Life and broadcast through the Internet. At the end, due to the persistence of the protesters and the extent of the publicity, the company decided to move to negotiations with the union, and finally gave the employees their pay back.

Figures 5-6: The protesters in the "Union Island" (left) and the IBM Island (right), (IBM SL Protest Organization, 2007).

During the negotiations of the collective agreement in IBM Italy, the Italian works council asked for a salary increase. In response, IBM decided to cancel a union agreement that cost each employee approximately 1000€ per year. The employers then decided to go on a worldwide strike and a demonstration that would take place within

Second Life on the 27th of September. First, the protesters informed the public by posting blog articles and by setting up an online petition against the company's management. Then, they formed a strike committee that convened in Second Life. They created a special region for their gatherings, the "Union Island" that could host up to 400 avatars and they developed applications in three languages so that protesters from different origins could join. A "strike kit" was also designed for the avatars, comprising of colourful t-shirts and signs to enrich their demonstrations (fig.5-6). Finally, they agreed on their strike's locations and meeting points, that were publicly announced only twenty four hours in advance. The virtual strike attracted 1853 avatars from more than thirty different countries that occupied the official IBM Business Island in Second Life for twelve hours[2]. The protesters managed to interrupt a meeting by the company's managers within Second Life so that IBM, unable to react otherwise, decided to close down the entire island for a while. Twenty days later the Italian managing director resigned and the union agreement that the protesters have been asking for was signed.

"*The union is expecting hundreds of avatars of Italian IBM workers, as well as IBM staff from around the world, and other trades unionists, to converge flash-mob style later this month, to demonstrate and spread the word about the dispute.*" (Au, 2007d)

Interestingly the protest is here displayed as a "Flash Mob-like" event, in the same way that many real-life demonstrations – sometimes even riots – are lately, especially when they project some sort of "fun" aspect instead of an aggressive attitude. Clearly this event was not organised just for the event's sake and lasted longer than ten minutes and as such it cannot constitute a Flash Mob, however many connections to the Flash Crowd and the Flash Mobs can be drawn here. The crowd that assembled in IBM's

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[2] "*The demonstration was also a moment with music and many discussions between the avatars about IBM and its strategy related to outsources and impacts on affected employees. We occupied the IBM main reception for 4 hours (!!!), stopping their activities (meet customers, give business information to the public) cause the sim reached the maximum allowed number of people, and no more avatars were able to come to IBM reception. No reactions from the IBMers that were working in the reception... but IBM sent many people to control what was happening inside its most important meeting point....*
Some groups of protesters went in parallel to Reuters (the most famous journalist was present and discussed with the protesters) and Manpower !
Some protesters interrupted the business of Manpower and after a while been banned from their site.
But no grief or problems: all the protesters were peaceful and respected all SL rules." (IBM SL Protest Organization, 2007)

Second Life Island was definitely political as they had very clear positions and specific demands and by running this virtual campaign they aimed not a being enjoyable or entertaining, but rather, global. They were decided to oppose a multinational company and for this reason a strike and a gathering of the Italian employees seemed inefficient. Instead, they decided to stage their protest at a platform that anyone (and from anywhere) could easily access. And since no place on earth was appropriate for that (as teleportation is not an option yet) this platform had to be a constructed artificial ground that would be able to gather this complex crowd. By demonstrating at the IBM's region in Second Life they could address the company as a mass [avatar] body of IBM's employees from all the different countries simultaneously.

The protesters attempted to resolve a problem of the contemporary times: if we are running global so that multinational companies are not based in any specific place, where and how could one directly address them? Clearly Second Life and virtual reality environments in general may provide the [artificial] ground for this kind of encounters. And however contradictory this might seem, employers had the opportunity to express their demands in a better way and thus have a more direct communication with their executives via their avatars. The "*IBM Global Demonstration*", as they called it (IBM SL Protest Organization, 2007), asked for the active support of people all over the world. IBM staff globally and also many more supporters and activists were mobilised and engaged to this common cause[3]. All they had to do was to build up an avatar (if they had not one already) and teleport to the specific Second Life location. Moreover, they were to decide on the level of anonymity – or pseudonymity – they desired. They could associate their avatar with their "first life" name and their professional email address if they wished to reveal their real life identity, or they could keep everything secret. Then the protest operated in different levels. Apart from the people that took part in Second Life, the events were continuously reported through blogs and websites. In addition to that, they were broadcast in the web so that people could watch in real-time. In many cases, projections were organised by IBM employees in different countries within their offices in support of the actions (fig. 7-8). At the end of the day, colleagues

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[3] "*Confirmed participation from: Belgium, Italy, Spain, France, USA, Canada, Germany and other countries. Supporters also from UK and Switzerland.*" (IBM SL Protest Organization, 2007)

that had never met before, located in different places of the world, had collaborated for a common cause and they succeeded.

Figures 7-8: Employees in Belgium (left) and in Slovenia (right) watching the virtual protest, (IBM SL Protest Organization, 2007).

When the protest came to an end, 550 IBM employers had signed the online petition (Against outsource from IBM to AT&T) and 1853 avatars had participated at the virtual demonstration. Unlike the real life demonstrations, where protest organisers and authorities always end up disputing the number of participants, in the computerised world everything is monitored and as such measurable and clear. Here anything can be expressed in numbers and then converted in data so that it can be analysed in detail. As Bill Wasik argues, "*in viral culture, we are all driven by the rating, the numbers, the Internet equivalent of the box-office gross*" (Wasik, 2009, p. 15). In this way, activities and behaviours can be transformed into statistics and thus be "objectified" for different purposes. In the case of the IBM protest, the record of more than 1800 people opposing the company (and their live broadcast online) cannot but have strongly affected the final outcome. Although many of the protesters chose to keep their real life identity secret, there was no doubt that behind each one of those avatars there was a real person who wished to join the crowd and support the common cause.

4.5.2 *The Kiss Artwork Demonstration: a Virtual Demonstration Triggered by an Incident in Second Life*

The IBM Global Protest may have been the first case that transcended the limit between physical and virtual demonstration; however protests referring to incidents within Second Life have been occurring almost from the beginning of the "world". An

interesting example is a protest against Linden Lab for the censorship of an artwork. On June 23, 2010, Second Life celebrated its seventh year of operation and, as in previous years, an official anniversary party [SL7B] was organised by the company, Linden Lab. Resident volunteers along with the company's designers created a region especially for this occasion, and artists, designers and residents were asked to submit artworks that would surround the events. When the installation titled "Susa Bubble", made by artist Rose Borchovski (Saskia Boddeke in real life), was rejected by Linden Lab for alleged nude content of an image called "The Kiss" (fig.9), a number of protesters gathered in Borchovski' s land in Second Life to demonstrate against the censorship of the work and support the artist. Linden Lab never gave in to the protesters' demands, and "Susa Bubble" was never set up at the party grounds (it is now hosted at the University of Western Australia Second Life region).

Figure 9: The "Susa Bubble" installation, (pj_trenton, 2010).

Soon after the incident, a number of Second Life residents were organised and assembled on to Borchovski' s land to rally against "Thought Police" (fig.10-1). They also created signs, t-shirts and other objects to dress their avatars and liven up their protest. After a while the case crossed the boundaries of Second Life world by appearing in multiple blogs and electronic magazines and opened up the discussion on the freedom of artistic creativity within virtual worlds and cyberspace in general.

"The worst part of censorship is not that which is censored, but the climate of self-censorship it imposes on all artists. Art is about having a voice. Art is about thinking differently and about thinking from fresh perspectives. When artists are not allowed to have a voice, culture is not allowed to progress." Rose Borchovski (Cremorne, 2010)

The artist blames Linden Lab for keeping a safe and sterile environment within Second Life that gives no space for expression and critical thinking. She describes the figures of the installation more as sexless creatures and caricatures telling a story, rather than a display of naked human bodies. The point, as she argues, was not to make them look real, but to create these symbolic forms that would tell a story[4]. Among the supporters of the action was the British film director Peter Greenaway. Greenaway is a Second Life player himself, and has incorporated the imagery of avatars and Second Life in pieces of his own art. In fact he has collaborated with Rose Borchovski to create a movie filmed in Second Life, which he incorporated into his theatrical production "Blue Planet" (Au, 2010). Greenaway signed a statement directed at Courtney Linden, the company staffer who helps manage the SL7B, and passed it around in Second Life through Rose Borchovski. He sees Second Life and the creative activity that takes place there as a continuation of the physical world and therefore he asks for sensitivity on the part of the company:

"Whatever else you think you may be doing with Second Life, you have created a very sophisticated tool that combines traditions of painting with cinema and the graphic arts in present tense terms that permits visual expression of language like never before. Do not underestimate what you have created - but to remain creditable you simply cannot enforce reactionary hypocritical standards that have been so discredited over the last five hundred years." Peter Greenaway (Au, 2010).

The overall mobilisation however did not succeed in affecting Linden Lab's perspective on the subject. The company gave out a response, via its community manager, that

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[4] *"The story of Susa is a sweet but savage story, told in image and text, sound and installation. It is about our dark inside, but also shows how vulnerable and lonely we all can be. My art shows a naked body, but it is not about nudity or sex."* (Rose Borchovski in Cremorne, 2010)

denoted the persistence to its initial positions, simply referring to the terms of use for the specific region[5].

Figures 10-1: The "kiss" demonstration. (Left: Au, 2010, right: SaveMe Oh, 2010)

Apparently within a virtual world a group of avatars can oppose to a multinational company within the world, but they cannot fight its constitutive rules themselves. In the case of "The Kiss" artwork, Linden Lab, which constitutes a much smaller scale company than IBM, did not show any will to change its plans and positions despite the demonstrations. The Second Life Terms of Use are here presented as fixed and non-negotiable, the ultimate starting point of the world. In a way the company undertakes the role of a god-like persona, a superpower that has set up the order and the general rules for its operation and will not negotiate on them. Therefore in an artificial world it is the legal framework and not the ground that provides the foundation for anything to be built. The terms of use appear to provide a steady, non-negotiable ground. Within Second Life the power of the [avatar] crowd can hardly affect the interior established order.

4.5.3 *Crowds Deconstructed and Reconstructed Anew within Digitisation*

As mass assemblies, Flash Crowds, virtual reality crowds, and physical crowds like the Flash Mob have many common traits: each one constitutes a collectivity of bodies –

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[5] "*As with past Second Life birthdays, we have implemented guidelines for the SL7B event to create a celebration that can be enjoyed by as wide an audience as possible. One of these guidelines notes that the event has a General (aka PG) maturity rating, as have previous Second Life birthday celebrations. As described on the wiki, the General maturity rating includes a prohibition on nudity. All exhibitors and builders agree to adhere to the policies for the event as a condition of participation, and these guidelines are available publicly on the wiki.*" Blondin Linden, company community manager (Au, 2010).

physical or avatar – that share a common identity, and are gathered at a specific place – either physical or virtual. In the same way that in real life bodies come together in physical contact to transcend their physical limits and overcome the fear of being touched, in virtual reality avatars assemble in a representational environment – that bears certain spatial characteristics – to overcome their physical distance with others through "digital proximity". In effect, apart from Virtual Reality, multiple features of cyberspace today also suggest crowding phenomena. People assemble virtually via blogs and social networks to celebrate, protest, or support a common cause, abolishing physical distance through their connectivity and their common interests. Under the framework of digitisation the idea of the crowd is being increasingly deconstructed without necessarily having to lose its power. In the more simply-designed Twitter web platform, one's avatar is a low resolution two-dimensional image and anything needs to be told in less than 140 characters, but one can "follow" people and may be "followed" by others, anything posted is posted in public and the more "retweets" one gets (the more his posts are being re-posted by others), the more popular one becomes to like-minded people. People that share the same interests or goals thus form clusters of digital encounters. From time to time, these groups cross the boundaries of their digital co-presence and reconstitute themselves physically in the city, in Flash Mobs or in political protests such as the ones in Egypt and Iran (fig.12). Consequently, increased mobility and intense connectivity have also introduced relativity to all sorts of connections. The contemporary crowd may be a virtual assembly, pulled together through the exchange of information within an electronically-constructed environment that may transform into a physical crowd out in the city streets or it may remain active in the digital realm. Although the need for public assembly has not ceased to exist, it can also be realised throughout alternative spaces by the employment of different media. If physical space cannot embrace a crowd for any reason, new technologies have provided us with the tools to construct it accordingly.

Figure 12: Stop of I'll Tweet! (Walt Handelsman, 2009)

4.6 The Question of Touch in Contemporary Crowds

Within the [virtual] crowd the avatar-body stands in representational proximity to other avatars. It may be pushed against other avatar-bodies, or they may not "touch" at all, depending on the density if the crowd, but this makes little difference. Although cyberspace creates the conditions for a public assembly and co-presence may be recreated virtually, the virtual crowd is first and foremost an image that makes the players behind the avatars conscious of their participation in this mass [avatar] body that has new boundaries and interacts with the [virtual] environment in a different way than each of the avatars individually, similarly to how physical crowds function within physical space. Going back to Canetti's definition of a crowd as a massing in which bodies need to be pushed against each other in order to overcome their fear of being touched, the phenomena of virtual crowds raise interesting questions concerning the significance of "physicality" and "touch" in the formation of a crowd and whether these may be reconfigured and reconstituted within digital worlds. Most generally, is touch a criterion for the experience and the appropriation of the world or has it been depreciated within digitisation and reduced to a medium that regulates the operation of the human-computer interface? By extension, if physical contact and physical space are the two constitutive components of crowds, how can they be reconstructed in the digital realm?

In his lecture "*Intact*" (2011) Steven Connor analysed the significance of touch in the experience of the environment and approached intactness not as an abstinence of

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touch, but as an intimate detachment from the world that aims at sustaining this world. Touch according to Connor includes within itself its negation. Opposite to the sense of "grip" or "reach" and including "*a sort of limiting of its own action*" (Connor, 2011), it suggests a certain fineness and delicacy, balancing two reverse conditions, one active and controlling that has to do with holding and grasping, and one passive and receptive that has to do with sensing and feeling. Then touch is at the same time less and more of itself, it progresses towards the world, but with a reservation and a precaution: "*this self-withdrawing, the discreet shrinking of touch from itself, comes to the fore in the history of the word 'tact'... Tact, we may say, is the particular kind of touch that leaves, or strains to leave, the things it touches intact*" (Connor, 2011). According to Connor, it is this withdrawal-as-it-moves-forward that makes touch a way of understanding our "being-in-the-world", the desire for appropriation, and it is that which turns solidarity into solidity within crowds.

If these dynamic relations between touch and intactness, action and reservation, moving forward and self-limitation are the beginnings for the appropriation of the world, what is it that makes crowds ineffective today and reduces them into mere images, while, on the other hand, digital assemblies come across as popular and often powerful? Is it the act of gathering itself or the gathering place that appears problematic today? In "The Human Condition", Hannah Arendt argues:

"*The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.*" (Arendt, 1958, pp.52-3)

Alongside Arendt's approach, Paul Carter in "Repressed Spaces" identifies space or street fear (agoraphobia) as an obstructed "*agoraphilia, a desire to re-member what has been dis-membered – to make concrete what has grown abstract*" (Carter, 2002, p.169). Then although touch cannot be reconstructed digitally, and this will always stand as a

disadvantage of the digital mass formations over the physical assemblies, what Arendt and Carter suggest here is that the physical world appears abstract, inadequate to gather individuals together and draw connections and attachments among them, and this is the void that cyberspace is made to fill. Therefore physicality needs to give its place to hybridity – information and connections upon organic bodies that may reconstruct co-presence and groundedness in complex ways, not necessarily tied to physical connectedness.

It is the re-placement of physicality by hybridity that this first section of the thesis aimed to discuss, and more specifically how bodies, communities, and crowds form and transform within digitisation. The examination of the relations of the human body with the others and the world within a context of connections of all sorts has set the ground for the following section of this study, which focuses on the need for connectedness itself, raising the question as to whether "locatedness" increases its significance in this expanded experience of social space.

Chapter 5. Body and Ground: Excursus on Public Space

5.1 Introduction: Identifying the Public Sphere in the Electronic Age

 "*Within a decade, the major population centres of the planet will be saturated with trillions of microchips, some of them tiny computers, many of them capable of communicating with others. (...) large numbers of people in industrial nations will have a device with them most of the time that will enable them to link objects, places, and people to online content and processes.*" (Rheingold, 2003, p.xii)

"*As I have said, with robots, we are alone and imagine ourselves together. On networks, including game worlds, we are together but so lessen our expectations of other people that we can feel utterly alone. In both cases, our devices keep us distracted. They provide the sense of safety in a place of excluding concentration.*" (Turkle, 2011, p.204)

In his book *Smart mobs: the next social revolution* (2003), Howard Rheingold studies sociality in relation to cutting-edge technology and foresees new forms of social power due to emerging computing technologies. For Rheingold, "*the killer apps of tomorrow's mobile infocom industry won't be hardware devices or software programs but social practices*" (2003,p.xii) developed due to electronic devices. It is a fact that in recent times electronic communications affect the way people socialise, work, buy, sell, and even isolate. In their expansion, new collective action will be enabled, new powers will be gained and old freedoms may be gone (Rheingold, 2003, p.xii). As the virtual, social and physical worlds merge into one, mobile devices that connect individuals to others and to the environment will make information and experience sharing easier than ever, and, according to Rheingold, electronically mediated communities will allow people to act together even if they do not know each other. The new forms of sociality that digitisation suggests will broaden the concept of "being with others" and challenge the traditional ideas of co-existence, the present social geography and the nature of public spaces.

In a less positive spirit, in her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), Sherry Turkle questions computer-

mediated relationships and their "real-life" significance. Turkle's books have been among the first to study human relationships in the age of the Internet. Among others, *The Second Self* (1985) and *Life on the screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1997) celebrated the construction and reconstruction of the self within digitisation, the interaction-at-a-distance with others, and the opportunity to explore this new universal space that opens up in front of us. However, *Alone Together* as suggested by its title, sees the social practices developed by social media as pathologies that have negative effects on human behaviour and co-existence. Turkle argues that cycling through interfaces and platforms gives us a fake sense of multitasking and continual multi-existence, when, in reality, we exist at no place at all, not even at our physical location. Instead of "being", she writes, we keep presenting and "re-presenting" ourselves through social networking, so that connectivity replaces the lost sense of physical connection: "*in virtual worlds and computer games people are flattened into personae. On social networks, people are reduced to their profiles*" (Turkle, 2011, p.28). Reduced into their images, people are then bound to an ever-connected isolation.

The arguments made by Rheingold and Turkle here raise a series of questions: do we head towards a more flexible and mobile presence in space through digitisation, or will we eventually be left inert and alone? Do virtual communities stand for extensions of our physical communities that complement our being with others or, given the decline of physical connections, are we instead reduced to images of our digital personae? Does the rapid and constant transformation of space in the digital age mobilise us or does it make us inactive? And although everything is public within digitisation, is there still such a thing as public space?

The aim of this intermediate section is to discuss growing publicness, its social implications, and people's right to privacy in the electronic age. It also marks the transition between the first section of this thesis that focused on the construction of the human body, and the second section that focuses on the construction of space to envelop it. It therefore seeks to examine whether the public sphere is augmented or suppressed due to the existence of digital communications and cyberspace. Then, questioning the effects of digitisation in everyday – private and public –life, it asks: can we regard virtual space as public, and therefore as extension of the public sphere, or is it instead public space that is being "virtualised" and reduced into an image today subject to new technologies – an issue that sets the ground for the following chapters. This chapter

initially discusses social activism and "online" social activism in relation to freedom and action in the contemporary world. It then asks if there is such a thing as public space today and how it becomes affected by issues of relativity and telepresence due to interactive technologies, and it questions notions such as "cyber-politics" and "cyber-democracy". Finally, it seeks alternative forms of communities and spaces within digitisation, and it studies phenomena of surveillance and self-surveillance that arise because of them.

5.2 On the efficacy of Social Activism and Online Action

On October 4th, 2010, few months before the "Arab Spring" (beginning of 2011) and the "Spanish Revolution" (May 2011), Malcolm Gladwell published in *The New Yorker* an article titled "*Small Change, Why the revolution will not be tweeted*", questioning the real power of social media and their ability to motivate people. The article came at a time in which – almost – everyone was praising social media for introducing new means of social activism (through micro-blogging and smart mobs, etc.), expecting the next social revolution to come in this way. Although Gladwell's article acknowledges that social media constitute a significant organising tool that raises awareness and facilitates communication in times of repression and maybe censorship, he argues that the interactivity and conversation that new technologies provide are not enough to motivate people or "reinvent" social activism. Social media are here regarded as plain tools, given a passive and thus restricted rather than an active role in developing social movements: "*Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools.*" (Gladwell, 2010) Therefore a crowd organising itself via mobile telephone text messages, Twitter or Facebook, as a movement that lacks strategy and discipline, may have, according to Gladwell, limited impact on the existing social order.

In this article Gladwell focuses on two main distinctions between traditional activism and activism associated with social media. First, he suggests that social media connections are made by weak ties, since platforms like Twitter and Facebook are mostly built around contacts one has barely or never met. Weak ties are for Gladwell important but not enough: "*The Internet lets us exploit the power of these kinds of distant connections with marvellous efficiency. It's terrific at the diffusion of innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, seamlessly matching up buyers and sellers, and the*

logistical functions of the dating world. But weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism." (Gladwell, 2010) Social networks may be great at spreading the word, informing people and their circles and motivating them to attend events or volunteer. However, Gladwell argues, this kind of activism will never reach the level of a "*real sacrifice*". In other words, social media may increase awareness and engagement of people in things, but at the same time, far from "*high-risk*" and "*strategic activism*" (Gladwell, 2010), without precision or discipline, they reduce the overall effect on anything established. In this way, more people may participate, but they cannot do much to change the world. The key for high-risk activism here is a significant hierarchical organization. This is for Gladwell the second distinction between the "old" and the "new" activism. Networks, by default the opposite of hierarchies, are structurally impossible to be organised by a central authority, but are instead "*messy*", and therefore unable to create strong bonds or lead in specific routes. The self-organised crowd created by networks suggests resilience and adaptability rather than determination and radical thinking: "*because networks don't have a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals. They can't think strategically; they are chronically prone to conflict and error. How do you make difficult choices about tactics or strategy or philosophical direction when everyone has an equal say?*" (Gladwell, 2010) The weak-tie connections established through digital networks may provide access to information and space for expression to more people, but they do not increase the effective action. "*It makes it easier for the activists to express themselves and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing order more efficient*", Gladwell concludes. Then clicking, "following" and "being followed" digitally, joining virtual groups, and forwarding emails may create Flash Crowds out of nothing (fig.1), but these physical enactments fail, according to Gladwell, to do anything more than that.

Figure 1:Westin St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco, August 2003.

The article suggests that all this "hyperactivity" created due to the social media and our electronic connections, which either translates into physical movements in the city or remains in the digital realm, can hardly have an impact on the established order. At a time when governments may bring down Internet connections in order to control demonstrations (Egypt, January 2011) and others discuss the possibility of controlling access to digital media for the prevention of future street riots (London, August 2011), Gladwell argues that telecommunication networks and new technologies may have initiated an increased online mobilisation that however proves to be rather ineffective and unable to change the world, even if it succeeds to produce massive demonstrations and often outbursts of violence. The integration of new technologies into everyday life has clearly affected the notions of presence and co-presence within space and time, and has introduced novel forms of socialities. In addition, cyberspace is often celebrated as this space of freedom, action, and expression, but the question is, in what way does this online activity affect our way of being? A Flash Mob or a Smart Mob may indeed temporarily change our daily routine and the way we perceive placeness, but are they capable of saving the world?

5.3 The Question of Public Space within the Context of New Technologies

In his essay *The Third Interval: A Critical Transition* (1993), Paul Virilio discusses the issues of relativity and tele-presence due to interactive teletechnologies. Virilio suggests that telecommunications, being and meeting at-a-distance, have shifted the centre of attention from real space to real time and have eliminated all sorts of extension

and duration: "*when technologies of telemarketing replace those of the classical era of television, we begin to witness how the premises of an urbanisation of real-time follow in the heels of the premises of an urbanisation of real space*" (Virilio, 1993, p.3). Controlling the environment in real-time is now more important than the environment itself. Virilio moves from notions of *Atopia* and *Utopia* to the *Teletopia*, the condition of being "*telepresent*", in other words, being here and someplace else at the same time. Real time becomes then real space-time, "*since different events surely 'take place' even if, finally, this place constitutes that of the no-place of teletopical technologies*" (Virilio, 1993, p.4). Real space-time has to do with instantaneity, immediacy, and speed, and therefore changes our relationship with the environment. "*Time (duration) and Space (extension) are now inconceivable without Light (absolute speed), the cosmological constant of the speed of light, an absolute philosophical contingency, according to Einstein, that follows the absolute character that until then Newton and his predecessors had ascribed to space and time*" (Virilio, 1993, p. 6). Real space-time constitutes the "here and now", the "real moment" and the immediate action that eradicates duration and even "present time" for the sake of the "present instant".

This shift to the absolute "here and now" has a direct impact on the individual and its social environment. For Virilio, the development of the territorial, physical space is giving its place to the immaterial management of the environment through satellites and networks that connects to the "*terminal body*". Similarly to the conceptualisation of the "cyborg body", the terminal body is the "plugged-in" human being, connected to various interfaces and prosthetically augmented, that turns the "*healthy (or 'valid') individual into the virtual equivalent of the well-equipped invalid*" (Virilio, 1993, pp.4-5). The plugged-in human body is by itself a receiver and a sender, using sensors and detectors, therefore it does not need to be mobile any more as everything may move around it. But this "everything", Virilio argues, is nothing but an optical illusion and a cinematic projection of the world, that is, entirely "telepresent" and always available. In this way the body comes at the centre: "*the very body of the connected witness happens to be the ultimate urban territory – a folding back over the animal body of social organization and of a conditioning previously limited to the core of the old city. In bodily terms, it resembles the core of the old familial 'hearth'*" (Virilio, 1993, p.5). Therefore, mobility is replaced by "*motility*" since the terminal citizen does not need to undergo any physical displacement, as anything can be sent or received via his

equipment. But then what happens to space when everything becomes instant and motile? Virilio suggests that public space is indeed replaced by public images, as everything happens within present time alone. For the sake of the real instant, and when the image replaces the "thing", the interval gives space to the interface in real time, "*in which everything arrives without there being any need either to travel or to leave in the slightest physical sense*" (Virilio, 1993, p.10). The interface makes notions of proximity and distance become less important than interrelations and connections. Objects, people, relationships of physical proximity, and, most generally, public space are thus at stake.

Virilio's argument questions public space in its construction. Telecommunications may have marked the end of the traditionally conceptualised as homogeneous and continuous public space, but they have also opened the potential for a new public sphere. Every electronic device is responsible for the production of some sort of shared – by those who possess the adequate technology – space, because of the personal information that it carries and its connectivity to other devices, and this unique space is entirely public. By default, reproduction becomes costless, information travels in real time and communication is above all decentralised, so that they altogether introduce new codes of behaviour and new social functions. For many, the idea of the public sphere as a platform of dialogue, in the model of the ancient Greek agora, can also be found in cyberspace, which is capable of instituting communities and developing political thought. In this regard, since the human body becomes augmented by information, informational space may equally stand as an extension of the conventionally conceived – physical – space. The development and the expansion of the Smart Mobs illustrate this idea.

On January 20, 2001, President Joseph Estrada of Philippines was the first governor to lose power to a Smart Mob (Rheingold, 2003, p.157). The demonstrations broke out when a trial in which President Estrada was accused came to an end through the interference of senators linked to him. When opposition leaders sent text messages out to their acquaintances, describing the event, the reaction was immediate. Over 20 000 people, mostly dressed in black, were gathered on Edsa [Epifanio de los Santas Avenue] within seventy-five minutes, and more than a million people showed up in the four days of the peaceful demonstration. The now famous text that passed from phone to phone

read "*Go 2 EDSA.Wear blck.*" (Rheingold, 2003, p.160) The "People Power II"[1] demonstration was not the first one organised through electronic texting; however it was the first that had such a direct political impact. Rheingold attributes the appearance of the first smart mobs to teenage "thumb tribes" in Tokyo and Helsinki who used text messages to organise impromptu gatherings for various reasons, to organise street games or to stalk their favourite celebrities (Rheingold, 2003, p.158). Ever since, different sorts of mobs for all kinds of occasions have been organised, such as the Critical Mass (Rheingold, 2003, p.158), a gathering of cyclists organised via the Internet that swarm hundreds of cities around the world and holding up traffic on the last Friday of every month, or the demonstrations organised by Zack Exley after the U.S. presidential election of 2000, who set up a website proposing protests all over the country, asking people to nominate locations for their own cities (Exley, 2010)[2]. Similar to Flash Mobs as a practice, only devoted to a specific cause, smart mob actions are very common in recent times, and very effective in organising instant mobs for different reasons, from peaceful gatherings and urban actions (fig.2), to political protests and riots. Some of them, although having a clear reason and not designed just for fun, are often also named as Flash Mobs, probably to emphasize their peacefulness, or to present a cheerful aspect.

Figure 2: Caron, M. (2012) Critical mass, San Francisco

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[1] The name refers to the "People Power" peaceful demonstration that was organised in 1986 on the same site against the Marcos regime (Rheingold, 2003, p.157).
[2] Exley writes at his article: "*The protests had little impact on the political scene, but for many of us involved, the experience demonstrated that a fundamental change is taking place in our national political life. It's not the Internet per se, but the emerging potential for any individual to communicate -- for free and anonymously -- with any other individual.*" (Exley, 2010)

In *Smart mobs: the next social revolution*, Rheingold defines a smart mob as a "*mobile ad hoc social network*" (Rheingold, 2003, p.169). It is the "*new social form made possible by the combination of computation, communication, reputation, and location awareness*" (Rheingold, 2003, pp.169-170). In this definition, the term "*mobile*" has to do with the fact that the telecommunication devices are portable and therefore can be always carried on us and "*ad hoc*" means that the organisation happens almost spontaneously and in a rush. According to Rheingold, "*social network means that every individual in a smart mob is a 'node', in the jargon of social network analysis, with social 'links' (channels of communication and social bonds) to other individuals*" (Rheingold, 2003, p.170). Then nodes and links have a double function here, they constitute the basic human elements of the communication networks, and they are connected and thus realised by wireless devices and the proper technology. By being both human and technological, nodes and links can have a significant and spatial impact.

Rheingold identifies two principle reasons for the development of the smart mobs, the fact that people have always functioned through social networks, and the collaborative structure of the Internet, especially at its beginning. Having carried out significant research on spatial imageries and the experience of dwelling in virtual communities, he suggests that the more informal public spaces cease to exist, the more people seek alternative forms of communities and spaces (Rheingold, 2000, p.6). Therefore, Rheingold argues, it is not our attachment to electronic devices and our connectivity that threaten public space – as Turkle argues in "Together Alone" (2011) – but instead the already-declining public space, coupled with the emerging technologies, that encourage alternative space constructions. Moreover, the way the Internet was structured and developed proposed new ways of organising communities and collaborative action. At their beginning (early 1960s), personal computers and networks were developed by these like-minded people, who aimed at creating something for their own purposes: "*in the 1960s, the community of users was the same as the community of creators, so self-interest and public goods were identical, but hackers foresaw a day when their tools would be used by a wider population*" (Rheingold, 2003, p.48). Back then, the term hacker was used to describe the people who developed the computer systems. It was not until the mid-1970s that computer development passed from the hands of passionate researchers to government laboratories, corporations and computer

gamers, and in 1976 that Bill Gates, on behalf of his new company Microsoft, first claimed that software was not a public good to be freely shared, but instead a private property (Rheingold, 2003, p.49). However, the ideas of the original "hacker ethic" (Rheingold, 2003, p.51) were not abandoned. The term "free software movement", developed in the mid-1980s refers to the software that can be downloaded, used, improved by users and redistributed without restriction and at no cost, aiming at keeping computer and operating systems a public good. It is the "open source" philosophy and individuals' contribution that have preserved the decentralised, self-organised character of the Internet and its development as a commons. And it is this commons that is often presented as a substitute for the declining public space. Rheingold argues that people have always been linked in networks, rather than closely-bounded groups (Rheingold, 2003, p.56). Unlike groups, networks are here considered fragmentary, loosely-bounded and widely distributed, arranged over happenings, acquaintances, jobs or interests, throughout which anyone can construct one's own "*personal community*" (Barry Wellman interviewed by Rheingold, 2003, p.57). Networks are also praised by Noam Chomsky in the construction of the "Occupy" movement, proposing a new sort of action in public spaces: "*in many ways, the most exciting aspect of the Occupy movement is the construction of the associations, bonds, linkages and networks that are taking place all over – whether it's a collaborative kitchen or something else. And, out of that, if it can be sustained and expanded to a large part of the population who doesn't yet know what is going on.*" (Chomsky, 2012, p.45) Hence, social networks have been here before new technologies, although these have attempted new structures of social organisation, so that "community" can now be defined as "*networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity*" (Barry Wellman interviewed by Rheingold, 2003, p.57), independent of geographical restrictions. Rheingold and Wellman suggest that with new technologies, it is the person and not the place that institutes a community. The ever-connected mobile person becomes itself "*an autonomous communication node*" (Barry Wellman interviewed by Rheingold, 2003, p.57) to create personal social networks and delineate space accordingly through these networks.

Then the body gains ground as place in its traditional sense loses its power. People tend to look for a sense of belonging to other people who do not need to be geographically close to them anymore. Therefore the body becomes the starting point,

the centre of a personal hybrid geography, around which people, places and space revolve. Through the "body-portal" digital and physical worlds merge: urban places are superimposed with information, media become linked with location, "smart homes" sense, adapt and respond to their users' needs, and virtual worlds are controlled while we press our computers' keys. Moreover, portable electronic devices have rendered the body more mobile than ever, able to effectively organise place and time around it. Physical locations, networks and virtual communities are combined accordingly to create shared space, places of intimacy, or places of social interaction.

5.4 The Question of "Real Democracy": the Example of the Spanish and Greek "Indignados"

On May 15th, 2011, demonstrations against high unemployment, the way that the government copes with the financial crisis, and the current political establishment in Spain gathered nearly 60,000 people in more than sixty Spanish cities (Hernández, 2011). In Madrid, protesters decided to stay overnight on the city's landmark, Puerta del Sol square, ignoring the demonstration ban. Early in the next morning, they were forcefully driven away by the police, but this marked only the start of the demonstrations. A mass call for protest generated by the social media took thousands of people all over Spain out to the public squares for many consecutive days. "*More than seventy public squares were occupied, #spanishrevolution[3] became a trending topic* [on Twitter] *and before the sobering election results, some appeared to believe in the possibility of overturning the system by conquering Twitter*" (Hernández, 2011). In the squares, public discussions and happenings were organised, the atmosphere was "*festival-like*" (Hernández, 2011), or maybe, Flash mob-like. The so-called "*los indignados*" [Spanish phrase for "the indignants"] used the social media to exchange information and ideas and to communicate their purposes and their images to the world (fig.3). They declared proud to have organised a different, peaceful, "happy", yet anti-government and anti-capitalist demonstration. Then on May 24th, 2011 something interesting happened. The Greek Twitter network got overwhelmed by the message that amongst the Spanish protests there was a sign saying: "*Ssshh... the Greeks are*

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[3] "Hashtag", prefixing a word with a hash symbol (#) is a popular practice on Twitter for opening a public conversation within the platform in real time, in which anyone can participate.

sleeping". Challenged by the Spaniards, the Greek "indignants" came up through social media with similar demonstrations on Syntagma square in Athens and in other big Greek cities against the government's austerity measures and the political system. The Spanish message that motivated the Greek protesters soon proved to be a fake rumour, however this seemed to be of no importance for those who kept peacefully demonstrating in the squares for more than a month.

Figure 3: The "Indignados" in Madrid.

In a context like this, the question arises at to what makes a public space. Is there one single place where people meet, interact, form opinions and decide actions? Is this place Puerta del Sol square alone, or Syntagma square, or maybe the Twitter platform? In Hernández's article the fact that "*seventy public squares were occupied*" is equally presented with the fact that "*#spanishrevolution became a trending topic*", both signifying public approval and action. Public space here could be Puerta del Sol square and the relevant Twitter posts and Syntagma square together due to their cooperation, rather than each one of them separately. For Mark Poster in his article *Cyberdemocracy* (1995), it is the media that constitute the public sphere: "*the age of the public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse*" (p.265). For Poster the meaning of "talk", of "face-to-face meeting", or that of "public discourse" need to be re-examined as these may also happen among individuals who may never physically meet due to new technologies. People can have a public discourse via Twitter, and then they can decide whether they prefer to keep it in the digital sphere, or they can make a movement, an action, and an event in the city out of it. By regarding "*the Internet as a political domain*" (1995, p.265), Poster rejects the Habermasian concept of the public

sphere as an embodied homogenous space, in which arguments are to be criticised and validity claims are to be presented.

The indignants movement that occupied the Spanish and Greek public squares did not resemble a traditional political demonstration. It did not have any particular political direction and it consisted of a heterogeneous and diverse crowd. Their ideological background appears complicated: these people did not have a common political ideology to unite them, nor did they aim at rejecting any particular political decision or party. Instead they were against the political establishment in general, asking for radical changes and justice. They also sprung from various communities formed via electronic communication, mostly blogs and Facebook groups of like-minded people. By rejecting representative democracy, they run an experiment of a participatory democracy, based on public assemblies that are clear and open to anyone who would like to enter. In their "*Manifesto for Real Democracy*", found in the "Real Democracy NOW!" website (Manifesto), they ask the direct participation of all the citizens to the decisions for the benefit of the society (Manifesto) and they celebrate the power of the many. Similar attempts towards a direct version of democracy mere made at the several "Occupy" movements in the United States. Indeed the "*festival-like*" atmosphere featuring such actions reflects more of a "happy" rather than a protesting crowd. The indignants specifically insisted on the peacefulness of their demonstrations (trying to create a counter-movement to the emergence of riots in European cities) and despite their anger they decided to seize the opportunity and transform it into something creative. Therefore they held public discussions and also artistic performances and they gave space to anybody who would have something to say. The squares staged all sorts of public events and these events were broadcast in real-time all over the world, allowing people to participate and support via the Internet. It also enabled the indignants in different cities of the country to communicate and coordinate their actions. In her article Hernández argues: "*after the 15M* [15th of May] *another side of the story has been told, on the squares and on the Internet, people are reading avidly and coming to terms with a 'system' that had until then appeared inscrutable*" (Hernández, 2011). Again, for Hernández here, the public assembly is of equal importance to the appeal that the events have on the Internet. In the simple language of social media, the more people "retweet"[4]

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[4] A "retweet" is the reproduction of a tweet (post on Twitter) published by someone else before. The more "retweets" a post gets, the more popular it becomes.

or "like"[5] these events, the greater their support, and therefore the stronger they get. But is "Real Democracy" described here a romantic and nostalgic approach to the ancient Greek system of direct democracy reconfigured in digital terms, or is it instead an ambitious attempt to create a new, just "Cyberdemocracy"? The indignants are similar to the Smart Mobs in their creation, as they are organised and coordinated via telecommunication networks in real-time, and they are not Flash Mobs, as they have one clear common cause to unite them. However, like Flash Mobs, they seem to be more of a physical enactment of a virtual movement than anything else. By setting up a space of expression open to anyone they create a public stage and an audience that will listen, approve or reject ["like" or not in the social media language] any idea presented; however no decisions are made and no action is taken by the collectivity thereafter. Such practices seem to satisfy the everyday tensions, but then they do not seem to achieve anything more than that. Cyberspace gives space for expression to anyone who has the technical means, but it is a question whether these actions constitute expressions of freedom of speech and democracy, or they create yet another spectacle in their place.

In his article "*Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm*" (2001) Paul Virilio argues that when everything functions within the perspective of real time "*the dictatorship of speed at the limit will increasingly clash with representative democracy*" (p.24). Virilio writes that viewer counts and opinion polls, the "retweets" and the "likes" of his time, do not suggest a "cyber-democracy", or a "virtual democracy", or an "opinion democracy" capable of replacing the old-fashioned "political parties democracy", but instead they are to create a "loss of orientation" and a "non-situation" that will affect society and hence, democracy. In this perspective, the "Real Democracy" promoted by the indignants does not suggest an improved – or even updated – version of democracy, but rather a "virtual", and as such, ineffective version of it. Are we then extending "cyber-freedom" into the real world or are we rendering real world onto a virtual one?

It would be interesting to approach the concept of "cyber-freedom" at this point. Given that we only refer to states of democratic regime – the Internet functions

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[5] "*'Like' is a way to give positive feedback or to connect with things you care about on Facebook. You can like content that your friends post to give them feedback or like a Page that you want to connect with on Facebook. You can also connect to content and Pages through social plugins or advertisements on and off Facebook.*" (Facebook)

differently within conditions of censorship and control – cyberspace promises to be this [representational] place of absolute freedom, without geographical borders or other limitations of real space. Although understood as an extension of the physical world, or even as a reconfiguration of it, cyberspace clearly constitutes a new sort of public platform that offers new freedoms as well as new restrictions. Organised as a network of networks without any sort of hierarchy, allowing anyone to participate as long as he complies with the programming protocols, it gives space to everybody to publish and share information, exchange ideas and communicate with others. Everything comes to the hands of all participants equally: public speech and also artistic and cultural production. Moreover, through networks and virtual communities it allows collective actions to develop in ways that were not possible in the past. If anyone can express his position freely on the Internet, regardless of his class, age, ethnicity or gender, then the Internet does not only suggest a democratic medium, but also an expression of direct democracy. As long as there are no representatives, anyone can express his opinion on anything. In support of this promised freedom Lawrence Lessig argued in 1998 that "*cyberspace is a less regulable space than real space*" (Lessig, 1998, p.6) since due to its current structure, there was not much that authorities or governments can do about it. Moreover, everything in cyberspace is measurable, so that we can always know exactly how many people agree or disagree with something. However actions such as the "Real Democracy" movement do not seem to extend this online action into the real world, but rather "enact" the exact same actions physically. In these public gatherings, everybody is given space and time to express their ideas [just like they do on their blogs or Facebook profiles] and at the end the audience is free to express their approval or disapproval [similarly to the "like" or the "retweet" button]. Although anyone is thus free to share their views and also their anger, disappointment, anxieties, and fears, no decisions are made and no action is taken, therefore it seems ineffective. Similarly to what happens in the digital realm, at the end of the day people feel relief simply for having shared their ideas.

As described in chapter 3, during the saturnalia of the Middle Ages people hid behind a mask and temporarily transformed into carnivalesque figures in order to release the pressure and the anxiety of the times. Following from that, chapter 4 illustrated how the "industrial saturnalia" helped people escape for a short while from the metropolis and its burdens to illusory leisure parks. Are these modern public

assemblies then some sort of a "digital saturnalia", where everyone, hidden in the anonymity of their digital personae, express their views either in the digital or in the physical realm, only to take the pressure out of their system, without changing anything? Is cyberspace – and by extension the movements that derive from it – the space of "social relief" and society's safety valve that allows everything to exist and expand, yet without affecting the established order?

"The fact that the rioters have no programme is therefore itself a fact to be interpreted: it tells us a great deal about our ideological-political predicament and about the kind of society we inhabit, a society which celebrates choice but in which the only available alternative to enforced democratic consensus is a blind acting out. Opposition to the system can no longer articulate itself in the form of a realistic alternative, or even as a utopian project, but can only take the shape of a meaningless outburst. What is the point of our celebrated freedom of choice when the only choice is between playing by the rules and (self-) destructive violence?" (Zizek, 2011)

In his article "*Shoplifters of the World Unite*", Slavoj Zizek discusses the UK riots of August 2011 and the Spanish and Greek Indignant movements in terms of social space and public expression of the times. Zizek sees the riots as irrational violent actions that have no message to transmit and nothing to demand. Opposition to the social oppression and a deeper unease have nothing to say and no alternative to suggest and therefore are here transformed and realised into meaningless violent Flash Crowd-like outbursts in the city. Similarly, the Indignants reject any established order and express their anger to the system but propose nothing that may affect the current socio-political order. Rioters and protesters establish a public space of expression in the city, a space where everybody is given the same amount of time to speak and is free to do so; however they fail to transform into anything dynamic and therefore they have no impact on social life. Then we live at a time where everybody has the absolute freedom of choice, but any choice is ineffective.

If we regard Virtual Reality as a simulation of real life, the opposite effect is also a fact: the virtualisation of the physical world. The examples discussed here suggest that real space becomes yet another platform – almost another window – of expression and performance. Real life powers can be applied to cyberspace, virtuality can envelope reality, and telepresence allows anyone to simultaneously be here and there, in reality

and in virtuality. And the networked body can be anywhere, as long as it possesses the appropriate passwords and the adequate technology. For Gilles Deleuze in the "*Postscripts on the Societies of Control*" (1992) Foucault's disciplinary societies give their place to the societies of control: "*the code is the password... The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become 'dividuals', and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks'*" (p. 5). Then control becomes the regime for the electronic age, and the "man of control", the networked body is no longer defined by geometry or architecture, but only by code. In this new realm we have all become "dividuals", always shared and in common with others, so that publicness and privacy in space take new meanings.

5.5 The "Googlization" of the Everyday Life: Growing Publicness and People's Right to Privacy

As seen above, the publicness and the open structure of the digital networks have developed cyberspace into a continuation and an augmentation of physical space. Although the phenomenon of the virtualisation of physical space existed before the emergence and the wide spread of the Internet, clearly new technologies and telecommunication networks, and our omnipresent connectivity have not only accelerated this process, but they have also made it more visible and present in the everyday life. Smart Mobs, and also the examples of the "indignants" and the Real Democracy assemblies illustrate that there is a complex relation – rather than a linear one – between the digital and the physical realm that, on the one hand creates conditions of social interaction within cyberspace, and on the other it applies practices and norms developed in cyberspace to the physical world. Our increasing and sometimes uncritical confidence in such practices has a direct impact on the way that we behave and also the way we imagine and perceive things. Eventually, applications developed by companies like Google and Apple, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become to a large degree our lenses to the world. And conversely, the ways we conduct our everyday lives, our ways and means, very often come as results of our digital interactions. These digital interactions are far from neutral, instead they are subject to

the structure of those applications and also to the interests of the companies that have created them.

In his book "*The Googlization of Everything*" (2011), Siva Vaidhyanathan discusses the involvement of Google's multiple applications into our daily lives and the company's global expansion. Google is very much responsible our experience of the Internet today – due to Google's search engine cyberspace appears very user-friendly and easy to navigate – therefore the term "Googlization" is in this sense closely related to the term "virtualisation". Vaidhyanathan explains how Google has evolved since 1998 into a great media company with multiple applications that affect everyone's everyday life. From services such as email- and blog-hosting and also web-browsing, to software applications that operate online (word processor, spread sheets, presentation software), to projects that serve educational purposes such as Google Books and Google Scholar, and to digital representations of the world through Google Maps, Google Earth, and Google Street View, the company has soon managed to provide solutions that help us to easily navigate our physical worlds as well. However, all these applications and the more to come in the future are simply the media that serve the company's objectives. For Google, the writer argues, the users are not the customers but the product. Google has become an advertising company that aims at monitoring our interests and preferences and selling them to advertisers. Therefore the loyalty of its users is of major importance. In exchange of the information and the services that the company provides "*it collects the gigabytes of personal information and creative content that millions of Google users provide for free to the Web every day and sells this information to advertisers of millions of products and services*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.26). By combining this information it builds highly personalised customers profiles that underpin its targeted advertising.

Google's methods are indeed remarkable. Through a seemingly magical process, the company hides an extremely complicated technology behind a very simply designed interface, aiming to "*capitalize on our weaknesses and desires, cravings, and curiosities*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.54). Faith in Google, according to Vaidhyanathan, is dangerous as it immediately fulfils our desires, therefore increases our needs for more, better, faster goods, services, information, distractions, and thus encouraging addiction to speed and convenience (2011, p.55). It is because of the company's structure to operate fast and display precise and honest results that everyone has

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embraced it and trusted it, and the more people trust it, the closer its top results get to the "truth". Vaidhyanathan analogizes Google's ranking system to the conceptualisation of the "truth" as developed in American pragmatism philosophy, according to which truth becomes the result of a process of experimentation and discovery that highly depends on different perspectives and personal experiences (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.61), instead of a aprofound speculation of reality. Thus the rank assigned to a search result comes from a dynamic process of "*verification by communal affirmation*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.61) of users. Through an algorithm, these affirmations are transformed into levels of reference and these levels shape the "truth". This sort of truth is then subject to the users of the service (who are categorised into "registered" and "unregistered" with the formers' selection valuing more) and also to their individual preferences. The selections of the many are thus likely to be trustworthy: "*we believe that a consensus about what's important arrived apparently by democratic means, is probably trustworthy*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.60). Therefore the "viral" identified by Bill Wasik as a characteristic of digital culture is a very important factor to determine the "truth", rendering the "new" and the "popular" as more important. In this way, interestingly, the locale is also very significant to the results generating process. Most generally, Google – due to its methods of development and its purposes to monitor preferences and behaviours – is thus based on the human element and is shaped by individuals' decisions, desires, and curiosities, and for this reason the "local" and personal decisions matter more than the "global" in Web search.

Through the lenses of Google the world seems clean, simple, and organised. Everything appears in front of our eyes in good speed to indulge our wishes and desires. The plain white design of the search engine conceals among others – though without blocking access to – any reference to pornography and any other insulting content, computer malware, hacking, and electronic fraud. Instead, Google projects a bright and hopeful future and a world where one cannot get lost, where communication comes in real time despite any distance, where one has free access to knowledge, and where information about anything is easy to acquire. Moreover, ourselves, we eventually get used to all these technological innovations and we take them for granted, while our expectations for more speed, information, convenience infinitely increase. Along with these arises the question of personal privacy.

5.6 Surveillance, Self-Surveillance and Privacy

It is not an accident that the first Flash Mobs took place in New York City, only a couple of years (2003) after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and that they were always organised in either public or semi-public spaces. The "post 9/11 trauma" managed to change the character of public spaces first in the United States, and eventually in the rest of the world. Public squares and spaces of public assembly suddenly transformed into a target for extremists and terrorists, the point of attention for the authorities, and a source of anxiety for the urban dwellers. Surveillance cameras on the streets and continuous recording of telecommunications were established for security reasons, however – or maybe due to which – people felt very uncomfortable to walk freely in their cities and use the public space. Sherry Turkle also attributes the connectivity culture developed in the years after 2000 to the attack trauma (2011, p.223). Turkle describes a situation where, after the terrorist attacks, Americans accepted, if not demanded, an unprecedented monitoring of their lives. The mobile phone soon "*became a symbol of physical and emotional safety*" (Turkle, 2011, p.234) as it provided continual contact, even at a distance. Besides when connected, one is always part of a virtual community, even if one is physically alone. At the cost of personal privacy, connectivity and cyberspace offered a sense of co-existence and belonging and consequently a sense of comfort at any place and time. At the same time however, physical space became almost as recordable and controllable as cyberspace. At that time, Flash Mobs illustrated people's desire to act differently in their own cities, to reclaim the constantly monitored public spaces, and to explore new forms of public appearance, performing in front of – or despite – the security cameras. They also expressed their desire to make this "digital co-existence" visible and transformed into an absurd and fun happening in the city. Most generally, the Flash Mob story suggests that if recent times and digitisation signify an ever growing publicness, then co-presence and public space need to be re-defined.

In his paper The Architecture of Privacy (1999), Lawrence Lessig suggests that although social life has always been monitored and private life was always to be negotiated, in the electronic age the notion of privacy will be fundamentally different: "*Life where less is monitored is a life more private; and life where less can (legally perhaps) be searched is also a life more private*" (Lessig, 1999, p.1). Today, one's own property proves ineffective in providing privacy as long as one is connected to the

Internet. The example of Google described above shows that cyberspace architecture has been designed to monitor and store information so that it becomes permanent and easily searchable. And although it is common knowledge that collecting data on the Internet is the default, the more cyberspace becomes superimposed to physical space, the greater the impact digital surveillance has on everyday life. Clearly, digitisation has introduced new social norms that regulate individuals' lives when they are both "online" and "offline". Everyone – even at a minimum level – has learned, usually by watching others doing it first, how to construct his digital persona, or personae, how to play with anonymity or pseudonymity and how to communicate with others through his avatar. Accustomed to watching and being watched, one checks his/her popularity and knows how to adjust his self-representation accordingly. Due to his availability to potentially thousands of viewers, through blogging and social networking, he/she effectively learns how to sell themself as a public figure and as a character on stage (Wasik, 2009, p.13). But the longer we stay connected, the more this sort of sociality affects social life in the physical world. As long as life becomes more and more electronically mediated, credit card transactions are associated with purchases and are permanently monitored, regulating traffic cameras keep their own records, and location aware technologies supplement our messages with our exact locations. Our ephemeral lives are increasingly leaving electronic traces behind.

Michel Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* (1977) explores the way that power is exercised rather than possessed, and therefore as an "*effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated*" (pp.26-7). Through the implementation of discipline instead of force, "docile" and therefore controllable bodies may be created. Space, geography and architecture are very important in creating and managing docile bodies. The architectural scheme of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* illustrates Foucault's ideas on modern spatial techniques of surveillance. In the Panopticon "*each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never the subject of communication*" (Foucault, 1977, p.200). Practically, it is the structure rather than the supposed guard that suppresses the subject's freedom. Individuals learn how to observe themselves in the way that the prison guard would, although they never know whether they are being looked at or not. It is the fear that they

are being observed rather than the actual observation that exercises the power. The gaze, the consciousness of always being watched controls their behaviour. In this way the crowd breaks down into separated individualities, easy to number and control:

"*the crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities. From the point of view of the guardian, it is replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised, from the point of view of the inmates, by a sequestered and observed solitude.*" (Foucault, 1977, p.201)

Foucault uses the Panopticon metaphor to describe power relations within modern culture. The Panopticon may be a prison, a school, a factory, a hospital, or the entire society: "*it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form... it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use*" (Foucault, 1977, p.205). It is a laboratory of power that can supervise its own mechanisms and also penetrate into people's lives. Then in modern society, power is not imposed by the implementation of any sort of violence or force, but instead by the way that everyone learns the art of self-surveillance. Always available for inspection, every citizen becomes his/her own guard, and this is the reason why no authority is actually necessary. A new kind of power that is mental becomes a part of the social world and affects actions and decisions, conversations and everyday lives. Introducing the transition to a society where everybody is being watched, according to Foucault, the Panopticon marks the shift from the civilisation of the spectacle to a culture where spectacle and surveillance collapse on to one another and where happenings and social control blend in a complex reality.

Foucault's work, seen through the lens of digitisation, suggests an interesting insight of the relationship between electronic communication and freedom and explains a lot about the way individuals behave in the electronic age. In recent times, increasing high-tech surveillance, either in the name of security or of accuracy, has become part of everyday life, reinforced by the voluntarily adoption of technology. The more our physical interactions are dependent on our digital connections, the more we cannot escape the continuous monitoring of our lives. Telephone calls and text messages, credit card transactions, airplane tickets and hotel room electronic keys can well outline our paths in real space. In addition in ourselves will post information and images of our

routes in platforms like Facebook or Twitter, although we know that in cyberspace everything is permanently recorded. Moreover, our interactions through digital spaces and our virtual world experiences are, again and by default, archived. Interestingly, when George Orwell in *1984* feared the emergence of a totalitarian *Big Brother*, he could not have imagined that communication and computing technologies would make users voluntarily share their privacy, either for fun or for convenience. New technologies have created new social norms in which all users are carefully fabricated. Today electronic surveillance raises a series of novel questions on the domain of personal information and on the privacy and publicness of everyday life. Is "dataveillance"[6] the new threat to liberty due to the new technologies or is this a new reality in which we all have to conform? As Langdon Winner in his paper "*Whatever Happened to the Electronic Cottage?*" (2001) argues: "*at a time in which people are frantically trying to get connected, we would do well to ask: when and where does it make sense to remain unconnected?*" (p. 10).

For decades cultural theorists, inspired by Orwell's dystopian fiction, predicted a future where a totalitarian centralised organisation would impose a government of surveillance and public mind control. In Orwell's story, the one and only – godlike – Big Brother would collect and store information about everyone, aiming to control not only speech and actions but also the thoughts of people, through "*thought police*". Today traffic and CCTV cameras, location-aware technology, "smart" portable devices, social media, and our long-pursued connectivity at any time keep track of us in the city and at home. In recent times, Big Brother is instead expanded into a decentralised but indisputable system of surveillance supported by all its participants. William J. Mitchell argues that on the Internet "*instead of one Big Brother, we got a vast swarm of Little Brothers*" (1995, p.157). In effect every electronic device is capable of recording one's actions, and thus anyone connected may keep an account of anything or anybody that seems interesting, fun, or necessary. The enormous databases of personal information that are created are also decentralised as they are distributed equally to everybody's personal computers and therefore it is even more difficult to ever erase them. And it is by common consent that users share most of their personal lives online so that "*the*

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[6] "*Dataveillance is the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons.*" (Clarke, 1988, pp. 499)

population itself could become a collective surveillant: Big Everybody" (Rheingold, 2003, p.187). Thus individuals have learned perfectly how to create and recreate themselves, and also to manipulate and sell themselves due to popular demand. And they watch themselves more than they actually watch others. In the world of page views, "likes" and "retweets", one serves as an agent of oneself, watching others and adjusting oneself among them, reconstructing and selling oneself as a public figure. As Bill Wasik in his book "*And then there's this"* suggests, in "*Orwellian Dystopia... Big Brother is watching you*", while in today's Dystopia "*Big Brother is you*" (2009, p.136). Big Brother exists anywhere that connectivity exists so that the walls of one's house are no longer enough to ensure privacy.

Interestingly, as the world opens up to new technologies and the new ways and means they introduce, the term "privacy" has less to do with the condition of being kept away from the presence of the view of others, and more with the ways that we may control our visibility and co-presence: "*it's just a word that we clumsily use to stand in for a wide array of values and practices that influence how we manage our reputations in various contexts*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.87). And the more all this digital information is combined to outline our personal profiles, the more the term is likely to derail from its meaning. As described above, through this extensive system of services for email and web hosting, general search engines and others that specialise in finding books and academic articles, and applications like Google Maps and Google Street View, Google manages like no other company to collect information about many different aspects of our everyday lives. The difference of Google from the other major media companies lies exactly in this: because of all the different targets of this information, Google not only monitors and controls much of the activity on the Internet, but it also bridges the digital and the physical realm, so that all the different contexts of our lives blend, and our physical bodies are clearly linked to our digital personae. Thus it establishes a system of universal surveillance that serves – but also combines – at once our professional, educational, and personal preferences, so that no distinction between public and private is possible any more. And this takes place with the contribution of every one of us: "*we are no longer in control of our public personas, because so many of our fellow citizens carry with them instruments of surveillance and exposure such as cameras and video recorders*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.96). Thus to the company that aims at monitoring, its users add a culture of sharing of information

about anyone by anyone, in a process of cross-referencing. Conversely, this emerging digital culture also causes a great degree of interest on behalf of the users that sometimes evolves into some sort of "*voyeuristic curiosity*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.105). But are we ready to consciously accept this infinite openness and publicness? An interesting example of the complex effects of the bridging of the physical and the digital world is the Google Street view. Even in countries such the UK where people are increasingly used to having their everyday lives being monitored by surveillance cameras, people initially reacted strongly to the idea that they and their properties are being photographed by an American corporation that would put all the images together to create a representation of the world available to anyone with a computer. It is this "anyone" that possibly creates this great reaction. Obviously anyone passing outside one's property can have a peek of the interior. The difference with Google Street View is that theoretically anyone in the world is able to do exactly the same. Vaidhyanathan describes this situation as the opposite of the Panopticon, the "cryptopticon", which involves "*not the subjection of the individual to the gaze of a single, centralised authority, but the surveillance of the individual, potentially by all, always by many*" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p.112). Thus the "cryptopticon" marks this shift from the one-guard system of the Panopticon era to the many and unknown viewers one is unable to control. And although the Google Street View raises a lot of reactions and questions of privacy – possibly because one has to confront an image of his own property and/or his family and friends – at most cases, as Vaidhyanathan argues, nobody really seems to care. Excited, and possibly addicted as well, to the ease at which things come to us – with communication due to Facebook, information due to Twitter, orientation due to Google Maps, shopping due to Amazon being only a few examples – we ourselves allow these companies to collect and combine more and more information about us, aiming to construct our as accurate as possible representation.

On the other hand, if telecommunications have introduced permanent surveillance in everyday life, they have in parallel suggested a more flexible existence in space. The loss of privacy has clearly opened new possibilities for social interaction. If we are all turned into "Little Brothers" then we can easily track acquaintances' positions and availability at real time. Meetings, directions and also place become flexible. After working with teenagers in Tokyo and Helsinki for his book *Smart mobs: the next social revolution*, Howard Rheingold observes a "softening" of space and time among texting

youth (2003, p.194). As they are always connected through location-sensing and texting devices, teenagers never agree in advance on their meetings. Instead, places and times simply adjust to their movement in the city. Then space is no longer fixed, but becomes articulated due to [physical or virtual] communities, and around mobilities and connections. Consequently, individuals are no longer located in place, but through their connections. The sociologist Barry Wellman suggests: "*the shift to a personalised, wireless world affords networked individualism, with each person switching between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability, and a sense of belonging*" (Wellman, 2002, pp. 16). In the electronic age the sense of connection becomes a prerequisite for the sense of belonging. And the sense of belonging does not refer necessarily to place. When the starting point is not a fixed place but the networked body, the sense of belonging may refer equally to a network – electronic, electronically-mediated or physical, a place – physical or digital, or a person.

Clearly, the more information superimposes everyday life, marking the transition to a hybrid world, the more we become accustomed to sharing personal information and living a more "public" life, but the questions that come up here are, do we understand what this means, and, do we really want this? It is important to study publicness within virtual environments here. As Second Life Wiki webpage explains about privacy in Second Life: "*Second Life® is a very social world, but sometimes you just want some peace and quiet. Privacy concerns have long been a concern of many Residents. This article explains how to get some time to yourself*" (Privacy in Second Life). Apparently not even in Second Life one feels comfortable with always being public. The article proposes several ways to escape publicness, one can hide "online" status from friends (so that they will not be able to track you on the map), or appear "busy" to them, or resort to a private estate. In effect one of the reasons that Second Life Residents buy virtual land and build their own houses is so that they can achieve some sort of privacy. Here privacy corresponds to the real-life isolation from the multitude. Hence when buying land in Second Life one has the option to allow or deny public access to other Residents or organise lists of Residents that are allowed to teleport in. A video

advertisement of Linden Homes, a service that creates and sells houses by Linden Lab, suggests:

"*Linden Homes are available at no cost to premium members and make owning land in SL so easy. You get a pre-built home that gives you a permanent virtual address, a social environment where you can hang out with your friends, and a place where you are free to be creative; you can build, rez[7] objects and experiment with your own personal look, all in the privacy of your own home*" (Second Life, 2010).

Then a house not only puts a Resident on the map, but it also indulges him with various levels of privacy. Users build walls to dissociate from the world and be left alone or with few friends. And if this is not enough, they can resort to a "skybox". A skybox is a special kind of space in Second Life that defies [virtual] gravity and stays up in the air, in specific coordinates (fig.4). Unlike with constructions situated on virtual land, a Resident can create a skybox without owning the land underneath, as long as the land owner allows it. A skybox can be as simple as a box or as complicated as a virtual house, always floating in the air. Skyboxes are positioned above 500 metres from the ground, which is higher than the typical height one can fly, and this is how privacy is achieved. Text and voice chat cannot be heard at that height either. A Resident can invite other Residents in his skybox by sending them its coordinates. Second Life Wiki suggests creating a skybox to Residents who want to get some privacy, or to avoid distractions and focus on a creative task, and to those who want to immerse into a "self-contained environment":

"*Some Residents have figured out clever ways to create the illusion of a self-contained environment by putting a build inside a textured, giant sphere. Such a sphere (or a cube) could be used on the ground as well, but depending on your neighbors, it could be courteous to change the exterior texture to transparent, in order to avoid adding to "visual noise... A variation on this are skyboxes that have textures on the windows that simulate city landscapes and other "fake" environments to better control the experience.*" (Skybox)

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[7] "*Rez in Second Life means to create or to make an object appear. Rezzing an object/prim can be done by dragging it from a resident's inventory or by creating a new one via the edit window. The term was inspired by the classic science-fiction movie 'Tron'*". (Rez Objects)

Those who feel like escaping the Second Life world, they can do so by isolating in a box that simulates the environment they wish, a self-contained environment within the self-contained environment, in an attempt to create another layer of privacy.
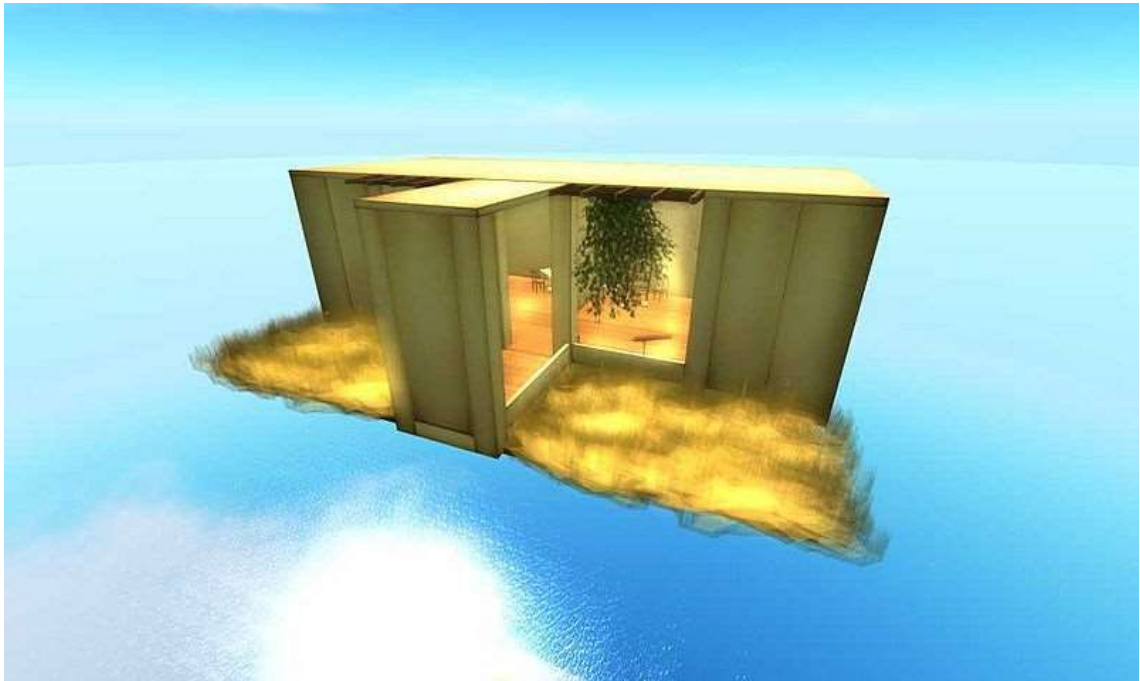
Figure 4: Skybox.

Interestingly, privacy here is associated with a level of rootedness and a "home", even in representational space, and if an extra layer of isolation is needed, then one can escape up in the sky. Privacy in Virtual Reality signifies isolation from others, but not from the system. As long as one is alone, he is in private. Then Virtual Reality illustrates this shift to a world of continuous surveillance that, unlike in real world, is widely accepted and almost neglected and ignored. Simultaneously real life moves towards the same direction: although lamenting for the freedom lost due to digitisation, more than ever before people accept the fact that their lives are permanently recorded. In a world where one cannot be left alone, even when between the [physical] walls of his own property due to his connectivity to the networks, but one can resort to a skybox in Second Life to feel free from all constrains, multiple questions arise: do we really need privacy, or do we need to become reconciled to a life in which we are always being watched? Is privacy still a matter of non-surveillance or simply a matter of isolation? And is it of no importance that the system, and potentially anyone, keeps records of our actions?

5.7 The "Electronic Flâneur"

In December 2004 the 8th Greek Flash Mob takes place in Syntagma Square, Athens. A group of no more than twenty people coming from different directions gather around the central fountain in the middle of the square. They hold teabags that they baptise into the fountain, while a few others distribute teabags to the surprised people who pass by and invite them to join the group (fig.5). The event lasts for five minutes and then the participants disperse within the urban crowd. Syntagma Square [meaning Constitution Square, named after the constitution that King Otto was compelled to give to the people after a popular and military uprising that took place there on September 3rd, 1843] has been the place for all sorts of different events: street riots and political demonstrations, smart mobs, New Year's celebrations and Flash Mobs. For this particular event, people who belonged to the same virtual network decided to create a fun and absurd happening to inhabit the square differently and cause astonishment. Only for a few minutes, the Flash Mobbers detached themselves from the urban crowd, ignoring the gaze of the people who pass by and the records that the security cameras keep, and recreated the environment to envelope their performance. During these seven minutes in total, they did not belong to the urban crowd, but to their own Flash Mob. In the digital age the mobile and connected individual becomes the ultimate place and the starting point of all things. The "plugged-in human being" as Paul Virilio has put it (1993), more mobile than ever, becomes the only fixed entity that determines absence and presence, proximity and distance, the sense of belonging and the sense of place. The networked individual does not constitute a threat to the – already declining for many – public space, but instead, connects to other individuals, and together they construct their space of action accordingly.

Figure 5: Tea Mob in Syntagma Square.

In the digital age the individual becomes principally "*an electronic flâneur*" (Mitchell, 1995, p.7) that "despatializes" physical space and "respatializes" it according to his connections. The sense of belonging, space, and personal identity emerge through the networks as well. William J. Mitchell argues that in the networked city the email address constitutes simultaneously a personal name of identification and an address. One's personal address is no longer fixed to a place but rather to his body and it does not refer to any material property, but simply to an access code and some data storage located at a server somewhere in the world. As long as he can connect to a network through an electronic device, he can organise people and places around him, as the exchange of electronic messages links people at constantly changeable locations. "*In the standard sort of spatial city, where you are frequently tells who you are. (And who you are will often determine where you are allowed to be.) ...But the Net's despatialization of interaction destroys the geocode's key. There is no such thing as a better address and you cannot attempt to define yourself by being seen in the right places in the right company*" (Mitchell, 1995, p.9). Then geography is no longer destiny and one's address signifies mobility and connectivity rather than homeliness and stability. People stay connected as individuals rather than being rooted in their home bases and therefore they develop a stronger sense of belonging to their networks rather than to their home places. Public interactions, from festivals and street acts to protests and demonstrations, do not cease to exist but instead become computer mediated. The "*flexibilization of people's paths through time-space*" (Urry, 2002, p.269) introduces new forms of "mobilised" co-presence and new configurations of individuality, and consequently the articulation of (physical and virtual) places around them. New technologies challenge place to be eventmental and ephemeral, and question any attachments to stability, fixity, permanence, groundedness. The re-coding of groundedness in this complex world will be the focus of the following section.

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Chapter 6. Connecting to the [Virtual] Ground

6.1 Introduction: the Desire for "Groundedness"

"When autumn sets in, to possess a burrow like mine, and a roof over your head is great good fortune for anyone getting on in years. Every hundred yards I have widened the passages into little round cells; there I can curl myself up in comfort and lie warm. There I sleep the sweet sleep of tranquillity, of satisfied desire, of achieved ambition; for I possess a house. I do not know whether it is a habit that still persists from former days, or whether the perils even of this house of mine are great enough to awaken me; but invariably every now and then I start up out of profound sleep and listen, listen into the stillness which reigns here unchanged day and night, smile contentedly, and then sink with loosened limbs into still profounder sleep. Poor homeless wanderers in the roads and woods, creeping for warmth into a heap of leaves or a heard of their comrades, delivered to all the perils of heaven and earth!" (The Burrow, Franz Kafka, 1923-4, p.327)

In The Burrow, the protagonist of Kafka's story is an animal of an undetermined kind that, despite its endless fears, only finds peace and satisfaction inside this construction of its own. The animal tirelessly digs its "building", an elaborate system of tunnels, into the ground, driven by the desire for absolute security. It appears hopeless and helpless, taking more and more measures of protection that are later overtaken by other, uncontrollable threats. Every single noise signifies a potential danger, an invader threatening the construction and consequently the animal's life. Right at the centre of this labyrinthine space lies the "Castle Keep", the central cell that inspires homeliness and comfort, offering the most security and protection. Food supplies are kept there, and the animal enjoys the smells, plays and circulates around them. From time to time it leaves the Burrow, yet it never feels really free away from it, always being about the return.

The Burrow, constructed with much effort deep inside the earth is a refuge, a shelter and a home, aiming at providing peace, protection, and satisfaction. Kafka's story suggests a paranoid connection to the ground: it is the always-present sense of insecurity that drives the constant elaboration of the burrow, but the deeper into the

ground the animal goes in search for a safe home, the greater its fears become. As with the animal in this short story, traditionally the concepts of place, home, and ground are intrinsically interwoven, yet groundedness and rootedness often prove insufficient to provide absolute homeliness. Nevertheless, the native ground has always stood as the symbol of the origin, the broad basis on which human being is defined, the "there" of the human existence in the world, so that the earth provides the foundation and the firm support for any establishment of place. The "quest for home" and the "sense of belonging" are thus closely related to the fixity and the stability of the earthly soil. Kafka's animal asks himself whether this connection to the Burrow is due to its materiality or something immanent in being. In the electronic age, where the earth is no longer something that anchors us and where mobility and connectivity introduce new, dynamic and flexible spaces, the question remains the same. Does the attachment to the ground refer to the native ground itself or to some sort of a phantasmatic background context? In a world that is less about place and more about places, less about origins and more about connections between the different sites of our lives (McCullough, 2005, p.171), the notion of "groundedness" shifts from materiality to absolute symbolism. Similarly to physical space, cyberspace is also capable of creating a "there" and a place, establishing new geographies and different sorts of attachments. Are we then "*poor homeless wanderers in the roads and woods*" (Kafka, 1923-4, p.327) in this new age or are we moving from a conscious attachment to a native ground and a single home, to a multiplicity of places, grounds, and, if possible, "homes"?

This attachment to the ground is the focus of this section. It presents conditions of groundedness – from the Heideggerian "being in the world" as "being on the earth" to the "native ground" as a repository of meanings and memories and as a symbol of the finitude of the human being – and groundlessness – from flying in the physical world to an avatar's weightless existence in virtual worlds. Through the example of buying and selling virtual land in a digital world like Second Life, it examines how the ground is symbolised in terms of materiality and virtuality.

6.2 The Significance of the Ground

6.2.1 The *Ground as Place as Home*

The Grey Monument stands at the head of Grey Street in the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne since 1838. The 41 metres column, topped by the statue of Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey, was erected to acclaim the Prime Minister for the 1832 Government Reform Bill, which modernised parliament in Britain. The Monument that has given its name to the wider surrounding area constitutes a popular meeting point for the people and hosts from time to time all sorts of public space activities, from demonstrations and protests, to celebrations and street parties. On Tuesday 30 January 2007, the first Newcastle Flash Mob event was held there, with the attendance of more than 500 people. The streets around the Monument were busy as usual on this Tuesday afternoon, when at exactly 1pm the sound of a whistle was the signal for the Flash Mobbers to run towards the Monument, surround it and stand still there for two minutes. On the sound of another whistle after that, the people formed a human chain and danced around it for six minutes, before they disperse into the surprised crowd (fig.1-3). For less than ten minutes of an ordinary weekday afternoon, the site became the centre of a fun, impromptu event that appointed the Monument a new role: it became the stage and the protagonist of an "urban dance" performance. Similarly to the Syntagma square, Athens, described in chapter 5, that has hosted events from Flash Mobs and New Year celebrations to anti-government demonstrations and street riots, a monument and a fixed place that has been there for almost 200 years becomes a different sort of place "generator", the centre of an urban event that creates new spatial links within the city.

Figures 2-3: the Monument Flash Mob, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

Such phenomena become more frequent, but also clear, within the networked city, which is saturated by electronic information and communication. Public spaces receive new meanings and host new sorts of public spectacles, partly because of the emerging new technologies and the new cultures that they cultivate. A monument, a symbol of

fixity and memory, participates in a fleeting urban trend and after a while tens of short videos displaying the event swarm the Internet. Most of these videos will remain permanently online, keeping the memory of the Monument as the centre of a Flash Mob alive. Within such mobility and connectivity in everyday life, the roles of physicality and stability in the creation of place are in question. Permanence can be found within cyberspace, while physical space appears contingent and fluid. The emotional and physical connections that bind place and ground together are seen anew due to digitisation.

The ground as the solid surface of the earth, as the land that lies under our feet, and as the foundation on which anything built rests, has always served as a condition of a possibility of place. It is through the transformation and the manipulation of the earth that places of all kinds can emerge. Heaviness and gravity on the one hand, and the attempts to overcome them through high-rise constructions on the other, define physical space and create different sorts of spatial relationships. Although the concept of a sense of place often appears subjective and ephemeral, grounding life in places is inevitable. Traditionally, the notion of place is conceived as a static entity and is associated with rootedness, the sense of belonging, and the desire for fixity and security. Thus the quest for placeness and homeliness refers both literally and metaphorically to the attachment to the ground. "Home" in particular, seen as a centre of meaning and a field of attachment, represents the primitive place, a starting point and a fixed location to which we always return. Therefore the notions of the "native ground" and the "original home" are difficult to escape both emotionally and materially. And as the concept of "home" is associated with the stability and the materiality of the ground, flying represents "ungroundedness", the release of all burdens and absolute transcendence.

The desire to defeat the connection to the ground, and with it the attachment to place, is not new. In recent times, new technologies, telecommunication and transportation systems have effectively transformed the world towards this direction, so that we can no longer say we are rooted to a place and restricted by it. The emergence of a telecommunication civilisation that is by default "ungrounded" has enabled people to interact in real-time through interfaces rather than face-to-face, and thus has drastically changed the concept of "groundedness". The body that used to be well-anchored in places within the city is now networked, tied into countless electronic connections, yet absolutely free within physical space. Fixed places also receive new meanings within

this context. A monument that stands for countless years marking the centre of the city now gets to be projected and revisited by a Flash Mob, a crowd that comes out of nowhere and disappears immediately. Place as fixity and security, and along with it relationships of proximity and distance, presence and absence, are redefined in the electronic age in favour of a sense of openness and freedom. These attempts to escape the "*tyranny of place*" (Harries, 1998, p.168) have introduced a freer and lighter existence in the world, even if these suggest a sense of not belonging and homelessness at the same time. In his book "The Ethical Function of Architecture" Karsten Harries asks: "*if the loss of place can be mourned, must it not also be welcomed as an essential part of the increasing emancipation of the individual from the rule of the accident of place? Place no longer need be destiny*" (Harries, 1998, p.169). Then the "accident of place" is no longer enough to determine people's lives and interactions, and cannot tie us onto the ground any more. Within this context we are clearly less rooted in the ground, but the question is, do we need to be rooted at all? John Rajchman suggests that "*once we give up the belief that our life-world is rooted in the ground, we may thus come to the point where ungroundedness is no longer experienced as existential anxiety and despair but as a freedom and a lightness that finally allow us to move*" (Rajchman, 1998, p.88). By extension, in "*What is Philosophy*" (1994), Deleuze and Guattari describe the earth as "*pure deterritorialisation*"[1], in other words, as pure uncoded material, as a grand reserve beyond any regime of signification, and as an entity that does not await any re-territorialisation, but instead exists as a plane of pure immanence. To Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, the earth is not one element among others, but the condition that brings together all the elements in one, "*using one or another of them to deterritorialise territory*" (1994, p.85), while it is itself detached from territory, so that geography is not restricted in providing the places to things, but may be equally physical or mental. A world of dematerialisation and deterritorialisation raises questions on whether we still need places and grounds to anchor us. And if we don't, are we then

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[1] "*Deterritorialisation is absolute when the earth passes into the pure plane of immanence of a Being-thought, of a Nature-thought of infinite diagrammatic movements. Thinking consists in stretching out a plane of immanence that absorbs the earth (or rather 'adsorbs' it). Deterritorialisation of such a plane does not preclude reterritorialisation but posits it as the creation of the future new earth.*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.88)

ready to confront homelessness or, alternatively, to redefine homeliness within mobility and through connectivity?

6.2.2 *Being on the Earth as Being in Place*

"*That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth of this setting back of itself we called the earth. Earth is that which comes forth and shelters. Earth, irreducibly spontaneous, is effortless and untiring. Upon earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. This setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the world. The work moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there. The work lets the earth be an earth*" (Heidegger, 1934, p.45)

For Martin Heidegger the very idea of being in the world, and consequently dwelling in the world, has to do with belonging to the earth, which signifies a strong connection to the ground. In his lecture entitled "*The Origin of the Work of Art*", in 1934, Heidegger conceptualises the earth not as a mass of matter, but instead as the "native ground" on which human dwelling is based. It is upon the earth that the work of art is grounded in the world. If "*in setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth*" "setting up" here is not a mere process of placement. The earth and the world appear reciprocally together through the work of art. The work makes space on the earth, it liberates the space of an open region in order to establish its structure, and by this structure it sets up a world. Through this work the world becomes grounded on the earth and, as a consequence, the earth is projected through the world. Thus the ground on which our dwelling, and through this our being, are founded does not work as a simple platform, but is instead "site-specific" (Rajchman, 1998, p.44) and fixed, inseparable from us. We carry this native ground with us at any time and it constitutes a part of who we really are.

The tension between the earth and the world is very important in this discourse. Aiming at defining human existence in the world, Heidegger introduces the concept of "*the fourfold*" [Geviert]. The fourfold was first developed in "*The Thing*", a lecture given by Heidegger in 1950 and was revisited in 1951 in his conference paper "*Building Dwelling Thinking*". Being-in-the-world as mortals on earth means for Heidegger staying within the "fourfold", that is, between earth and sky, divinities and mortals. The

four elements cannot be considered separately, but constitute a simple oneness[2]: being "on the earth" means being "under the sky", and both of these also mean belonging among humans and staying before the divinities (Heidegger, 1951, p.148). Being within the fourfold practically means staying among the things actively, remaining in peace within them and also "sparing and preserving" them. Human beings dwell in the world by safeguarding the fourfold, and accordingly, this sort of dwelling keeps the fourfold within the things.

Therefore the ground, the earth in its oneness with the sky, the mortals, and the divinities, is for Heidegger fundamental to the human existence. We preserve the earth and at the same time we depend on it. It provides the ground to support us and also the food and water that nourish us. Mortals dwell in the earth by saving rather than spoiling or mastering it, and in that way they preserve themselves. Although for Heidegger the human being is bound to the ground both literally and symbolically, due to the oneness of the fourfold, it is not imprisoned in it. By being on the earth man exists equally under the sky, which opens up multiple possibilities. The sky stands for the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the air and the changing atmosphere. "*Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.148), without interfering in its course. Heidegger juxtaposes the openness of the sky to the solidity of the ground and places man between the two, free to define his existence. Similarly man dwells between the mortals and the divinities, he exists among the existence of other men that help them realise the finitude of his existence, and he awaits "*the divinities as divinities*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.148), ascribing to them anything that they cannot perform due to his mortality. Altogether, human existence is thus placed between materiality and spirituality, between reality and expectation, well-grounded on the earth and nonetheless open to unearthly dimensions. Earth, sky, mortals, and divinities constitute the basic preconditions and a framework for the human existence, and therefore ground human beings in the world. Karsten Harries sees the Heideggerian "earth" as "*material transcendence*": "*even if constituted by our language or concepts and as such*

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[2] "*But 'on the earth' already means 'under the sky'. Both of these also mean 'remaining before the divinities' and include a 'belonging to men's being with one another'. By a primal oneness the four — earth and sky, divinities and mortals — belong together in one*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.147).

appearance, what thus appears is not created by our understanding but given. Inseparable by our experience of things is a sense of this gift, an awareness that our understanding is finite; and that means also that the reach of our words, of all our determinations and calculations, is limited. The rift between thing and word, earth and world, where 'world' means not the totality of facts, but a space of intelligibility, cannot be closed." (Harries, 1998, p.159) This "material transcendence" suggests that the fourfold ensures that the earth-world system exists as a fixed entity, beyond our limited understanding and the way we construe space and perform in it, interestingly, an idea that may not be so different from Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of the earth as "pure immanence" mentioned above.

As long as the earth is not simply a stage where life happens, but an active component of human being, then the "native ground" is charged with meanings and memories, and at the same time it provides the essential material for its extension, building. In his book "*The Dominion of the Dead*" (2003) Robert Pogue Harrison identifies the significance of the human being in the connection to the dead through the regional ground: "*if it is true that we move forward into the future only by retrieving the past, it is because, through the burial, we consign the future of our legacies to this humic element, with its vast, diversely populated underworlds. Thus burial does not mean only the layering of bodies to rest in the ground (…). In a broader sense it means to store, preserve, and put the past on hold.*" (Harrison, 2003, pp.x-xi) The burial is here seen as the preservation of rather than the separation from the dead. Instead of being discarded from human life, the dead "humanise" the ground to form the basis on which worlds and histories are founded. The earth, by absorbing the dead, constitutes simultaneously the receptacle and the content of humanity (Harrison, 2003, p.2), the beginning and the end of human life. Accordingly, a grave does not simply mark the place where the dead lie, but stands equally for the mortality of the living, symbolising the temporality and the finitude of the human being. Following Heidegger's thinking, Harrison here suggests that we inhabit this world by building homes and cities on the ground, because this ground is already pre-inhabited by its predecessors. This enables us to inhabit the earth historically rather than merely "naturally" (Harrison, 2003, p.3). Therefore, architecture "*transforms geological time into human time, which is another way of saying it turns 'matter into meaning'*" (Harrison, 2003, p.3). Thus matter becomes meaning and, reversely, ruins express the decomposition of meaning into

matter, reminding us simultaneously the beginning and the end of human life and the fact that the earthly ground in its heaviness always prevails.

If such is the role of the ground in the human being, then its extension, building, also constitutes a continuation of past and memory, and an important feature of being in the world. In effect, building stands between past and future, memory and experience, both conceptually and materially. Given the metaphorical and literal analogy between ground and foundation, architecture comes to negotiate between gravity and lightness, tradition and innovation. From graves and monuments well-rooted in the earth signifying the confrontation with death, to modern architecture that extends the ground and transforms its heaviness into lightweight constructions that smoothly sit on the ground[3], and to skyscrapers that represent the desire to defy gravity, building becomes an expression of man's complex connection to the ground. From modernity and onwards, different utopic and futuristic visions have called for new spatialities that would oppose the solidity of the earth. An architecture of non-static, infinitely expandable spaces, and spaces that follow movement and action has been a recurrent dream. Furthermore, new technologies and virtual space spur architecture towards the dematerialisation and the open-endedness of physical space. Building attempts either to overcome groundedness or reconstruct the ground in a lighter sense, driven by the desire for material transcendence and freedom. If the aim is to detach from the ground or live a freer existence on it, could we perceive the ground as a surface that supports us without limiting us?

A ground reduced into a thin surface would not be able to bury past worlds and their dead within it. It would provide a space emptied of memories and meanings and any building on it would constitute a new beginning that takes place. This is the world of Second Life, a digitally constructed and thus artificial world that draws references – but not restrictions – from the physical environment. Due to its structure as a complex

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[3] John Rajchman discusses the dismissal of the natural ground in Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino: "*the house is thus freed from the earth of historical tradition to move in an extendable boundless space, acquiring a Mondrian-like autonomy, where a ground is only a vestige... In this revolution, houses will be put in pilotis barely touching the ground, roofs flattened, and everything turned into intersecting horizontal and vertical planes and monochromatic stucco surfaces.*" (Rajchman, 1998, p.79)

combination of pixel-like islands floating in the digital ocean, the world is infinitely expandable so that when more land is needed, new islands are created, while regions that are no longer in use disappear from the map. Memories and meanings are only contained within computer codes rather than within the ground. Unlike the Heideggerian earth, in the world of Second Life islands appear and disappear due to demand and any sort of construction can be placed on them, as long as the user-resident has the skills to design or the money to purchase it. Furthermore, an avatar does not poetically exist between the earth and the sky. If the earth is flattened into a surface, then the sky is also simplified into the background of an avatar's figure. The sun, the moon, the day, the night, and the changing atmosphere are only background selections in the Second Life viewer. But more importantly, thinning the ground into an abstraction is a movement away from death too. If for Heidegger the fourfold represents the human mortality, temporality, and finitude, avatars do not need that. Since the digital representations do not die and their constructions are not ruined or demolished but deleted, there is no need for them to stand on a ground that has a thickness, as there is nothing to be contained in it. Clearly the construction of virtual worlds symbolises the desire to live a freer and lighter existence, and escape from the "*tyranny of place*" (Harries, 1998, p.168) as well, but as mortals, are we truly ready to disengage from the earthly ground and inhabit these spaces? And since Second Life is a user-created environment, what of our desires does its construction denote?

6.2.3 *Dreaming Home: from Heidegger to Bachelard*

Concluding *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger presents the Black Forest Farmhouse as an example of genuine dwelling. The attachment to the ground as homeliness is represented by this structure of a past era that exists within and sustains the fourfold at the same time.

"*Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the*

dead"—for that is what they call a coffin there: the Totenbaum—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwellling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse." (Heidegger, 1951, p.158)

The farmhouse represents for Heidegger the authentic being-in-the-world as it gathers under its roof all different needs, activities, and generations. It allows the earth and the sky, the mortals and the divinities to define its functions and coexist in harmony as a dynamic whole. And reversely, through the self-sufficiency and the economy of this building, the fourfold is accomplished. The farmhouse example may seem far removed from the contemporary world – and it was already outdated when it was presented in Post-war Germany – but it designates Heidegger's ideas on genuine dwelling. Heidegger argues that "*not every building is a dwelling*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.143), distinguishing dwelling from merely finding shelter in a structure. To dwell means to remain in close connection with the earth and situated on it. Thus the earth becomes the point of departure and the common place for everybody. To Heidegger, the house emerges from the ground and becomes a physical manifestation of all the different activities that occur within it, and hence it constitutes place. Therefore dwelling signifies remaining, staying in place.

Heidegger resorts to Old English and High German to explain how dwelling and building are related. According to this, "to build" is said to be "to dwell", and in turn, "to dwell" traces its origin on the verb "to be". Therefore "*the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.145). Then dwelling becomes the basic characteristic of human being. Heidegger insists that it is not buildings that invite us to dwell, but instead, "*we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers*" (Heidegger, 1951, p.146). If building is dwelling and dwelling is being on the earth, then building as dwelling means both cultivating the earth and constructing on it. And if being on the earth means staying within the fourfold, then dwelling as being means sparing and preserving, remaining at peace on the earth and safeguarding it. Then the connection to the ground as emplacement and as authentic being-in-the-world is fundamental to Heidegger. The earth becomes the home of people and a presupposition for genuine dwelling. The ideal home is here well-anchored on the ground, specific and unmovable, mediating between the earth and the sky, first ensuring a sense of belonging and then

opening up to spirituality. The ground is significant in its pragmatic sense; through its physicality it provides the foundation of human being, and determines the conditions of human life. It situates humans in its materiality and it creates this sort of place that constitutes a centre of meaning and grants people a sense of attachment and rootedness.

Juxtaposed to the stable ground of Heidegger's Black Forest Farmhouse, Gaston Bachelard approaches authentic dwelling in an "oneiric house", a house between dreams and memory, reality and imagination. Bachelard traces emplacement and the conceptualisation of the "ideal home" to the poetic image within the human psyche. What is important here is not how homeliness is contained within the human being, but instead, its projections on the soul and consequently on the self. The soul is considered as a placial receptacle of poetic images (Casey, 1998, p.289). Imagination thus plays an important role to human nature, as it separates us from the past and from reality: "*to the function of reality, wise in experience of the past, as it is defined by traditional psychology, should be added a function of unreality, which is equally positive... Any weakness in the function of unreality, will hamper the productive psyche. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee.*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.xxxiv) The function of the real and the function of the unreal collaborating augment and complete the actual experience. Bachelard names his method topoanalysis, "*the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.8), through which he attempts to locate and identify memories and poetic imageries. He argues that in the past constituted by memories, the localisation of memories in space is more important than time, as time can be absorbed in imaginary spatiality.

According to Bachelard, the memories of the house that we were born primarily, together with the memories of other houses that we have lived in, constitute a mental background imagery that will always be projected in the future, to outline the idea of our dream house. "*Over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits... The house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme*" (Bachelard, 1958, pp.14-5). We inhabit this house in our memories and we enhance it with dream values. The oneiric house becomes a concentration of thoughts, memories, and dreams, and this psychic imagery determines the modes of our habitation in real life. And there is always one for

everyone, hidden behind the real past. To Bachelard this dream house has an intense verticality, a cellar and an attic, to give space to the different aspects of the imagination. The cellar, dug deep into the earth, "*the dark entity of the house*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.18) represents the place of the unconscious and the irrationality of the human being and everything that needs to be concealed in the human soul. Oppositely, the attic is the place of the intellect, where "*the fears are easily 'rationalised'*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.19), seen under the light of the day and confronted. The up-down opposition in the oneiric house mediates between the verticality of the human being and the earth-sky dimension. Thus this dream house becomes the "*first universe*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.4), framing the way people conceive the world.

In Bachelard's thinking, imaginary place may be conceptual and immaterial, but it is also highly structured instead of abstract: "*imaginary space, far from being arbitrary or chaotic, is consistent, specific, and finely wrought*" (Casey, 1998, p.292). Topoanalysis suggests a well articulated material imagination that enables anything substantial – in reality or in virtuality – to come forth: "*the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to its shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.*" (Bachelard, 1958, p.5) Then while Heidegger sees the world as the place where mortals dwell, Bachelard resorts to virtuality and imagination. Here the poetic image and the memory situated in the psyche come to represent the world, therefore the authentic place itself rests first and foremost inside the human soul. These psychic images, function as places that determine everyday experience and being-in-the-world. The juxtaposition of Bachelard's oneiric home to Heidegger's genuine dwelling is here to point out that virtuality and imagination – that may equally derive from pragmatic spaces of the past or from fantastic ones – can shape the concept of a place and a home, similarly to materiality and groundedness. Homeliness and placeness can be found in nonsensible items too, due to the ability of the human soul to "store" and "retrieve" such spatialities. Ages before the conception of cyberspace and the emergence of Virtual Reality that initiated the attachment to virtual environments, Bachelard suggests that nonphysical and conceptual space can still count as place (Casey, 1998, p.288), as long as it contains a powerful phantasmatic/virtual background. Then the reason why we are attached to the ground may not be its heaviness and the physical law of gravity itself, but instead some sort of an immaterial support in the form of emotional connections, memories and poetic images.

6.3 Defying Gravity: the Liberation of the Earthly Burdens

"Whoever one day teaches humans to fly, will have shifted all boundary stones; for him all boundary stones themselves will fly into the air, he will christen the earth anew – as 'the light one'." (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 154)

To Zarathustra, the human being is a "*heavy burden to himself*" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 154) as long as the earth anchors him. Earth and life seem so heavy to him because he cannot fly. Only when he learns to fly he will be able to rename the earth as "the light one". Until then everything, truth and meanings, the "*ground and background of all things*" remain hidden and buried. In Nietzsche's thinking, gravity suppresses things and is a burden that needs to be overcome. Flying does not merely defeat gravity, but it renders the earth and one's own existence weightless. The desire to detach from the earth and become weightless signifies the need to reject the earth-sky and up-down divisions and re-invent a freer space. In *Constructions*, John Rajchman (1998) argues that it is only when the earth is not considered as ground that it might be called "light" (Rajchman, 1998, p.46). Lightness may be achieved by escaping the traditional notion that the earth is the "original ground", the centre, and the fixed entity around which everything revolves: "*for the earth cannot be delimited by boundary stones (Grenzsteine); it may even be said to be unlimited, uncentered, formless*" (Rajchman, 1998, p.47). Then the earth becomes a place of deterritorialization instead of fixity and movement instead of stability. And if, as Zarathustra claims, "*the path to eternity is crooked*" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 125) then human beings should learn from start how to re-orientate themselves in it. The earth that Zarathustra describes is not the place of dwelling that Heidegger or even Bachelard had conceptualised. If all the "*boundary stones*" are removed so that the earth can become "the light one", then dwelling cannot be anchored in it. In this freer sort of space, living should be considered within the context of mobility and rootlessness, even if at the same time this means a certain homelessness.

Flying signifies the liberation from all earthly matters both literally and metaphorically. To be lifted up is to be set at a distance from any involvement with the things and everyday burdens. One is transformed into a spectator put in a god-like position. "*An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur...*

It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes." (De Certeau, 1984, p.92) From above, the world becomes visible and comprehensible in its complexity. Man has been always trying to build high structures and create flying machines to be lifted off the ground. The desire to defy gravity and navigate freely in the air stands as a metaphor for the dissociation of things and the ground as home, as past, and as memory. Rajchman argues that "*'ungrounded' acquires the sense of 'off-the ground', freed from the 'weight' of tradition, artificial rather that natural, abstract rather than figurative – abstract in a new canonical sense of reduction to a pure universal language, reproducible anywhere, irrespective of the natural site*" (Rajchman, 1998, p.78). Up in the air the "native ground" loses its meaning and one is free to start anew, to construct his own grounds and to build his own connections.

The electronic age may have not (yet) managed to set man free in the sky, but it has created immaterialities and transparent connections to set him free on the earth. Electronic interconnections and virtual places have reduced our dependence on bodily presence and materiality. Physical spaces function in collaboration with virtual spaces and action-at-a-distance supplements face-to-face contact, so that space becomes more flexible and fluid whereas our connection to the ground becomes weaker. If we "*live more lightly on the earth*" (Winner, 2001, p.3) due to new technologies, lightness is here achieved by the superimposition of – weightless- communication layers into existing social and material patterns and their interaction. But if cyberspace, as a platform where everything and everybody is floating, renders our existence in the world lighter, opening up fields of dematerialisation and deterritorialisation, it may also help us reconfigure the way we conceive the earthly ground and attach to it.

In Second Life, similarly to the real world, up and down have a meaning and objects fall under gravity; however Residents are also allowed to ignore these constraints and explore new freedoms. Apart from teleportation which constitutes the basic form of transportation between regions in Second Life, avatars can also walk, run, and fly. In effect flying is a very popular practice that enables avatars to navigate within regions and between neighbouring locations. To explore further their flying experience, Residents have also developed wings and flying vehicles and have been organising

events such as hot-air balloon races, aerobatic performances, and skydiving[4] (fig.4-6). When in "flight mode" (which can be selected by clicking on an icon on the user's display), the avatar is beautifully animated to float freely in the air, to swirl according to the user's directions, and to smoothly rise higher without effort. By controlling the viewing perspectives while on the air, the world can easily turn from a three-dimensional to a vertical projection, similar to a Google Map (http://maps.google.com) or to its equivalent Second Life Url (http://slurl.com), available for exploration (fig.7) [although here, the map and the world are the same thing, only seen from a different viewing point]. And when escaping flight mode, the avatar falls naturally on the ground, with an acceleration of gravity set at 9.81 m/sec^2 (the same as the conventional standard value for the Earth), so as to give out a real-world-like impression of fall. Then the avatar drops down on the surface, stays still lying down for a moment, and then gets back on his/her feet. Through programming players/users create their own personal animations to intensify this experience.

Flying in Second Life does not simply liberate avatars from their weighty existence in the virtual world. Instead this function aims at indulging the user behind the avatar in a purportedly liberating immersive experience. The aesthetics of exhilaration here intensifies bodily experience and grants absolute freedom. Flying fulfils the desire of an existence despite gravity throughout which we may see things from afar – even if in this case "things" are the digital representations that stand for the real ones. And most importantly, a fall here can cause no damage. An avatar can perform a free fall and land on any kind of surface without fear of getting hurt or dying.

Figure 4-5: Skydiving (Au, 2004)

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[4] Skydiving is also a popular activity in Second Life. Residents "*take skydiving classes, join groups for multi-person jumps, compete in contests, purchase upgraded equipment, look at screen shots of jumps, and even buy a jump plane to take up their own groups*" (Ondrejka, 2004b, p.6).

Figure 6: Hot air-balloon flight (Antonopoulou, 2009)

Although flying is a very enjoyable practice, interestingly, it was not highly appreciated by Second Life players at the beginning. In "The making of Second Life" (2008), Au describes how tentatively and slowly, to the developers' surprise, Second Life residents embraced flying in full. Au writes about the avatars' clear intentions to remain on the ground and commit to grounded activities, like building homes that are not at all fantastic or utopic, but instead extremely realistic: "*given the chance to fly, Residents instead built homes that assumed gravity*" (Au, 2008, p.57), and he asks: "*why the fear of flying? Many have speculated that the sensation of self-propelled flying is too jarring for extended periods, and that people's visceral empathy with their avatars means they need to maintain a visual reference of themselves on the ground in order to feel comfortable.*" (Au, 2008, p.57). Then, although a universal dream, flying was not immediately appropriated by individuals, even in the digital realm. The disengagement from our weighty existence may not be as simple as it seems.
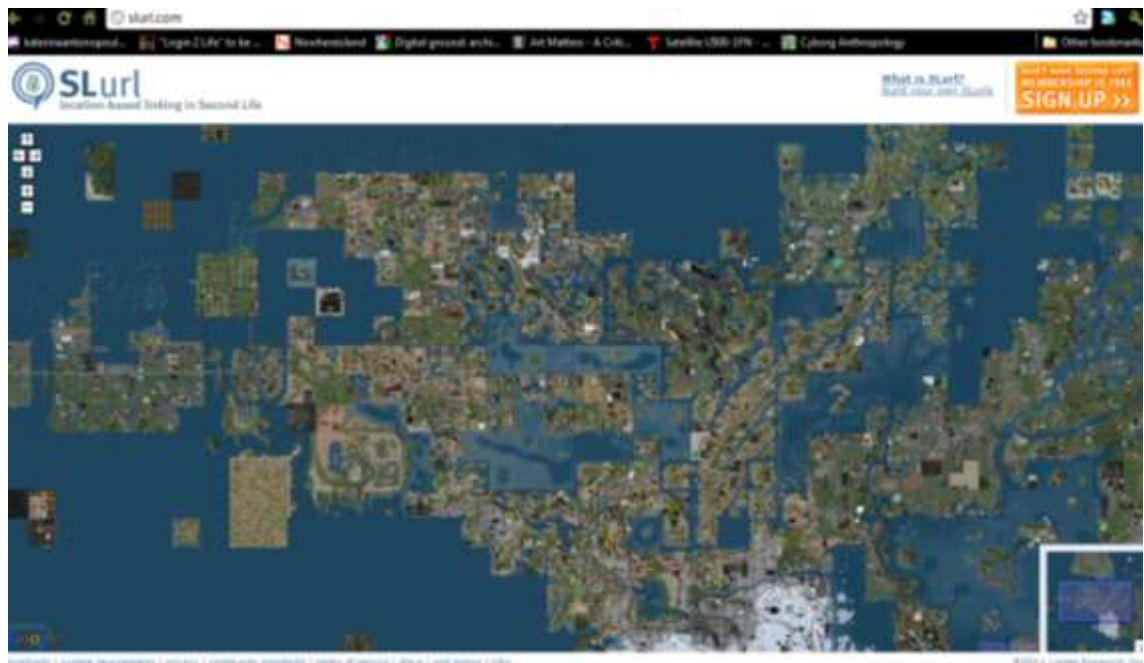
 Figure 7: Second Life Url (http://slurl.com)

Moreover, in Second Life not only avatars can defy gravity, but buildings can, too. As described in chapter 5, the digital sky gives space to very popular constructions called skyboxes. A skybox is a construction in Second Life that floats in the air, set in specific coordinates. Skyboxes are placed above 500m from the ground and below

4,096m, which is the maximum building height in Second Life due to technical restrictions, and they are fixed in place, although they can be relocated anywhere at any time – as long as the land owner underneath permits it. Skyboxes range from simple floating platforms and cubic enclosed spaces to extensive housing structures or even large retail centres. Users are free to design their own skyboxes or buy "prefabricated" ones from the marketplace. In effect the digital marketplace offers a great variety of structures for different needs and desires. Simple box-like or spherical structures that simulate heavenly landscapes in the interior (fig. 8) and grass-covered "sky platforms" (fig. 9), modern designed "mansions" (fig. 10) and spacecraft-like constructions (fig.11), offer all kinds of alternatives.

Figure 8: "WL Skybox sphere" (Second Life Marketplace-a)

Figure 9: "Sky Platform" (Second Life Marketplaces-a)

Figure 10: "Sky Mansion" (Second Life Marketplace-a)

Figure 11: "StarFleet drydock" (Second Life Marketplace-a)

Let us here study closer a special category of skyboxes, the "floating islands". A floating island is a piece of land designed to function as a skybox in the virtual

atmosphere. It may be used as a plain platform or as a foundation on which one can build a sky house. "Sky land" featured here (fig. 12), resembles a piece of roughly excavated ground, though flattened on top and covered with grass, ready to use/build. The potential buyer can also buy a castle of suitable size by the same designer to place on top (fig. 13), or may design another building of his liking, or even use the land as it is. Certainly an elevated platform is of different significance to a floating piece of land. A sky platform functions as a lightweight stage that may give space to isolation up in the open sky. Similarly a floating house may stand for the futuristic desire to inhabit space and build houses completely detached from the earth. Both examples suggest experimentation in terms of lightness, and an attempt to disconnect from the ground and resort to finer means of support. But if flying in the sky fulfils our desire for freedom from the earthly matters, then should we carry a piece of land with us? Do we really want, and most importantly, are we able to disengage from the ground? And is it the ground in its materiality or in its conceptualisation that we cannot let go (fig. 14)?

Figure 12: "Sky Land" (Second Life Marketplace-b)

Figure 13: "Sky Land Castle" (Second Life Marketplace-b)

Figure 14: The Little Prince (Saint-Exupéry, 1943)

6.4 The Real in Virtual Land: the Second Life virtual property case study

Buying and selling virtual land has always been an attraction and a very popular practice in Second Life world. Individuals and companies have invested real-world money to acquire virtual land and be able to use it as they want. They design and build, they create businesses, they hold meetings, they throw parties, they interact and they

communicate with other people through their avatars. The digital environment offers the platform in which they are able to express themselves and establish connections not only with each other, but also, interestingly, with the environment itself. But does this environment really exist? Is virtual property and hence virtual reality merely an individual fantasy, a construct and a dream or is it a shared fantasy transforming into a social reality? And can this social reality replace our attachment to physical land?

On the 15th of April 2010, four Second Life residents and property owners filed a class-action suit against Linden Lab, the company operating Second Life. They claimed that the company is misleading players into thinking they actually own their virtual lands. Although acknowledging the fact that in virtual worlds there are no courts, halls of Congress or visible mechanisms for civic governance, the Plaintiffs argue that since there is a large flow of real money by real people, real world legal consequences should follow as well. In other words, they suggest applying real world laws into a virtual world.

When Second Life was first launched, following the norms of its contemporary virtual worlds, the participant's intellectual property rights to their creations or possessions in the world were not recognised. Linden Lab soon decided to differentiate by preserving and recognising the residents' ownership rights to all virtual items, land and goods. The idea was not only to maximise the company's profits, but also to create a world that would function similarly to the real world and would establish strong economic and legal connections to it as well (Ondrejka, 2004b, p.1). The company aimed at improving and increasing the user-created content in Second Life, along with the users' engagement in it. The revised Terms of Use for the Second Life world allowed subscribers to retain full intellectual property protection. According to the class action suit, at that point, Philip Rosendale, one of the creators of Second Life had stated: "*what you have in Second Life is real and it is yours, it doesn't belong to us. We have no claim to it. Whatever you do in Second Life is your own intellectual property. You can claim copyright on it. You can make money.*" (Carter et al. 2010, par.83) The representations of land were declared as identical to land in order to set the basis for the construction of a real economy in-world: "*land is yours to own and resell... Let's just make this a real world, let's let it have a real economy and let's make property have real value*" (Carter et al., 2010). This decision enabled the development of a wide variety of businesses within Second Life, with clothing and avatar stores being among the first.

The transition to the land model gave the opportunity to entrepreneurs to create large retail centres that would simulate the real world shopping experience. Franchising, shopping malls at different locations, advertising, and branding were also developed due to the ability to possess as much land as one wants (Ondrejka, 2004b, p.5). Skilled designers were also encouraged by this system to invest time and ideas in virtual creations. The possibility of generating an income inworld, especially by doing something enjoyable, transformed Second Life from a playful social network to a real – albeit representational – world.

In the meanwhile, the Second Life world has also established its own currency, Linden™ Dollar. Linden Dollars can be exchanged for U.S. Dollars or other foreign currencies through a number of different websites. Rates fluctuate based on supply and demand, but over the last few years they have remained fairly stable at approximately 250 Linden Dollars (L$) to the US Dollar[5]. Linden Dollars constitute virtual tokens that allow all economic transactions. Second Life residents use them to purchase goods, land and services either from each other or directly from Linden Lab. The cost of land itself is also based on demand and can fluctuate with the market (fig. 15). Land may be purchased[6] directly from Linden Lab, or from private owners, or even by "virtual real estate" agents. Instead of owned, land can also be rented by Residents. Overall, Linden Lab has established an economy based on real-world economy and has managed to attract companies and individuals to invest money in virtual land, each one for their own purposes. Interestingly, financial illegal activities, such as credit card fraud, identity theft and PayPal chargeback, also take place in Second Life to prove the "actuality" of this financial system.

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[6] Any Second Life resident can become a land owner as long as he is a Premium Member (by paying US$9.95/month). Apart from the cost of land, land owners that possess parcels that are larger than 512 square meters are required to pay a sort of "tax" as a monthly charge, called the Land Use Fee (also known as a Tier Fee).
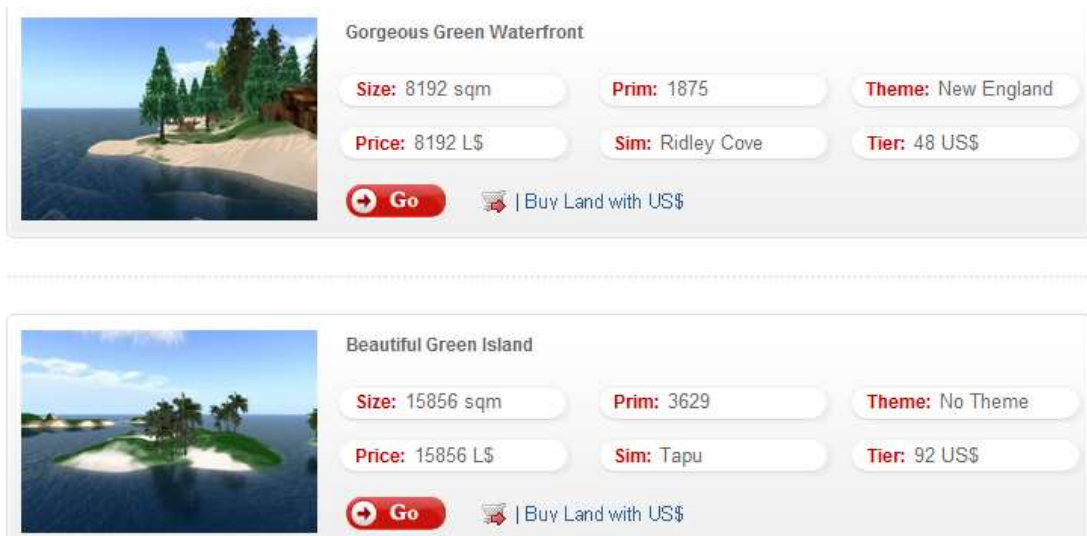
Figure 15: Virtual land on sale (AnsheX)

The Second Life world was thus shaped, mostly by its users, according to such terms and conditions. Linden Lab clearly stated that "*Second Life is an online, 3D virtual world, imagined, created and owned by its residents*" where "*everything is owned, controlled and built by the people who are there*" (Carter et al. 2010, par. 87). However, at an unknown date according to the Plaintiffs, Linden Lab decided to change the Terms of Use at the expense of its residents. Without any notice, Linden Lab removed any reference to ownership throughout its website. "Why would I want to own land?" became "Why would I want to have land?" and no compensation to the players was considered on behalf of the company. As clearly stated in the new Terms of Use "*Linden Lab owns the bits and bytes of electronic data stored on its Servers*" (Second Life Terms of Service, par. 4.5), so that "*Virtual Land is the graphical representation of three-dimensional virtual world space. When you acquire Virtual Land, you obtain a limited license to access and use certain features of the Service associated with Virtual Land stored on our Servers.*" (Second Life Terms of Service, paragraph 6) As a limited license right, Virtual Land does no longer constitute a real property right or actual real estate, and it is not redeemable for any sum of money from Linden Lab. To avoid misunderstandings, the company also defines the terms "buy" and "sell" in the Second Life world, in order to dissociate them from their real world definitions. Thus "buy" and "sell" here refer to the transfer of the Virtual Land License[7] and the same applies to the

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[7] "*Second Life offers a Linden dollar exchange, called the LindeX exchange, for the trading of Linden dollars, which uses the terms 'Buy' and 'Sell' to indicate the transfer of Linden Dollar Licenses.*"

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exchange of Linden Dollar Licenses as well. Only the intellectual property rights concerning the digital creations in Second Life are still here fully granted to the players.

Based on these changes, the Plaintiffs accuse Linden for preventing access to all of their belongings in Second Life, items, land, and goods, to which they had [representational] rights, titles, and interests, without any intention to compensate them: "*Defendant Linden 'froze' Plaintiffs' accounts preventing them from accessing the account to use, cancel or modify it or enjoy or use the virtual items, land or real world money contained therein*" (Carter et al. 2010, par. 129). They argue that, even after the revised Terms of Use for the virtual world, Linden Lab keeps deceiving users into thinking that they will own the land they purchase within the world. They describe Second Life as an environment modelled after a "*real world dictatorship that causes investors to build an infrastructure in the country claiming there are 'ownership' rights where the true but secret intent is actually to nationalize the assets and infrastructure built by the 'investors' or in actuality unsuspecting consumers*" (Carter et al. 2010, par. 148). Having invested time and money to their – until recently – virtual possessions, they suggest that since their property was purchased and designed as equal to real world property, it should be treated and protected as such. For these reason the four Plaintiffs are taking Linden Lab to court and demand at least five million dollars for compensation.

Second Life Residents were promised a land of absolute freedom – freedom according to the conventional or maybe American standards – but, instead, they feel deceived, oppressed and censored. Within this utopian-virtual environment they resort to real-world legislation to claim their rights. Virtual Land, on the other hand, is here presented by Linden Lab as a product of the imagination and a fictional value, the three-

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Also: "*Regardless of terminology used, you acknowledge that as used in this Agreement and throughout the Service in the context of Linden dollar transfers: (a) the term "Sell" means "to transfer for consideration to another user their Linden dollars in accordance with the Terms of Service," (b) the term "Buy" or "Purchase" means "to receive for consideration from another user their Linden dollars in accordance with the Terms of Service," (c) the terms "Buyer," "Seller," "Sale" and "Purchaser" and similar terms have corresponding meanings to their root terms, (d) "Sell Order" and similar terms mean a request from a user to Linden Lab to list Linden dollars for Sale on the LindeX exchange at a requested Sale price, and (e) "Buy Order" and similar terms mean a request from a user for Linden Lab to match open Sale listings with a requested Purchase price and facilitate completion of the Sale of Linden dollars.*" (Terms of Use, paragraph 5.2)

dimensional representation of which we may see and "experience" only online. Although a participant may invest money on digital property, invite people to this land, hold meetings in it, exchange information and communicate with others, this is supposed to only exist in Linden Lab's code. Everybody's accounts and digital "valuables" constitute electromagnetic records stored in the company's servers. And of course, these "bits and bytes" belong to the company. What is Second Life then? Is it a living and evolving social world or plain data in a private company's server? If virtual land exists only in the imagination and virtual worlds constitute a shared fantasy, then why do people become so attached to it? Is it the physicality and the materiality of the ground or its phantasmatic frame and its reference to utopic discourse that makes it significant to people?

6.5 Money as the Real in Virtual Worlds

As described above, in Second Life Residents and groups of Residents that purchase large areas of land (or simply their representations according to the new terms of use) are allowed to establish their own zoning rules and to develop their environment accordingly. Interestingly, most video games and virtual reality games based on imaginary worlds have to do with conquering land and fighting over territories. Although in Second Life there are no winners or losers, and the world is more about a digital social environment rather than a gaming platform, inequalities clearly exist: people that possess large regions of land are indeed more powerful than others. Then exactly as in physical land, virtual land also becomes a repository of value and power. Although the term "virtual real estate" may suggest a contradiction in terms, the tangibility of land is of minor importance here. In his article "On Money and Magic" (2010), Edward Castronova suggests that the more virtual and real economies overlap, the less important the immateriality of virtual value becomes. Castronova argues that an individual fantasy may be a madness, a construct and a dream, but when more people share the same fantasy, and most importantly when they become aware that others share the same fantasy (and when "*these fantasists then become aware that everyone has become aware that everyone has become aware that….*" – p.4), then this fantasy is actually worth something and people allow it to be real-actual. The transition from an individual fantasy to social reality would be better explained through "magic", rather

than by pure reason, according to Castronova: "*Magic is an identifiable sociological process by which individual fantasies become social reality*" (Castronova, 2010, p.4). But this magical space is also a shared pragmatic space.

Even as a visual representation that exists only in the imagination, Virtual Land is purchased with real money and shared by real people. Within this platform of interaction, communication, and information, multiple financial transactions also take place, to supplement virtuality with actuality and produce a complex social reality. In "*Space and place: the perspective of experience*" (1977), Tuan argues that although a conceptual schema, mythical space always contains a pragmatic component in the sense that there are always realistic activities contained in it, so that "*a difference between the mythical and the pragmatic space is that the latter is defined by a more limited set of economic activities*" (Tuan, 1977, p.17), therefore, if we are to make "*this a real world*" (Carter et al. 2010, par.48) as the Second Life creators had declared, it is monetary exchange that marks this passage from the individual fantasy to the social reality, and finally defines what is then perceived as real.

Then, either in real or in virtual world, the capital appears among the few "real things" in life, able to determine spatial and social relationships. If places become materialised and fixed as "*permanences within the flux and flow of capital circulation*" (Harvey, 1996, p.261), the virtual land case study suggests that money can equally create digital permanences, and thus virtual places. Plaintiffs have spent time, and most importantly for them, money, in creating their personal space in Second Life and thus consider Virtual Land as land, ground, that is, a place for interaction and communication that satisfies their need for fixity and security, even if it exists only as a "representation". Interestingly, money, a virtual entity par excellence, becomes the common place and the "real" between virtual reality and the physical world, and a place-determinant at the same time. In their complaint, the Plaintiffs insist that although in Second Life there are no courts or other mechanisms of civic governance, since real corporate companies are involved and large amounts of real money are exchanged, real-world legal consequences should follow (Carter et al. 2010, par. 28). In several points in the Complaint, Second Life is compared to Disney World: an enclosed private fictional world where real monetary transactions take place and real world legislation applies. Then real world money and real world laws seem enough to transform a shared fantasy into a social reality and a representational space to a significant place. At a different

fictional place, in Thomas More's *Utopia*, described by Louis Marin in "*Utopics: Spatial Play*" (1984), the marketplace becomes the "place of places" within the space of the fictional city: "*the central marketplace of the district, in short, inscribes money into the referred space of discourse. Money is the present and irrepresentable 'place', the topos, the universal and abstract equivalent of all products. It is the figure of an 'abstract reality'.*" (Marin, 1984, p.134) The marketplace becomes the site of inscription and the space where money as the "abstract reality" transforms through material products into place. The investment of money in space creates fixed place, both in the virtual and the real worlds.

"*Invest:*

(1) put (money) into financial schemes, shares, property, or a commercial venture with the expectation of achieving a profit.

- devote (one's time , effort, or energy) to a particular undertaking with the expectation of a worthwhile result

-[no object] (invest in) informal buy (a relatively expensive product) whose usefulness will repay the cost

(2) (invest someone/thing with) provide or endow someone or something with (a particular quality or attribute)

-formally confer a rank or office on (someone)

-(invest something in) confer a right or power on (someone or something)

(3)archaic clothe or cover with a garment

(4)archaic surround (a place) in order to besiege or blockade it

Origin:

mid 16th century (in the senses 'clothe', 'clothe with the insignia of a rank', and 'endow with authority'): from French investir or Latin investire, from in- 'into, upon' + vestire 'clothe' (from vestis 'clothing'). invest (sense (early 17th century) is influenced by Italian investire"

(Oxford Dictionaries)

According to the English Oxford Dictionary, the term *invest* traces its origin from the French *investir* or the Latin *investire*, that contain the term *vestis*, clothing. To invest then means to clothe, to envelop someone with a garment, an attribute or a power, or even with space. The act of investment transforms the "abstract reality" of money, as Marin suggested, to the concrete reality of a scheme, a feature, or a property, and thus to place. Moreover it encloses – and supplements – the body with an actual-real environment that inspires safety and security, and by extension, it attaches value to it. In effect, the avatar may be a product of the imagination at start, but the more effort – money and time – one attaches to it in the form of [virtual] clothes, accessories, land and maybe a home, the more pragmatic this becomes to the user-resident and the more it affects his interactions within the world and maybe his life in general. If building as dwelling constitutes an essential part of human being, as argued by Heidegger, then building in Second Life also aims at appropriating this world and thus dwelling in it. And everything – even clothing – is building here: from the construction of one's avatar, to the selection of his/her outfit, to the design of a house. This building is achieved by the employment of real world money and time that bridge the two worlds. The Virtual Land case illustrates the fact that the transition from fiction to a social reality can be accomplished through the investment of real-world money. Second Life has established strong economic bonds to the real world, giving the opportunity to Residents not only to consume virtual products, but also to own digital property or even generate an income. It is exactly because of these features that Second Life is less considered as an online virtual reality game rather than a digital social environment. The accumulation of value makes virtual land mean something more than merely bits and bytes stored in a private company's servers. Digital ground here, maybe similarly to the physical, gives space to intimacy and homeliness, interaction and communication. Then, are money, bits and bytes in a company's server, and shared fantasies to create our places? What matters here is not what is real and what is unreal, but how, between social reality and science fiction, the boundaries of which we can no longer define, we construct the grounds towards we attach.

Virtual Land then signifies this special place that exists between the real bits and bytes stored in Linden Lab servers and our "real", physical world. For the Plaintiffs it constitutes an artificial piece of land, purchased and ready to be inhabited, while for the Defendants it is simply a representation of the imagination and an image that stands for

a collective fantasy. In recent times, the immersion in virtuality due to new technologies on the one hand, and the "hyperrealism" of images that overwhelm the physical world on the other, attempt to blur/abolish the boundaries between imagination and material reality. In "*Cyborg Manifesto*" (1991), Donna Haraway suggests that the boundary between social reality and science fiction constitutes an illusion. The cyborg is conceived as a creature of social reality and a fictional creature, arguing that fiction and lived experience together form our perception of reality. Similarly, the fantasy of owning and inhabiting virtual land mediates between true life and its simulation, objective reality and its illusory perception. To Elizabeth Grosz in "*Architecture from the outside: essays on virtual and real space*": "*the virtual is not a pure, self-sufficient realm with its own fixed features and characteristics. Rather, it is a relative or differential concept whose status as virtual requires an actual relative to which its virtuality can be marked as such*" (2001, p.76). The virtual needs to be traced in reality and reversely, the real is infused by virtuality.

6.6 Desert Islands: Separating from the World and Beginning Anew

"*But everything that geography has told us about the two kinds of islands, the imagination knew already on its own and in another way. The élan that draws humans toward islands extends the double movement that produces islands in themselves. Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone—or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. Some islands drifted away from the continent, but the island is also that toward which one drifts; other islands originated in the ocean, but the island is also the origin, radical and absolute.*" (Deleuze, 2004, p.10)

This chapter has persisted in the tension between the earth and the sky, both in the Heideggerian sense in which earth and sky hold the world together to define human existence, and in the more liberating representation of them within virtual worlds, however nothing has been mentioned so far about the sea. As previously described, the Second Life world comprises a great number of islands of different sizes, floating in the virtual sea. The largest connected land-masses constitute the "mainland", while many smaller, pixel-like islands are situated around it. One of the reasons why this island-

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model-world was preferred was because the Second Life world was planned to be infinitely expandable, therefore whenever new land is needed, new islands are created, either in extension to existing regions or separately. Similarly to the real world, the sea here creates this "physical boundary" to land, in other words, it designates where this ends, and also isolates the regions from the rest of the world. An avatar that falls into the water does not float and cannot swim, but it does not drown either. Instead, it goes down to the bottom where it can walk, however it is often difficult or even impossible to escape from it without the use of flying mode or teleportation.

Robert Pogue Harrison regards the sea as the opposing order to the earth, the element that represents the hostility to any sort of "groundedness", and *the imaginary agent of ultimate obliteration*" (Harrison, 2003, p.4). The sea appears uninscribable and thus uninhabitable as it is unable to provide foundation and support to humans to build their worlds. If the earthly ground stores and preserves the dead to form a firm basis for the future, the sea oppositely "*receives, hides, and reabsorbs the dead. It is its passion for erasure that makes it inhuman. Erasure does not mean disappearance only; it means that the site of disappearance remains unmarkable.*" (Harrison, 2003, p.12) The inhuman nature of the sea bears no attachment to past and memory, and therefore gives no space to future and inscription. The sea stands for the erasure, the disappearance and the separation. In Thomas More's 1516 book, Utopia is the name of an island that encloses a self-contained community. At the creation of Utopia, its conqueror, Utopus, symbolically cuts the isthmus that connects the formerly named Abraxa to the continent. Only when disconnected and surrounded by the sea, the land can be named anew and stand as independent, in its own reality. Then the sea here, once again, separates and isolates the island of Utopia from the rest of the world and marks its re-birth and the beginning of its history.

In Gilles Deleuze's essay quoted above, the island constitutes a dreaming object for two reasons: first, it represents the separation from the rest of the world, and second, it suggests a new start, a beginning anew. To Deleuze's thinking, were the people who resort to a desert island only driven for this passion for movement, then "*the island would be only the dream of humans, and humans, the pure consciousness of the island*" ((Deleuze, 2004, p.10). However this is not possible. Since humans cannot be reduced to plain movement, carrying in them the world they have left behind and its civilisation, they will only be outsiders to this island, forming a fictional unity with it. For in the

deserted island "*it is not creation but re-creation, not the beginning but a re-beginning that takes place. The deserted island is the origin, but a second origin*" (Deleuze, 2004, p.13). Then the inhabitation of a deserted island is a matter of re-birth and re-production. The elements that have survived from the first origin constitute the essential material for the construction of the new world. Beginning anew means that there exists a precedent for this beginning, something substantial to trigger the re-construction. This might explain how – and why – one resorts to a Second Life island, or to a sky island, or more importantly, to Second Life in the first place: it is the need to separate from their world and begin anew. After all, the desire to acquire virtual land illustrates the fact that the connection and/or the faith to real land is weakened. If "*our rootedness to place has attenuated*" (Turkle, 1997, p.178), since institutions that used to bring people together, such as the main street or the union hall, are no longer in use, at the same time social structures are redeveloped through the screen and along with them virtual social spaces to envelop them. Following Deleuze's thinking, inhabiting virtual worlds is not at all the negation of ground and place, but about the desire for a mediation between groundedness and groundlessness, and rather a re-production of a ground that supports us in new ways.

The fact that in virtual worlds the [immaterial] construction of grounds is of great priority illustrates that the emergence of new technologies might have shifted the notion of "groundedness" from materiality to symbolism, yet it has not undermined its significance. The need for connectedness, attachment, and by extension situatedness and placeness, remains in the digital age, perhaps stronger than ever. It is in effect only in the virtual context of utopia, a no-place par excellence, that the transcendence of groundedness can occur. This transcendence and its importance for the understanding of groundedness is the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter7. Transcending Placeness and Groundedness

7.1 Introduction: on Thomas More's Utopia

"*Howbeit, as they say and as the fashion of the place itself doth partly shew, it was not ever compassed about with the sea. But King Utopus, whose name as a conqueror the island beareth (for before his time it was called Abraxa), which also brought the rude and wild people to that excellent perfection in all good fashions, humanity, and civil gentleness, wherein they now go beyond all the people of the world, even at his first arriving and entering upon the land, forthwith obtaining the victory, caused fifteen miles of space of unplandish ground, where the sea had no passage, to be cut and digged up, and so brought the sea round about the land. He set to this work not only the inhabitants of the island (because they should not think it done in contumely and despite) but also all of his own soldiers. [...] There be in the island fifty-four large and fair cities, or shire towns, agreeing all together in one tongue, in like manners, institutions, and laws. They be all set and situate alike, and in all points fashioned alike, as far forth as the place or plot suffereth.*" (More 1992, p.56)

As described by Thomas More, the name of the land that was later named Utopia was Abraxa and it used to be connected to the continent. After seizing this land, Utopus, in a symbolic gesture separated it from the continent by ordering his army and the existing inhabitants to cut the connection with the mainland and create a new island. This separation from the rest of the world was the beginning of the establishment of a new order: the island was meant to become the land of perfection. According to Louis Marin, this separation symbolises the departure of nature, and the passage from nature to culture, yet because this separation constructs nothing new in reality, the new name of this land stands for this negative action: Utopia, the "no-place" (Marin, 1986, p.106). Utopia, a differently constituted island, introduces for More a new geography and a new history that exist only within his text.

Chapter 6 attempted to approach the ground as place through virtual and physical lands, and through the metaphors of sky islands and desert islands. The focus of this chapter is on a different kind of island that does not attempt to re-present or re-create some sort of place, but instead constitutes a no-place: the island of Utopia. It aims to

explore what is the significance of – virtually – being in a "no-place" and what could be the effects of this placelessness. It examines how needs, hopes, and desires are projected in imagining the future, and how this imagined future constructs a critique of the present. First, through visions of the colonisation of space, it explores the fantasy of detaching from the earthly surface in a pursuit for the perfected, the ideal, and the utopic. It then attempts to approach the notion of utopia as a narrative and as a text, and thus as the absolute no-place that opens up to infinite possibilities and spatial configurations. Louis Marin's reflections on the utopic as a double figure of negation and as such a space for limitless contradiction and critique become central in the discussion. Finally, the chapter questions Virtual Reality as a utopic context and it reflects on the purpose of utopic thinking and the possibility of its realisation.

7.2 Detaching from the Earthly Surface: the NASA Space Settlements

After the first travels in space and the first person to land on the Moon in 1969, the optimism of the time found its expression through the desire to extend the range of humanity beyond the earth's surface. Visionaries and scientists began to imagine the colonisation and the inhabitation of space as an outlet for an overpopulated world. Although some scientists saw the Moon or even Mars as the new grounds for the development of their alternative worlds, NASA conceptualised these new worlds as no ground whatsoever, but instead as large self-sufficient megastructures-cities orbiting the earth. In the 1970 the NASA Ames Research Centre in collaboration with Stanford University and Princeton physicist Gerard O'Neill designed a series of constructions that would hover thousands of miles above the planet – made out of steel and glass that would be mined on the moon – that would continuously spin to create conditions of gravity in their interiors and thus an environment similar to the one on the earth. O'Neill's team did not stop at the engineering details of these spaceships, but they also produced multiple representations that illustrated what life within these colonies would look like – through a series of design contests – that gives us the opportunity to understand how they imagined the "New World" at the time (fig.1-2). Interestingly, these ambitious futuristic structures are presented as rather conventional and unimaginative in the interior, resembling more of suburban environments rather than science-fiction imaginaries: "*These orbital space colonies could be wonderful places to*

live; about the size of a California beach town and endowed with weightless recreation, fantastic views, freedom, elbow-room in spades, and great wealth. In time, we may see hundreds of thousands of orbital space settlements in our solar system alone. Building these settlements will be an evolutionary event in magnitude similar to, if not greater than, ocean-based Life's colonization of land half a billion years ago" (Globus).The New World was not to be discovered, but instead constructed from scratch.
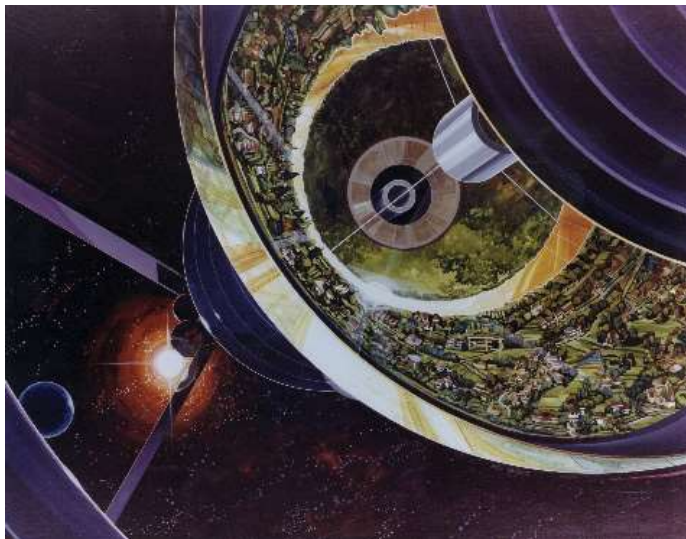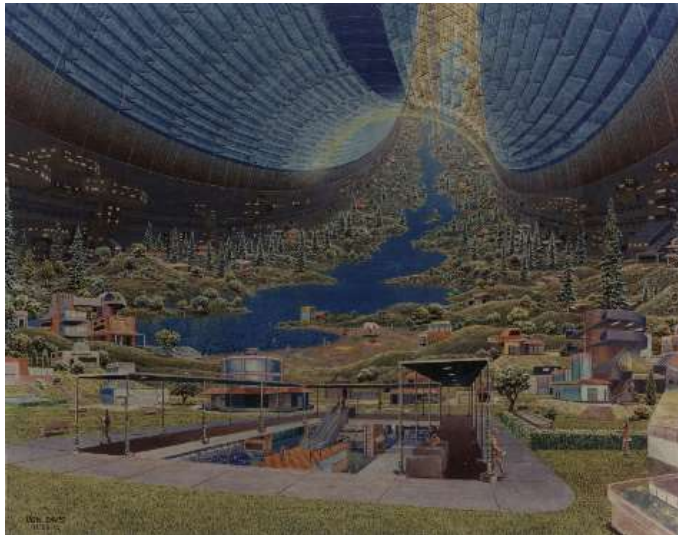
Figures 1-2: NASA Space Settlements (Globus).

According to the *Stanford/NASA Ames space settlement studies "a space settlement is a home in orbit*" (Globus). Its residents would not live on the outside of any planet, but instead on the inside of a massive spacecraft, within an artificial and self-sufficient environment where water, oxygen, and wastes should be constantly recycled. Following NASA's project, colonies in orbit are far superior to the colonisation of the Moon or

other planets. They should be able to provide earth-like – yet artificial – conditions for their residents, such as gravity and atmosphere, they would be only a few hours away from the earth to enable the transportation of goods and people between the two, and they would take full advantage of the solar energy as there is no night when in orbit. Moreover, they would all profit from great views to both the earth and the outer space. More specifically, NASA scientists believed that orbital tourism, the development of solar satellites, and the importation of resources like asteroidal metals to the Earth would be greatly beneficial. But most importantly, the colonies promised to be "*a nice place to live*": "*Since the entire environment is man-made, you can really get what you want. Like lake front property? Make lots of lakes. Like sunsets? Program sunset simulations into weather system every hour. Like to go barefoot? Make the entire environment foot-friendly.*" (Globus) Thus the space settlements would offer the opportunity to create new land in outer space, indulging the users' preferences, and also a backup plan for the humanity, given that the living conditions on the Earth would be deteriorating and the planet would eventually become uninhabitable. Each one of these cities would be able to accommodate up to 10 000 inhabitants and it would be self-sufficient, giving space to housing, agriculture, leisure, cultural and communal activities, and also light industry (Yager et Felchle, chapter 5). NASA's visualisations of the colonies convey an amalgamation of a long gone paradise and a greatly desired suburban life as openness, great vistas, and intense nature prevail (fig.3-5). The artificial landscape encompasses all sorts of geographical clichés: hills and mountains, rivers and lakes, grass covered slopes and wild forests. The housing units, usually small clusters of one or two-level structures, are sparsely scattered around the green fields. In order to avoid density and compression, commercial, productive, service, and other activities are located at – artificially illuminated – multiple levels below the main plain. The residents seem to happily enjoy their lives there: they are shown having barbeques in their terraces or picnics at the "countryside" accompanied by friends and families, in endless spring weather. Altogether NASA promises a place of freedom and wealth, and a new ground that mediates between dreams and functionality, illusion and necessity as defined at that given time.

Figures 3-5: NASA Space Settlements (Globus).

NASA's response to a rapidly deteriorating earthly environment and a world that is becoming more and more difficult to cope with is not to improve this world, but to construct a new one from the beginning. This imagined world may be set at a distance from the Earth and have no physical contact with it, but at the same time it exists in an inescapable attraction to it. From the description of the lost Paradise to Thomas More's Utopia, and then to NASA's space settlements and to Second Life's skyboxes described in chapter 6, man has always been imagining an "other", better, freer life at an extraterrestrial environment. It seems that in the same way that the connection to the ground is associated with memories, history, and tradition, the new, the "other", and consequently the utopic can only be conceptualised by breaking or interrupting the connections with the ground and far away from anything established and appropriated. However, although this might suggest that there is a clear distinction between the condition of "groundedness" and that of "groundlessness" – groundedness being associated with the past and the established while groundlessness with the future and the pursuit of ideal – the NASA space settlements visions and the Second Life examples analysed so far illustrate a much more complex relationship between the two. In effect, it comes out that on the one hand we need to imagine the future in new, different, and ideal means that disengage us from the obstacles of the past, but on the other, the ways that we choose to describe and represent this new "other" appears at a certain degree bound to our present "ground", dreams and desires. Then the conceptualisation of the ideal and the "u-topic" does not have to do with the absolute disconnection from all kinds of attachments, but rather with the mediation between conditions of connectedness and disconnectedness, such as being on and off the ground, and consequently conditions of placeness and placelessness. This makes the utopic a "no-place" that does not function independently of its context, but it is instead intrinsically linked to current perceptions of place and space. The question raised here is what is the

role of this "no-place" and how can this be precisely defined – juxtaposed to the notion of place – within the context of mobility, temporality, and connectivity of recent times?

7.3 The Utopic as a Concept

From Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Plato's *Republic*, to Thomas More's *Utopia* and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, the history of utopic discourses suggests that the aim of utopic thinking is not to outline specific kinds of spaces but rather, to approach the "otherness" and an "*elsewhere*" (Coleman, 2005, p.26) that would create criticism of the "here and now". These "elsewheres" – that exist nowhere – describe the conditions that "could have been", or better, that "should have been", always as superior to the "what is" now, drawing their references from the idealised past and the fantasized future. As collages of past and future imaginaries, they aim to work as an informing model for the present and shape it accordingly.

Utopias constitute projections of mentally constructed personal and social ideals assembled to describe a perfected, yet unrealised, world. Promising freedom, free will and infinite joys, these projections represent other, better places intending to replace the ones that we inhabit in the everyday life. Etymologically, utopia, from the Greek "ou+topos" means "no-place" and signifies a place that in effect exists nowhere and therefore transcends anything that is real and established. As such, the utopic is something that remains beyond any geographical and topographical specification and any sort of groundedness whatsoever, and thus a non-topological question. Despite our tendency to transform narratives and descriptions into lived spaces and to imagine these as fixed places and urban forms in order to understand them, perfection and the ideal are non-tangible entities that can only be conceptualised and narrated, while any attempt to bring them down to earth and materialise them would mean their transformation into static social relations and fixed spatial forms that would fail to represent further desires and imaginative free play. Similarly, the utopic cannot be fixed in time, as this free play presupposes social change and thus mobility and as David Harvey argues: "*idealised versions of social processes (…) usually get expressed in purely temporal terms*" (Harvey, 2000, p.174). Thus utopia signifies no-place and no-time; as such, it cannot be tied to the ground or reality. At the same time, utopia as "eu+topos" stands for the happy, the good place and the space of felicity and paradisal goodness. As with the

spatio-temporal dimension, the fortunate place of potential goodness exists nowhere but in the imagination and according to Elizabeth Grosz: "*not the good place is no place, but rather no place is the good place*" (Grosz, 2001, p.135). Most generally, either as a non-place or as a happy place, the utopic represents the "other" to place that has a double function: first, it produces a projection of this unapproachable "elsewhere" and second, it outlines the limits of the human imagination. Made out of "*collages of experience*" and "*bits and pieces of the here and now*" (Jameson, 2005, p.xiii), utopias are complex formations of idealised memories projected into the future and then back into the present that not only make the imaginable clear and infuse with it everyday life, but they also make us realise the "unimaginable" and along with this, how far our imagination goes.

Dreaming a life of personal freedoms that release individuals from all kinds of repression, labour, and anxiety is not only a matter of individuals themselves but also a social and political process. Utopian imagination, either in the form of a new future that ceases to be a pressing concern (Grosz, 2001, p.139), or in the form of a comfortable urban environment that enables the exploration of new ways of life (Harvey, 2000, p.158), is a form of social imagination. The picture of a society in its perfection not only forms a social response to any established order, but it also gives the opportunity to individuals to transcend social reality, envision the potential and possibly attempt to realise it. Hence utopic imagination reveals desires and fantasies against the problems of the present and for a better future. The past and the future are contained in this imagery, only as read through the present and translated via our present experiences and conditions. The question raised here is, if utopic thinking is a social process that reflects the current social conditions, does it have an actual impact on society itself, or does it instead work as a safety valve for the release of the social pressure that only maintains the existing order? In "*Ideology and Utopia*" (1936) Karl Manheim regards social imagination that juxtaposes pictures of a "what could be" in response to the "what it actually is" as utopian only when this attempts to clash with the current order: "*only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time*" (Manheim, 1936, p.173). This means that Utopia is a politically-achieved project that motivates societies to move forward. The revolutionary purpose of Utopia is not simply to construct a dream-image of the future, but most

importantly, to provide criticism for the present and new narratives for appropriation in order to change this present.

7.4 Utopia as a Narrative

Longing for a better place has always been a driving force for humanity. Descriptions of these places, sometimes located elsewhere in space and others elsewhere in time may vary, but at the same time they feature elements that are clearly transferred from the one tradition to the other. In *Works and Days* (estimated at the ninth century before Christ) Hesiod describes the five ages of descending excellence following the creation of the world[1], a story that has been appropriated and transformed by thinkers across the years. The first generation, the "golden race", was a race of outmost superiority that marked the golden age, a period of perfection. They inhabited a nameless and undefined place, free of labour, violence, pain, and agony, where the earth produced goods by itself, evils and the fear of death did not exist (Manuel and Manuel, 1972, p.84). This myth of a happy place located nowhere takes different expressions within ancient Greek literature. In Homer, the Elysium suggests a paradisiacal place that offered retreat to heroes and was located "at the end of the Earth", juxtaposed to the underground Hades where men exist as shades. Plato sees these wish-places as philosophical heavens for the souls where joys are entirely spiritual, while Orphic poets imagine them as places where food and drink are abundant and sexual desires are fulfilled. In Genesis, the description of the Garden of Eden appropriates earlier traditions of the religion of Israel. The Garden of Eden was a world of peace and joy in the beginning of things, from which man was expelled due to his disobedience, maintaining the hope to return to in the afterlife. Placed at different locations across its long history, from the East to a place far from the inhabited world, and to somewhere out of this world, it translates into Paradise through Christian culture, and it becomes interpreted in various ways, for example as an allegory for the womb[2] (Manuel and

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[1] In "*Sketch for a Natural History of Paradise*" (1972, p.84) Manuel and Manuel suggest that there are indications that the myth draws references from earlier descriptions of the East, in Indian lore.

[2] Hippolytous (1928), Vol. II, pp. 22-23.

Manuel, 1972, p.98). Either as Garden of Eden or as Paradise, this dream state offers consolation for the everyday life burdens and promises to believers a world of freedom and justice to come in the afterlife as a reward for their good behaviour in this unfair world. The description of the Paradise is again here accompanied – and completed – with the description of the Hell, so that after the last Judgement Heaven triumphs over Hell, God over Satan, and good over evil. Thus this other promised world becomes a place of freedom of any evil and from labour, where eternal peace reigns and there is "*free will, though no freedom to sin*" (Manuel and Manuel, 1972, p.105). Manuel and Manuel suggest that as we move towards the Middle Ages, the story of the Paradise ceases to function as a mere dream and comes down to earth, to inspire the poor as they fought against the rich for a better life. Medieval maps attempt to include a terrestrial paradise on them or relate it in different ways to Jerusalem. Furthermore, in the same historical period, the search for the Holy Grail refers again to the search for this earthly heaven. And the closer men got to this terrestrial paradise, the more distant this paradise fantasy became:

"*Columbus was manifestly in a state of disarray. He was close by the terrestrial paradise, but he knew, as he wrote to the Spanish sovereigns, that no one might enter it except with the will of God. Frightened by the forbidden paradise and the ultimate secret it held, he fled back to Hispaniola.*" (Manuel and Manuel, 1972, p.119).

The story of the Paradise comes out as an amalgam of traditions from the history of humanity. The idea of a long sought better "elsewhere", either in time or in space, has always been present, initially to compensate for social reality, and later to inform it. The transition from the elsewhere in time to the elsewhere in place is that which marks the passage from Paradise to Utopia. Although the boundaries between Paradise and Utopia are not quite clear, as there are multiple utopic representations that contain paradisiacal references and vice-versa, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) came at a time when plain religious faith became attenuated in favour of a newly conceptualised modern dream world: "*the shift from a heavenly utopia to a worldly one came during that period of change and uneasiness which characterised the decline of the Middle Age*" (Mumford, 1922, p.60). The voyages to the New World and the discoveries of "better places" on the one hand and the emerging idea of establishing a new man-made order within Europe – replicating these places – on the other, made Utopia the "elsewhere" of the modern world. Utopia signifies the creation of a man-made paradise on the earth rather

than a transcendental extra-terrestrial God-made one, suggesting that man is actually capable of creating his own paradise. The relation to time is also novel here. Both the golden age as an elsewhere in time and the paradise as an elsewhere in space are retrospective, whereas utopias stand as retrospective and prospective at the same time, and as such they may draw their references from the past and the present, but they project their imageries to the future.

Then Utopia may hold a strong connection to the past, but it suggests searching rather than remembering the other, good, happy place, and dreaming of it rather than lamenting for its loss. The play with time is very important here. Coleman sees this process as a "*speculative nostalgia*", a forward looking nostalgia, rather than memorising a long gone past, a definition that prima facie suggests a contradiction in terms. In effect, nostalgia, from the Greek words "*nostos*", which means return, and "*algos*", which means pain, is "homesickness", longing for (a) home and a backward speculation. Mere nostalgia had indeed to do with the story of the lost Paradise and the fact that we are cast and hence homeless in this world, constantly striving to regain it. But utopic thinking does something more than that. Although it draws its references from the past, Utopia is also looking for a new home and a new world, focusing on thought and desire and attempting to re-imagine and re-discover, if not re-create a new world. Aiming to replace existing conditions, utopias are as much concerned with the past, as they are with the present and the future. This takes us back to Heidegger's ontology that regards homelessness as a constitutive characteristic of the human being. To Heidegger's thinking, being as dwelling in the world signifies being by default "out of place" and constantly attempting to approach placeness. According to Jeff Malpas, "*we dwell, and yet we do not dwell; we belong to being, and yet are separated from being; we are in place, and yet we find ourselves displaced; we are at home, and yet nevertheless remain homeless*" (Malpas, 2006, p.309). Heidegger's "homecoming" has basically to do with the desire to return to the nearness of being and as such, to the nearness to the things, and finally to the nearness of home. Then nostalgia and the idea of "coming home" do not have to do with a return to past conditions and times, but rather with the return to the authenticity of being, which is a forward looking and endless pursuit. Similarly, utopic thinking constitutes a speculative nostalgia in the sense that it regards backwards to approach authenticity, and forward in order to re-

establish it, however always remaining a projection – and thus a reflection – of the current order and the present.

From the above it is clear that the utopic does not refer to a specific time or a specific place, but is instead a play with time and a play with space. In "*Utopics: Spatial Play*" (1984) Louis Marin considers Thomas More's *Utopia* as a free play of the imagination and a total fiction that does not belong to the spatial or the temporal field, but it constitutes instead the "other" to space, the "ou-topic", as well as the "other" to time, the "*a-temporal*" (Marin, 1984, p.163). As such, it may be expressed and reassembled as an infinite series of social, moral, political, and economic relationships. Marin argues that utopia constitutes a "*text whose reality is nowhere*" (Marin, 1984, p.65), which makes it a presence that is nothing but a representation and a projection to language, and therefore an iconic, a virtual presence. Utopia here is not a "somewhere" – either some place or some time – but a narrative analysis, and as such a conceptual framework that produces spatial configurations, events, and presence. Absolutely limited within the boundaries of a discourse, utopia suggests a double figure, an ambiguous representation, a narrative that stands between positive and negative, past and present, false and true, "*the equivocal image of possible synthesis and productive differentiation. It points to a possible future reconciliation and a present acting contradiction of the concept and of history.*" (Marin, 1984, pp.8-9) Its practice is to break down the imagination in order to produce play. This play constitutes the performative expression of the initial text, therefore it comes out through various different spatial configurations, "*discursive places or topics*" (Marin, 1984:9). For Marin, the utopic cannot be located; it is a space without place where the narrative becomes the representation.

"*Utopia is first and foremost a text, a narrative that frames the description to which it ascribes its conditions of possibility. It is a text that points to a gap or difference that is active within historical and geographic reality: between England and America, the Old and the New Worlds, misery and happiness, political analysis and travel journal. Between history and geography this is an in-between space without place, lacking any geographical-historical coordinates that determine that a place is the trace of a tale, that a tale is first and foremost a scar left on the surface of the earth, an inscription to be added to a narrative.*" (Marin, 1984, p.57)

According to Marin, utopic practice opposes contradictory elements to produce neutrality and create a description that is absolutely separated from things and spaces. The utopic description creates a mental framework that projects things and spaces and creates a representation. This representation does not simply suggest a new or a different world, but instead an "other" world of the – placeless – space that stands between history and geography. In this space it is only language that matters: "*utopic discourse is perhaps this extreme pretension of language to provide a complete portrait of an organised and inhabited space*" (Marin, 1984, p.51). The image of a lived and experienced spatial condition and potentially an iconic presence in the form of a representation is thus entirely produced by language. But what is it that this language constructs and how does it relate to the existing order? Frederic Jameson (1977) regards the Utopic text as a "*determinate type of praxis*" (p.6) and not a mere form of representation in the sense that its purpose is not to reflect a specific "perfected society" or someone's ideals, but rather it challenges the appropriate mental operations that, with the use of the raw material of society itself, produce collective representations that inform ideologies and everyday life experience. The narrative works as a process rather than a fixed thing that takes something real from the outside of the text and attempts to produce an allusion with it through the text. Then utopic thinking may suggest a reality that only belongs to the order of the text, but this reality has been created drawing references to the "exterior", established reality. By defining it as "*a system of narratives referring and reverberating among themselves*" (Marin, 1984, p.39), Marin sets Utopia in a timeless framework. Despite this connection to the current order, utopia does not refer to the "now" in the same way that it does not refer to the "here", but is instead a timeless conception. The timeless present of this description also adds in the timelessness and the eternal presence of this figure. It is this relation with time that differentiates utopia from the myth: a myth has its point of departure a history or a past that transforms into current conditions through a description, whereas utopia is a plain set of interconnected and interreflecting narratives that only refer to themselves. However, although utopia is not a myth, it bears close connection to history as, according to Marin, what More attempts to prove in his book is that history is utopic, composed by narratives that can be assembled in multiple ways.

It is hard to understand how utopic thinking may use the "raw material" of society to create a representation, while at the same time this representation and through this,

places and events are contained within a text whose reality is nowhere, and for this reason Marin insists that utopia is merely and exclusively a book. Utopia "*is a signifier whose signified is not a spatial and temporal ideality or a rational intelligibility. It is a product of its own play within the plural space it constructs.*" (Marin, 1984, p.65) Places, figures, history are all produced by the play that the utopic text has produced. Space itself is inscribed within the text. Within Utopia's textual place, key dissimulations happen: the sign stands for the symbol and the imaginary stands for the reality. And since there is no space between sign and symbol, imagination and reality, there is also no space between the narrative and the representation (Marin, 1984, p.74). Then the question raised here is: how can a text dissimulate historical contradiction and create a figure/projection? And further, how can a figure that is self-produced and self-referential have anything to say about the existing society? Marin describes the role of Fool's Days and carnivals in order to juxtapose them with the way that utopia functions (Marin, 1984, p.78). As seen extensively in chapter 3, according to Mikhail Bakhtin the carnival in the Middle Ages became a play with life and time that subverted anything established for a short period of time. However, according to Marin, such celebrations only provide the society with "safety valves" that release social pressure in a controlled and limited manner so that social cohesion and stability are maintained. As long as rituals – here translated into celebrations that seem to turn the world upside down and threaten the social order – belong into the same framework of the institution that they attempt to battle, they can have no effect other than preserving social repression and maintaining the existing social order[3]. Then any sort of social critique that happens within the cultural, social, and political context that has created it cannot have an impact on this context. On the contrary, utopia performs in a very different way. Within Utopia transgression is established as norm, and this norm becomes the reference of the critique for the real society: "*Utopic transgression is not the same. It is absolute; it is the law as its other. It is the negativity of reality realized, or rather figured and represented, in fiction, the sole means of representing it in discourse.*" (Marin, 1984, p.81) As a figure of the negativity of reality and the laws that hold it, utopia functions as the "other" to the world and is by no means an integral part of this world; therefore it can articulate a critique proper to it.

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[3] "*Every institution is repressive; the mythic ceremony performs its overthrow, but the social community exists only through it.*" (Marin, 1984, p.78)

But how are negativity and "otherness" achieved? As described above, Utopia projects a double figure of affirmation and negation, reality and imagination, true and false, and the space between any of these contradictions cannot be located. It is this double opposition in utopic thinking and consequently their double cancellation that creates a third term, the neutral. Thus the utopic is not the composition of the positive and the negative of a situation, but neither the positive nor the negative, in a complex and dynamic antithesis. It is this double negation that marks the utopic as an infinite fiction and as a future possibility beyond any present conditions. Because of the existence of this neutral as a supplementary term, the utopic narrative produces this powerful – yet placeless – space for limitless contradiction and critique: "*Utopia is space organised as a text and discourse constructed as space.*" (Marin, 1984, p.10) This space takes narrative history and geography to a distance from their spatial and temporal frameworks, so that they can be appropriated by utopic fiction and they can participate in the play. Then Marin defines the neuter as "*intransitive. This means two things. First, it is the expression of pure action. (All infinite verbs are neuter.) Second, it indicates the closure of a subject by his own circularity. He is himself his own object, and his actions are his passions: self-consciousness.*" (Marin 1984, p.12) By having neither a subject nor an object, the neutral is used here to illustrate a self-referential condition that establishes its own framework and acts in full power. It forms a whole that keeps together dynamically opposing tensions. These tensions reflect an eternal conflict, "*a polemical, and symmetric opposition to infinity*" (Marin, 1984, p.18) rather than a mutual annihilation, and a process of a continuous movement and "differentiation" instead of an infinite indifference. Altogether, it is the tensions within this neutral that hold a possibility that goes beyond the limitations of present "reality".

7.5 From the Utopic Context to the Virtual Context

In a later chapter of Utopics: Spatial Play, Marin explains this process of neutralisation by reading Iannis Xenakis' description of the "Vertical Cosmic City" (1972) as a utopic description. The Cosmic City is a city modelled in the form of a text, simply illustrated by a few sketches (fig.6), a description formed not in order to be realised but instead to articulate a critique on the contemporary city and a reflection about its future, and as such a utopic place: "*the utopic City is not an idea to be made*

real or the project of a City. It is the fiction of the conditions of possibility of urban architecture within the domain of the imaginary." (Marin, 1984, p.262) In a similar way that More's Utopia marks the end of feudalism and the beginning of the bourgeoisie and consequently the development of capitalism, Xenakis' city suggests the detachment of the modern city from roundedness and horizontality, celebrating technology, science, and communication. The city is constructed, like all utopias as argued by Marin, by the direct opposition of contradictory elements. The problematic features of the city are analysed and reviewed, and then reversed in order to cause a tension with the initial theses and create contradiction through a process of neutralisation. Hence the negations of neither decentralisation nor concentration, neither the earth nor the skies, construct infinite possibilities.
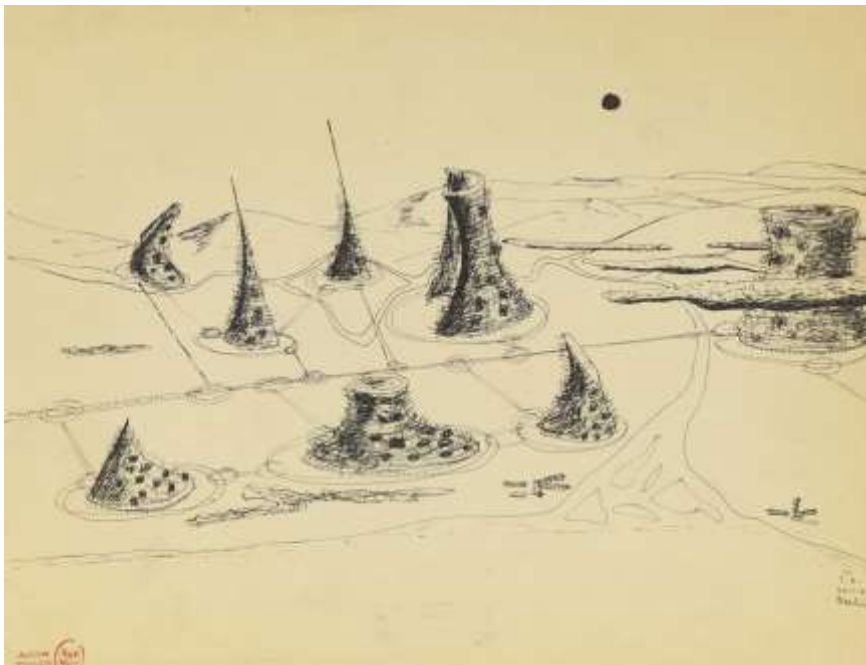

Figure 6: Cosmic City (aerial perspective), by Iannis Xenakis (1963)

The City described by Xenakis suggests neutrality, difference and differentiation. Its most important characteristic is that it is separated from the ground, allowing a greater degree of freedom in its development, and also in respect of the earthly surface and the landscape. If place and ground have been so far intrinsically interwoven concepts, opening up to the fields of topography and geography, the Vertical Cosmic City attempts to break this connection and suggest a third dimension to urban planning and architecture, the vertical. U-topia is here literally understood as "no-place" in the sense that the City separates its spaces from all the existing places – since the idea of place

signifies groundedness. This process indicates for Marin the "*indeterminability of place*" and a place that exists neither here nor there. In this way "*the 'no' of place, it constitutes the refusal of topography and geography. It is the 'no' of space, as well, understood as a connected system of said and described places, flat and extensive.*" (Marin, 1984, p.263) With the introduction of the vertical as the new dimensional feature in the construction of the city, another dimension of reality is also added in it, the "other" to reality that differentiates itself from topography. Furthermore, since the utopic is the space of no place and no time, the Vertical Cosmic City is a city of an absolute presence. To Xenakis' thinking, this presence has to do with the ability to "*view space directly*" (Marin, 1984, p.264) and has a twofold meaning: the city must be in the light as it must be in anyone's vision. This is why all points of view of this city are places in a God-like position, where all spaces are viewed directly and independently from individual positions and personal narratives. The "dominating gaze" does not belong to the organisational system of the city but is instead a transcendental feature that exists above it, it is a process of "objectification" of reality by regarding it from above, reducing it into a flat surface, and projecting it onto a screen, so that the map of the city finally becomes the gaze.

The Vertical Cosmic City then frees itself from the earthly ground – and through that to topography and geography – and opens up, above the clouds, to the spaces of the sky, where it becomes light and view. This earth-sky opposition and the negation of contradictory features in order to achieve dynamic tensions, and through this neutralisation in order to articulate a critique on the contemporary environment, make the parallel study of Xenakis' utopic description and Second Life's utopic visions significant here. As analysed extensively in Chapter 6, the ground in Second Life is reduced into a thin surface that appears and disappears – put differently it is constructed and deconstructed, programmed and deleted – according to demand. Gravity does not function as a burden to avatars and objects, but rather as an option that can be applied or defied, therefore constructions may as well remain horizontal and attached to the ground, or they may explore the vertical dimension and extend up to the skies, or they can completely detach from the ground and be set at the sky as skyboxes do. Further, as with the Cosmic City, in Second Life the gaze is everywhere present by default, for every avatar and every object. Does then Second Life express a digitalised version of the utopia in the twenty-first century, and if it does, is it then a place or a no-place? And

is then Second Life a field for the generation on constructive criticism on the contemporary environment (fig.7)?

Figure 7: Museum of Surrealism (Antonopoulou, 2012)

To Marin's thinking, the indeterminability of place is very important to the utopic fiction. In Xenakis' City geography and topography are refused as the city opens up to the third dimension and thus to the sky. In Second Life any geographical and topographical order is denied not only due to the defeat of the gravity, but most importantly in the sense that the ground appears and disappears following needs, use, and activity. The Second Life world map actively adjusts to such constant changes, but it does much more than that. The map here is not merely the inscription of every potential route and presence in the world viewed from a God-like position, but it is an orthographic projection of the Second Life world itself (fig.8).

Figure 8: The island of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in Second Life (Antonopoulou, 2011)

The map (narrative) becomes the view that becomes the world. Since the entire world here is constituted by a digital representation, the map is not another representation of this representation, but its manifestation. With the starting point of the general picture of the Second Life world, a viewer can zoom the display on an island, and then zoom in further so that he/she can clearly read anything that exists on this island, and following that, he/she can teleport to this island immediately. As in Xenakis' description, "*the gaze is everywhere present, and all points of view are the viewpoint, similar to Leibniz's God*" (Marin, 1984, p.264). This gaze projects a neutralised and objectified reality of this world. Further, if the utopic operation activates a double operation of "derealisation" – by replacing the real with its signs – and "reification" – by replacing signs with the real – (Marin, 1984, p.265) this process is very similar to the Second Life's play of representation: the world is being replaced by the map [derealisation], and at the same time any interference with the map directly alters the world itself [reification]. It is as if, in the real/physical world, the map emerges within the territory itself so that any manipulation upon the map is a manipulation upon the world, which signifies the collapse of the identity of the territory map. And since it is the map that generates the world, the form is – similarly to Xenakis' City – denied in favour of the surface that folds and unfolds to create space: the ground, the landscape, the sea and the sky, buildings and objects, all forms are all made by surfaces. It is this play of the surface that causes the indeterminability of place, heterogeneity, and the interference of spaces and places. Freedom according to Marin is achieved because of this heterogeneity and interference (Marin, 1984, p.267). Mobility and play within the Vertical City introduce absolute mixture of populations, groups, and sociality in an equal environment for all. Nevertheless, although there is this absolute freedom for all in the utopic city, there also exists a place that exercises power: "*the Shell of Light withholds a small fold into which light cannot enter, and instead of the gaze, orders emerge*" (Marin, 1984, p.268). Then freedom, equality, heterogeneity are mastered by this place of power whose purpose is to eliminate privileges, inequality, and any other sort of power within the world, again in a dynamic tension within neutralisation. Does a place like that exist in Second Life? This role would be played here by Linden Lab. Although Second Life is a user created world that enables all sort of social and economic activities to its residents, there is always the company behind every activity and transaction, making sure that no one takes control of the world or part of the world. This place of power cannot be located in Second Life, yet it exists everywhere as it

comprises mostly of coding that ensures limits and determinations in everyone's actions.

It is not simple to argue that cyberspace constitutes either a dream or a real condition, or even a utopic condition in the sense that pragmatic and imaginary elements coexist in a dynamic tension within a process of neutralisation; however the popularisation of the Internet has been often identified with the opening to a freer and more virtuous world, and potentially a utopic world. In the "Internet Imaginaire" Patrice Flichy (2007) sees the beginning of this era with the launch of the *Wired* magazine in January 1993: "*the founders (…) were persuaded that computer technologies were going to trigger a real revolution. Apart from the universal Internet that some were promoting, computing was infiltrating all human activities, professional and personal, intellectual and artistic alike*" (Flichy, 2007, p.99). At the time, the technological revolution promised a critical shift the society from which would develop a new economy, new cultures, and different sorts of political action. The magazine not only illustrated this newly emerging culture, but it also promoted it, and attempted to engage people in it. The 1990s were in effect marked by this shift from the close networks destined for small specialised groups of academic research, like Arpanet, to the infinitely expanding virtual community of the Internet. This "utopian discourse" (Flichy, 2007, p.91) of computer scientists and intellectuals opened up to welcome the masses in a process of appropriation but also customisation and transformation of the network. The important change then was not the fact that the network opened up to the public bringing people together because of their common interests rather than their geographical proximity, but conversely, the fact that in this way the public sphere expanded to include the Internet and people started experimenting with new forms of socialities. The new communicational relations were applied at large scale to first include American society and then progressively the rest of the world, investing in volunteer labour and the need for interaction and connection. Not merely a means of mass communication, but an entire new world was opening up to promise whatever the physical world was missing: freedom, equality, democracy, cooperation. Free from any physical restrictions, the Internet constituted a man-made – or better, a user-created – heaven, an "other" society, that offered to individuals a second chance, the opportunity to start over and the space to redefine the self and its relationships with others.

Figure 9: Museum of Surrealism (Antonopoulou, 2012)

Within this context of regarding cyberspace as a just and free world, virtual reality and Second Life in particular took a double function: on the one hand it attempted to "animate" the Internet by transforming it to a three-dimensional world, and on the other to create an alternative environment to the physical world and a second chance for one's life and body, which does not have to be necessarily better or worse than the "first" one, but it would rather give the opportunity for something "other" and different to develop. Similarly to Marin's description of the utopic operation as a process of derealisation and reification at the same time, Second Life doubles the real body with its sign, the avatar [derealisation], and at the same time it substitutes wireless connections and interactions with virtual spaces where experiences can be shared [reification]. The result is a different, fantastic world that escapes the framework of the physical world to create a different order (fig.9).

In *The Making of Second Life* (2008), Wagner James Au describes the beginning of Second Life as an organic and unformed place, similarly to the myths of the creation of the world from the chaos. According to the book, the creators' first experiment, named at first Linden World, was formed by a complex amalgamation of their fantasies: a paradisiacal place in which players would be able to interact with each other and the environment, a world of absolute realism and spectacular three-dimensional graphics where the users would lie upon the virtual grass and be able to zoom the display upward and see the galaxies, and a post-apocalyptic scene of robot wars which players would be able to control, all these and many more would merge into an incongruous environment. Andrew Meadows, Philip Rosedale, and Cory Ondrejka had obviously very different visions on how to change the world, and their first attempt to create this

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"other" world come across as a weird combination of all these ideas in an absurd environment. Au describes this world as "*the Book of Genesis turned into an action movie. It wasn't exactly the verdant, untrammelled paradise that Rosedale wanted, but a post-apocalyptic place strewn with half-formed cities and bridges—which really only existed to be blown up by the guns and grenades with which Ondrejka and his team had given their robot avatars.*" (Au, 2008, pp.26-27) Snakelike creatures also roamed the world, aiming to eat as many geometrically shaped birds as possible and multiply in this way. Avatars were armed and able to fly. The three colleagues soon realised that there was nothing truly new in this adventure world game. The advantage of the world that they wanted to create lay in the fact that it would be a continuous single world[4], made by a single network of servers, so that avatars could move from the one region to the other without interruption. Due to the construction of this network, players would be able to interfere with the environment and shape it accordingly. Moreover, this world could be infinitely expandable, new regions could be added – as new servers could connect to the network – to accommodate new "residents". This was then the real challenge for the new Linden World: to create an open environment where users could meet and dynamically collaborate in order to shape a world according to their needs, hopes and dreams. They would be able to implement change and see the effects straight away, and also share this with others. This feature was what would make Second Life unique, although, as Au mentions, it was not really carefully planned by the three creators (Au, 2008, p.30). Thus the design of the world fell into the background, to allow space for involvement and interaction. When the world was finally first launched experimentally in March 2002, it must have resembled more like an, unshaped, organic environment. The first resident to log in chose the name "Steller Sunshine" for her avatar. That very first night of the launch, as Au reports, the Linden staff left their workspace to come back the next morning and see the first creation of their first resident:

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[4] Players of other virtual reality games usually do not share the same world but instead play in several copies of this world, inhabited by a maximum of a thousand players, depending on the availability of the servers and also their physical-geographical locations.

"'We came to work', Harper remembers, 'and there on the top of a hill, she had built a cabin with smoke coming out of the chimney, and next to it, a beanstalk that grew right up into the clouds.'

Somehow, overnight, Steller had created not just a thatched roof home, but a narrative, and a game. The object, she announced in a sign she'd left at the beanstalk's base, was to get to the top— not by flying, but by hopping from leaf to leaf. At the top, Steller had created a Cloud 9, her miniature version of heaven for those with the patience and ability to make it there." (Au, 2008, p.32)

As described by Au, this world was about the narrative and the game rather than the design of the world itself. This very first resident's creation made clear that the purpose of this environment was to supply an open field that the users could shape themselves, visualising their individual heavens. The name "Second Life" then came in to give this metaphysical extension to this concept, and also to highlight the central core of this world: the idea that everybody wants a second chance and an opportunity to reshape oneself and their relations with others and also reform the world they inhabit. Au describes this world as a *"'Bebop Reality', riffing off the framework and rules of the existing world to create a new harmony of the strange and fantastic"* (Au, 2008, p.32). Second Life offered the chance to everybody to become an "other" and shape this "other" world accordingly, promised freedom from the earthly ground and sky – and also from geography, topography, proximity, and distance – and invited users to create an new body and either fly away from the digital ground or transform it and build on it (fig.10).

Figure 10: The Labyrinth of Absurdity (Antonopoulou, 2012)

Back to Xenakis' Cosmic City, the city breaks its connections to the earthly ground and extends above the clouds, opening up to the sky and the stars: "*the city has freed itself from the ground and the earth, from the space of topography and geography, all through the raising of the map to the vertical dimension and by a warped shell-like structure*" (Marin, 1984, p.270). According to Marin, once the city becomes "*light and view*" (Marin, 1984, p.270), it also breaks free from the two-dimensional earthly inhabitation. Freedom, indetermination, openness to cosmic space and connections are achieved according to Xenakis – and at the given time – via "*absolute communication*" (Marin, 1984, p.270). Communication makes the city become a pure message and this loosens the ties to the earth in favour of the connection to the universe. As a pure message, lacking a transmitter or a receiver, and without any reference as a utopic operation that acts as an entity and its code, the City becomes according to Marin the medium between the World and the Universe. Then if More's Utopia exists somewhere between the New and the Old World, and Xenakis' Cosmic City somewhere between the Earth and the Cosmos, Second Life World suggests an existence in the space that exists between the physical and the digital, the material and the conceptual, testing within this "elsewhere" how strong our bonds with objects and concepts are.

Figure 11: Region of Utopia (Antonopoulou, 2010)

The parallel study of Xenakis' Cosmic City and the virtual world of Second Life illustrates the fact that utopia as the transcendence of all the problems and the pursuit of the perfected needs a "no-place" and a "no-ground" to develop (fig.11). It is only within this "no-place" that the happy or the good place that exists nowhere but in the imagination may occur. Chapter 6 explored the significance of the ground as place

through connections and attachments to the ground itself and also to the built environment. The theme here is quite the opposite: the "no-place" as the generator of the "new", the "other", the "alternative". Both the NASA Space Settlements example and the development of Second Life designate that it is specifically this groundlessness that makes everything possible. The suspension of the ground gives individuals the chance to re-evaluate and then redefine gravity, materiality, context, and also connections and attachments. At the same time this "no-place" is intrinsically connected to the "first" place. Then this is what utopia is about: the suspension of individuals, objects, and environments, and their reconfiguration following hopes, wishes, and desires. Following Marin's thinking, although this no-place may refer to nothing but itself, it does not come from nowhere, but instead it is created by the raw material of the existing world and its negatives. Thus it is not merely groundlessness and placelessness that trigger the utopic, but rather the fact that at any time we stand in-between placeness and placelessness, groundedness and groundlessness, established reality and extreme imagination.

7.6 Apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence: Transcending Reality through Virtual Reality

Clearly Virtual Reality functions as a metaphor for the transcendence of any sort of placeness, groundedness, and materiality by suggesting a conceptual world that all users can build, experience, and share. Due to its complex construction – as it is made of pragmatic and idealistic concepts, it comprises of digital worlds inhabited by real people, and it expresses the imaginary while to some extent appears similar to the physical world – it is naturally given utopic and even metaphysical extensions. Following these extensions to the extreme, *Apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence* (AI) is a theory that attempts to cross the boundaries between science and religion – or better, to create a hybrid notion by combining science and religion – and construct a "cyber-theology" and through this a digital paradise for humanity. According to this theory, salvation will come from the technological progress: in the near future, technology will provide us with the means to upload our conscious minds into computers and live forever through our avatars within cyberspace (Geraci, 2010, p.1). This will transform the future into a transcendental digital world and a virtual heaven, and will render man

powerful and immortal in it: "*Apocalyptic AI promises to resolve problems of dualism and alienation in a radically transcendent future where we forsake our biological bodies in favour of virtual bodies that will inhabit an omnipresent and morally meaningful cyberspace*" (Geraci, 2010, p.9). Through technoscientific progress, the human kind is thus expected to stand out of its physicality, and conquer a better, happier, and potentially infinite life. Then, contrary to the science-fiction literature that wants the physical world in the future to be inhabited by "dehumanised persons", Apocalyptic AI imagines a virtual future world of "humanised machines" (Geraci, 2010, p.13).

In his book *Apocalyptic AI*, Robert M. Geraci focuses particularly on the world of Second Life as a testing ground and a field of application for such apocalyptic visions. Virtual Reality and specifically Second Life as a virtual social world offer the opportunity to individuals not only to escape their everyday reality, but also to build by themselves their alternative worlds and live in them. As described above, the opportunity to rebuild one's own body and the world to envelope this – not necessarily in a better but in an "other", different way – is what makes Second Life significant. Most generally, Second Life represents this heavenly place of transcendence, promising freedom, independence, and even immortality. Geraci takes this further to argue that Second Life gives space to individuals to separate from the everyday and the established, and for this reason it is often regarded as almost sacred and as a medium towards the digital salvation promised by Apocalyptic AI: "*our ability to build a paradise and fulfil the age-old promises of religion elevates to divine status according to the leading voices in Second Life. (…) This dream weaves throughout digital utopianism, Apocalyptic AI, and Second Life transhumanism*" [5] (Geraci, 2010, p.102). In effect, apart from the overall construction of the world as a futuristic – if not utopic environment – certain regions within this world are dedicated in creating such heavenly future projections. "Extropia", also referenced by Geraci as such, is one of them. Extropia is promoted as a "*safe haven for digital people*" (Source: Independent State of Extropia), and it functions as a club of people who wish to leave behind their physical lives and their real world constraints, allowing them to indulge into an immersive

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[5] "*Transhumanism*" is according to Geraci the belief that with the help of the scientific progress, the humankind will transcend its physical condition in favour of a better, happier, infinite life within digitisation (Geraci, 2010, p.13)

experience within Second Life and to explore the scenario of transcending the physical body through a digital existence. Hence, interestingly, Extropian residents do not perceive their Second Life as a continuation and an extension of their "First Life", but instead they regard this existence as separate from the physical one, and as an opportunity to develop and participate into a culture that is "real" – equally real to the "physical real" – and invaluable. Thus, at its official website, the *Independent Technocratic City-State of Extropia* presents itself as a:

"*community of Second Life residents sharing a common desire to build a positive, beautiful, empowering future for all. Unlike other land options, Extropia is a place where residents are encouraged to work and play together, and to govern their own affairs to the greatest extent possible.*

The Board of Directors of Extropia espouses no ideology beyond a belief that humanity's future can be improved through its own ingenuity. Extropia actively networks with other persons, organizations and communities in Second Life which share that belief." (Source: About Extropia)

Through a series of objectives[6] Extropia is here presented as a modern version of paradise, where the problems of the physical world – even human mortality – will be resolved through technology and human ingenuity (fig.12). Although it is common knowledge that many Second Life residents find their online lives much more significant and enjoyable than their earthly lives, the region of Extropia and the likes of it introduce something that goes beyond that: apocalyptic visions of digitisation do not

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[6] Following the official website, Extropia is a:

- *"exemplar of the future we want, today, where technology is used exuberantly in the service of beauty and fun,*
- *exaltation of exquisite design, where exotic experimentation is ever expected,*
- *exhilarating haven for creative expression – in architecture, social relations, sexuality, artistic and technological media,*
- *exclusive shelter from the mass and the crass, with the best technical and social protections from griefing, harassment and vulgarity,*
- *execration of extinct ideas and aesthetics, exemplified by consumerism, control and post-apocalyptic nihilism, and an*
- *community of collaboration and cooperation, with events and exhibitions to expand our social networks and explore the power of creative synthesis"* (Source: About Extropia)

suggest some sort of a temporary transcendence from physicality, gravity, earthliness – and in this way a reconsideration of those – but instead they pursue a permanent feeling of exhilaration that will come from the absolute disconnection from the biological body and its finitude, and the construction of this transcendental digital heaven of pure mind.

Figure 12: Extropia Skyline (Rau, 2009)

As mentioned before, the transition from the notion of a God-made paradise to a man-made utopia as a better "elsewhere" came at a time when man felt capable of creating his own better place in this world, instead of awaiting an extraterrestrial God-made one as a reward. Apocalyptic AI imageries and examples such as the community of Extropia seem to introduce something different: "a man-made digital heaven", which is neither a heaven – as it is not made by some sort of god-like conception – nor a utopia – as it exists nowhere on the earth and it is given metaphysical extensions – but rather a hybrid notion of the two. It is about the creation of a man-made paradise, of "another world" that exists neither here nor now, it is absolutely immaterial and thus offers a destination for the mind and proposes a transcendence that is both religious and technological. Theology infuses science and vice-versa: "*a properly formulated theology, one in which being made in the image of God means that we form loving relationships with others, implies that the goal of robotics should be the creation of new partners in creation*" (Geraci, 2010, p.5). This raises the question as to how can a superior condition that succeeds to escape the biological body and any connection to the material world, maintain its ties to spirituality. Geraci explains that "*cyberspace – the*

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digital world – takes on a sacred aura precisely because people need to locate spiritual realities somewhere" (Geraci, 2010, p.75). Then the need for connectedness to something that is beyond the understanding of our existence remains even after the transcendence of our physical body. Going back to Heidegger's definition of being as being between the earth and the sky (and between the mortals and the divinities, within the "fourfold") this suggests that even at an age characterised by connectivity, material transcendence, and openness, where we can potentially live a freer existence – even disengaged from our own biological body – we not only look for rootedness to some sort of ground – native or artificial – but we also need this connectedness to the skies.

Apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence and Extropia see the salvation, in other words the paradisiacal or the utopic, coming through technological development within virtual reality environments. However, it is interesting that this technological development cannot take place within these environments by the players/participants. In Extropia and in other similar places, residents may experiment with it or even have conversations about it, but then they have to go back to their "first lives" in order to carry it out. This technological background is either designed by their "physical selves" or, as a framework, "given" by the god-like Linden Lab. This necessary transition from the "first", physical existence that is capable of designing such environments to the "second", conceptual life that they experience in Virtual Reality raises the question as to how time works within the virtual context. If utopia, as mentioned above, is both the "other" to place and the "other" to time, and Virtual Reality is studied here as a possibility of a utopic context that might be the "other" to place, what happens to time? How does time run within Second Life and what is its relation to the real world time? Virtual Reality indeed suggests a complicated play with time. Although space accumulates in Second Life independently from the real world, Virtual Reality time exists in parallel with real world time. When someone logs in, "first-life" time and Second Life time run together – although many thinkers who celebrate the power of virtual worlds would argue that the "first-life" time is of minor importance here. As much as one may be immersed and absorbed in the virtual world, having the impression that there is no connection to the physical one, time progresses simultaneously for both worlds. When someone logs out on the other hand, time continues to run inside the world due to the existence of other avatars and as the world changes in the meanwhile, time counts as a progressive accumulation of things and changes. Since the world is

made by pure coding, everything that takes place there is being recorded in the form of code and in this way time accumulates. Nonetheless, this same world seems to develop beyond time as well, in the sense that things exist outside decay and disintegration. Moreover, the Apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence case suggests the intention to transcend the biological body and its finitude, and thus escape the real world time frame. The goal here is not to exist at a different time, but instead to stand out of time, to exist at no time at all, in an eternity of pure mind. Thus, paradoxically, Extropia and spaces like it, promise a placeless and timeless space to our virtual selves, yet this space can only exist through our timely existence in the material world. Similarly to the utopic, they draw their references/information from an accomplished order of the "outside" in order to create a reality that only belongs, here not to the order of the text, but instead, to the order of the code.

7.7 Dialectical Utopia

"*The existing order is a topos. Criticism and analysis of this topos permits the elaboration of utopia; the definition and situation of utopia, the criticism of utopia and the updating of its means of realisation (philosophical, political, economic…).*"

"*The realised utopia is a new topos, which will provoke a new critique, then a new utopia. The installation of utopia passes through a (total) urbanism.*"

(Baudrillard, 2006, pp.31-2)

To Baudrillard's thinking, criticism and analysis of the existing topos – that theoretically destroys the initial topos – enables the emergence of a utopia that eventually generates a new topos. This new topos – which is in fact a realised utopia – will provoke new criticism, new analysis, and consequently new utopias and new topoi. As analysed above, utopia constitutes an "otherness", an "elsewhere", and an "in-between" space without a place. As a narrative, it uses the raw material of the society in order to articulate a criticism for the existing world and the established order. Naturally, the question raised here is, what happens when this utopic speculation comes down to earth and attempts to materialise in any possible way? Can any utopian discourse that stands by default between groundedness and groundlessness, place and placelessness be grounded anywhere in order to construct functional spaces? Can Utopia negotiate – and

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compromise – with reality, spatiality, geography, topography, and placeness without losing its ideal character?

Louis Marin argues that any attempt to realise a utopia results a "degenerate" (Marin, 1984, p.240) version of it, and he uses the example of Disneyland to explain his argument. Disneyland according to Marin stands for an allegedly happy, well-ordered, absolutely predictable space that creates an "otherness", a complex mixture of past and future, reality and imagination, playfulness and serious determination that cannot articulate any criticism for the "outside" world and the established order, but instead it maintains and strengthens the existing social relations by promoting a commodity culture masked by the fantasy world (an extended analysis on Disneyland as a "degenerate utopia" and a hyperreal space follows in chapter 8). David Harvey asks: "*can any utopianism of any spatial form that gets materialised be anything other than 'degenerate' in the sense that Marin has in mind?*" (Harvey, 2000, p.167). Clearly the transition from a utopic discourse to a material reality is not simple as it involves the fixation of processes that are normally flexible and mobile into order and spatial forms. Although architects, urban planners, and engineers are tasked with imagining alternative worlds, they are as much tasked with constructing new realities, two activities that are rather contradictory. Even if their intentions are to construct flexible and adaptable environments and structures – especially within the context of mobility, temporality, and connectivity of digitisation – the fixity of spatial constructions works according to Harvey as an obstacle for this prospect[7]. The more these processes become definite, precise, and potentially permanent, the harder it becomes to maintain their imagery.

If any materialisation of a utopic projection suggests a closure and thus a fixed condition that can no longer introduce the better, the new, the alternative, then how can utopias be useful? Harvey – quoting Marx and Unger – argues that the future is not to be built upon fixed promising fantastic plans, but instead upon the "raw material" provided by the society in its current status (Harvey, 2000, p.191). Thus the purpose of utopias is not to achieve any sort of materiality, but to provide directions, visions,

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[7] "*Free-flowing processes become instantiated in structures, in institutional, social, cultural, and physical realities that acquire a relative permanence, fixity, and immovability. Materialized Utopias of process cannot escape the question of closure or the encrusted accumulations of traditions, institutional inertias, and the like, which they themselves produce.*" (Harvey, 2000, p.185)

trajectories to this society. Time, space, social processes are not to be fixed in these schemes, but rather open to relativity and change, so that rootedness comes not in forms or structures, but based on possibilities, needs, hopes, and desires. Besides, the Apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence example illustrated that even in the context of an absolute material transcendence, the need for connectedness remains as an attachment not to particular material contexts, but to conceptions such as the skies. Thus the utopic cannot be brought into the city through any form that suggests materiality and stability. The phenomenon of Flash Mobs could introduce a different approach towards this direction. If Flash Mobs are about the transformation of a virtual condition into a physical one, they could equally be read as expressions of the virtual utopic context in the city. Due to their construction, Flash Mobs consist of a double negation: the negation of place in the sense that the city context [as placeness] becomes suspended for the sake of the event that creates a new/other ground, and also a negation of time in the sense that they introduce something different to the city that lasts for a short period of time and goes beyond the city rhythm and its regular activities. Together, the refusal of place and the refusal of time open up endless possibilities in urban space. The "other" to the city comes in terms of the temporality and the suspension of the ground, as what matters is the "instant placeness" generated by the performance. Most generally, since it is the detachment from the ground and the separation from the time frame that evokes the "other", the unrealised, and the utopic, Flash Mobs illustrate that there is no need to download our consciousness into "humanised machines" in order to play with the corporeality and the materiality of the real world, but we can achieve lightness and freedom with others, in the city.

This chapter has shown that it is only within a context of utopia, a place made possible only as a narrative and a text, that we can disengage from the ties to the ground and find ourselves in suspension, opening up to infinite possibilities. The desire to build and make our utopic imaginings real, along with Louis Marin's description of Disneyland as a "degenerate utopia" set the ground for the last chapter of this thesis: raising the question as to what happens when we attempt to visualise this utopic narrative and text either in the virtual or in the material reality, it discusses the phenomenon of the transformation of the contemporary world into a plain iconographic context, which eliminates the ground from any meaning.

Chapter 8. Reality Turned into an Image: spaces of virtuality and virtualisation

8.1 Introduction: the Example of the Google Art Project

The Google Art Project (http://www.googleartproject.com/) is a website launched by Google in February 2011, aiming at bringing together images of more than a thousand artworks, originally housed in some of the world's most distinguished art museums. The innovation of this project is that the paintings presented here are all high resolution images, the most representatives of which (one for each one of the 17 museums that initially participated in the project) are photographed in even greater detail by the use of super high resolution or "gigapixel" photo capturing technology, with each of these images containing more than seven billion pixels (Google, 2011). The images are accompanied by relevant information on them and related YouTube videos. This project also involves the 360 degree tours of the interior of selected galleries of these museums (over 385 different rooms in January 2012), put together using the technology developed by Google for the Google Maps Street View platform, and these interiors can be also viewed directly from within Street View in Google Maps. It therefore brings together 1061 high resolution artwork images and 17 "gigapixel" pictures made by 486 artists and more than 6000 Street View "panoramas" taken from 385 gallery rooms from 17 museums in 11 cities and 9 countries (Google, 2011). The landmarks of the history of art are thus available to internet users all around the world for a very close – yet through digital means – examination: "*With this unique project, anyone anywhere in the world will be able to learn about the history and artists behind a huge number of works, at the click of a mouse.*" (Google, 2011) The viewer has the possibility to discover much more about a painting or study details of the brushwork and zoom in the image until the paint strokes and the cracks in the surface become visible (fig.1-4).
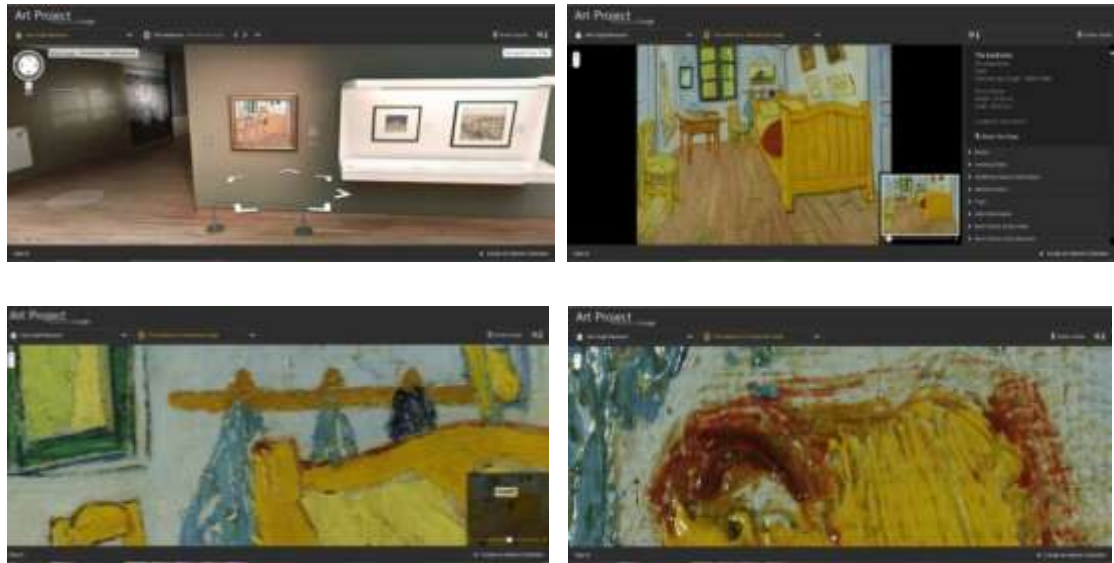
Figures 1-4: The Google Art Project: Bedroom in Arles, Vincent van Gogh, Van Gogh Museum.

Instead of offering a collection of replicas, the Google Art Project presents digital images of original artwork in probably greater detail than the detail that the average viewer of the original piece would notice. Within the context of digitisation everyday experience is infused by information that augments "our reality" of things. Due to the immateriality of this information, but also to the impact that this has on our perception of things, we are more than ever unable to discern whether this experience is composed by things or by images of these things. Here, the dreams of the perfect place are easily confused with the construction of the perfect image of a place. And it is not so much that the boundaries between the real and the virtual, the copy and the original, are abolished, but the fact that real and virtual entities, and also copies and originals, altogether compose our everyday – virtual or not – reality.

Between immersive experiences in virtual worlds and "real" experiences in a world that gradually becomes virtualised, the aim of this chapter is to explore spaces of virtuality and their relations to the new technologies. First, it reflects on the "real-virtual" opposition that seems to dominate the recent times. It then approaches the transformation of the real world into a context of Virtual Reality focusing on spaces where illusion takes over to abolish any distinction between reality and imagination. Through phenomena of theme parks that replicate different parts of the world, and virtual reality environments that simulate real buildings within fantasy lands, it finally questions the role of the ground in the construction of placeness.

8.2 The Real and the Virtual

In recent times the term "virtual" commonly refers to any action, interaction or platform produced or transmitted through computers and telecommunication systems due to the apparent immateriality and intangibility of their outputs. Although the tension between the real and the virtual is very popular due to the wide spread of Virtual Reality and Cyberspace, new technologies and computerisation did not invent the virtual but simply attempted to project anything that might be beyond touch and render it visible. The real world has always been a space for virtuality, and the virtual has always been a fundamental component of writing, reading, drawing, and even thinking. Text and fiction literature, for example, by default mediate between the real (the text that exists in real space) and the virtual (the imaginary world that they describe), creating images and intriguing the imagination and, as Derrida (1986, p.577) argues, the text constitutes a special kind of place, a scene and a field for something to happen. Hence what computers and the world they generate have attempted is the projection and the simulation of a virtual condition rather than its construction. Although digital technologies have clearly affected the way we perceive materiality and information, and by extension the way we sense space and architecture, the question of virtuality refers first and foremost to the fantasmatic background and the projections of the imaginary that supplement every aspect of the human life.

Elizabeth Grosz in "*Architecture from the outside*" (2001) argues that the world generated within cyberspace simply illustrates the fact that the world that we always lived in, the "real" world, has always been a space of virtuality: "*the real is saturated with the spaces of projection, possibility, and the new that we now designate as virtual in order to keep them contained behind the glassy smoothness of the computer screen*" (Grosz, 2001, p.78). The computer on the one hand reveals that this fantasmatic background has always been there – only awaiting to be visualised by new technologies – while on the other it serves as an object to mark the separation between the real and the virtual. This separation is not only fictitious, as reality is inseparably infused by virtuality, but simplistic as well, allowing us to think that we are capable of easily distinguishing the difference between the two. Leaving aside the use of the "virtual" in the computational sense, which refers to anything that takes place over computer networks due to their apparent immateriality, most generally, the virtual assigns for the fantasmatic, the product of the imagination, that which exists only in mind. Grosz

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defines the virtual as *"the space of emergence of the new, the unthought, the unrealized, which at every moment loads the presence of the present with supplementarity, redoubling a world through parallel universes, universes that might have been"* (Grosz, 2001, p.78). Then the virtual as the "unrealised" may be opposite to the real, but at the same time it is closely linked to it, supplementing it with its imagery. Reversely, the virtual is not necessarily a fixed condition, but a rather relative concept that needs to be defined in relation to an actual counterpart. Then the virtual functions as the "double" to the real-actual and a mirror-image to it, and the encounter of the two creates the perceived reality. As such, the difference between the real and the virtual is never fully resolved: the real is functional due to the existence of the virtual and at the same time, our immersion to virtuality is a way to construe reality.

If such is the relation between the real and the virtual, then the term "Virtual Reality" constitutes primarily a contradiction in terms. Virtual Reality aims at juxtaposing the body and the matter with the imagery supported by the desire and the mind. "*This is a real not quite real, not an 'actual real', a 'really real' but a real whose reality is at best virtual. An equivocation in and of the real. An apparent rather than an actual 'real'"*. (Grosz, 2001, p.80) Clearly an "apparent real" constitutes an image instead of an actual condition, but, as seen in the preceding chapters, in the case of Virtual Reality this image is enough to create spatial conditions and possibilities of placeness that would envelop human experience. The main question that this chapter poses is, can we distinguish the real from this "apparent real" in the contemporary environment or is it that our reality is constructed within a "Virtual Reality"?

In his book "*Welcome to the desert of the real*" (2002) Slavoj Žižek reflects on the "passion of the Real" termed by Alain Badiou as the enthusiasm to identify the authentic Real within everyday social reality. If the nineteenth century has been the age to imagine the future and search for the utopian and the ideal, then for Žižek the twentieth century is characterised by the need to realise the accomplished "New Order" and thus to directly experience the Real "*in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality*" (Žižek, 2002, pp.5-6). However the obsession for authenticity, the need to approach the Real in its purity either by getting closer and closer to it or by isolating it and resisting anything from the environment that might corrupt it, often results, according to Žižek, into its opposite phenomenon, the creation of the theatrical spectacle in its place. But if this is the case, if the Real refers to

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its spectacular effect, what happens to the pursuit of the effect and the appearance that is also a phenomenon of the recent times? "*If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in its pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real*" (Žižek, 2002, pp.9-10). Thus in pursuit of the Real we end up in the realm of the absolute appearance, its virtual, which at the same time reinforces this pursuit of the Real. Žižek uses the example of "cutters" (Žižek, 2002, p.10), people who cut or hurt themselves, to explain this phenomenon. By their actions, cutters express their resistance to the virtualisation of the environment and their attempt to approach the Real of their body. If inscribing one's body with tattoos can be read as a resignation of the self – through its appearance – to virtuality, then cutters designate the opposite case: by cutting themselves they struggle to approach bodily reality and to firmly anchor the self in it. They need to see – and feel – the blood flowing out of their body in order to feel that what they experience is reality and hence they exist in actuality. Žižek's example clearly suggests that the world that we live in is mostly a place of virtuality. In a world in abundance of entities deprived of their "harmful" properties, coffee without caffeine (decaffeinated coffee), beer without alcohol, sex without sex (virtual sex), virtual reality becomes the realm of pure appearance[1]. Within this context of virtualisation, reality becomes its own best representation, and virtual reality, unlike the virtuality that supplements the real, replaces the real with this "other" condition. To Žižek's thinking the attacks on the World Trade Centre towers make the virtualisation of the everyday experience clear: the aim of the terrorists was not the actual material damage itself, but rather the "*spectacular effect of it*" (Žižek, 2002, p.11). Although in this case the reality of the bombings destroyed the illusory world in which we used to live, it was the image of the plane that hit the World Trade Centre towers – in the form of a "fantasmatic appearance", repeated over and over again on the television screen – and not the event in its actuality that entered and shuttered our reality. In other words, an image, an effect, an appearance, a media spectacle achieved to deliver the "real thing" in our everyday reality.

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[1] "*Virtual Reality simply generalises this procedure of simply offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so*" (Žižek, 2002, p.11).

For thousands of years humans have been trying to explore the skin-bounded body and its sensory environment in order to explain the reality of the world and their existence in it. New technologies made things more complicated by superimposing informational networks on the physical world and by creating simulations that attempt to either mask physical space or render it redundant. The organic body along with its electronic extensions has managed to extend its existence from physical space into cyberspace, opening up great opportunities for communication and interaction. The world – physical and by extension digital – has transformed into this illusory context that enabled anyone to enact his fantasies. Although we often attribute the "virtualisation" of real space to the emergence and the expansion of computational worlds, Žižek's formulation suggests that the dominion of the image is in fact an effect of this obsession with realism rather than a result of the digitisation of the everyday life – oppositely, it could be argued that the intensification of the digitisation happened to support this obsession with the real. From reality TV shows and reality soap operas to generic shopping malls and consumerist Californian towns, the built environment is ample in spectacular signs and images to spatially envelop – but also question – our existence. Absolute unreality is often presented – and also perceived – as actual presence. This context raises a series of questions: are we truly able to identify the Real within this context? And how can we be sure that we do not mistake reality for fiction? Does our "hyperreal" world contain any reality within it? Chapter 6 researched physical and digital worlds in terms of groundedness within mobility and connectivity. Groundedness as placeness referred to the need to appropriate the earth or to reconstruct it – physically or digitally – in order to inhabit it. But what happens when our material environment proves to be absolutely virtual? Does the ground matter?

8.3 The Virtualisation of Space before New Technologies: the Example of Coney Island

Many years before the emergence of cyberspace and any discourse about the virtualisation of physical space due to new technologies, the leisure resorts of the 19th century, as the predecessors of the contemporary theme parks, attempted to recreate places of the imagination and playful sceneries. As described in chapter 4, Coney Island in New York and Blackpool in North West England gave space to the playful crowds of

the newly industrialised cities to pursue pleasure, social interaction and play, through music and dance entertainment, freak shows and mechanical spectacles, within illusory environments. As discussed, the phenomenon of "*industrial saturnalia*" (Cross and Walton, 2005, p.5), the formation of a "playful crowd" visiting these seaside resorts, offered the opportunity for the release of pressure of the mass and their liberation from – and also their reconciliation with – the everyday life of the metropolis. The suspension of any established rule came along with the suspension of place itself, within fantastic architectural worlds that juxtaposed the modern cities, stimulated the imagination and the senses and freed people from any anxiety or inhibition. Such theatrical environments enabled vulgar and unrefined enjoyment and the celebration of extravagance and excess, aiming at the satisfaction of people's desires. The superabundance of pleasures offered in these amusement lands, although ephemeral and fleeting, introduced new forms of social interaction and created new cultures of entertainment to the residents of the nineteenth century's cities that featured money, time, and mobility. These cultures were transferred through the urban crowd to the industrial cities to affect their further development.

In "*Delirious New York*" (1978), Rem Koolhaas sees Coney Island as a testing ground and a laboratory for the practices and the interventions that later shaped Manhattan. According to Koolhaas, it was the new technological culture that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, along with the experience gained through the transformation of Coney Island to a "fantasy land", that turned Manhattan into a "*collective experiment in which the entire city became a factory of man-made experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.10). The quest for the spectacular, the dominance of imaginary and utopic perspectives, did not remain within the boundaries of the leisure parks but extended their influence to the city.

Coney Island developed into a place dedicated to pleasure between 1823 and 1860, when the emergence of Manhattan as a Metropolis created the need for a temporary escape of its residents to "illusory" environments. By the end of the 19th century, pleasure became necessary to the people of the city: noisy crowds swarmed the place, seeking release from the burdens of the "industrial" life in replicas of exotic places and

fantasylands[2] (fig. 5). As the place gained in popularity, the conversion of nature into artificiality and of reality to fantasy was intensified. Coney Island developed into a series of enclosed theme parks, the interior of which could be controlled in its totality and shaped according to a specific thematic. The parks' managers did their best to further oppose to the "reality" of the rest of the island in their illusory enclosures. Koolhaas describes the example of Peter Tilyou's "Steeplechase Park", the entrances of which are formed into the "*Earthquake floor*", a mechanical platform that shakes intensely compelling visitors into an involuntary dance (Koolhaas, 1978, p.38). At another park, the "*Luna Park*", visitors are turned into astronauts when entering, having to pass through a "conceptual airlock" that represents their travel in space, so that when they step out of that into the park, this will not stand for a piece of earth, but as part of the Moon: "*in one gesture, the whole structure of mutually reinforcing realities on earth – its laws, expectations, inhibitions – is suspended to create a moral weightlessness that complements the literal weightlessness that has been generated on the trip to the Moon*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.39). The mechanically shifting ground in the first case and the fictional suspension of the earth in the second, attempt to isolate the park's territory from the earthly ground and create the illusion of a physical and moral suspension. The ground here is not itself artificial, constructed anew, or digital as in Second Life, however it is clearly cut off from its surroundings and alienated in order to create the impression of suspension and project a fantasmatic space.

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[2] The Coney Island landscape was initially formed by tower observatories that enable visitors to explore the territory from above, a railroad that later developed into the Roller Coaster, various performance spectacles, and animal-shaped constructions and machines that reinforce the illusion of the experience. Attractions like the "*Barrels of Love*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35) where a machine made by two cylinders in line that revolve in opposite directions, one entered by women and the other by men, so that men and women cannot stay standing and fall on top of each other, creates "*synthetic intimacy between people who would never otherwise have met*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35) as an antidote to the loneliness and the estrangement caused by the metropolis. With the introduction of electricity into the site the public is offered "*a second daytime*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35), the beach is made accessible during the night time and becomes an attraction due to its artificiality this time: "*Electric Bathing*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35). This is the first phase of Coney Island's transformation from a natural site to a "*technical service*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.35) devoted to the fulfilment of desires.

Figure 5: Modern 1947 Coney Island

Year after year the Coney Island amusement parks evolved into impressive architectural spectacles, using the newest technological achievements in the service of the imagination and distancing themselves from any earthly reality. The entire site of the park transformed into a constantly changing landscape, always aiming to create the most spectacular event of all times. Electricity became a very important component to the construction of the illusion: with the employment of innumerable light bulbs, Luna Park created this "*second, illusory skyline, even more impressive than the first, a separate city of night*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.41), so that "*technology + cardboard (or any other flimsy material) = reality*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.42), undermining once and for all the – until then – conventional notion of architecture. Technology is attributed the potential to create and sustain the fantastic, and also to explore and reproduce human imagination, and Coney Island became an illustration of its use as such. The "*Technology of the Fantastic*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.62) broke the bonds with the established "reality" of the world at the time, and introduced new forms of architecture and urbanism. According to Koolhaas, "*the Metropolis leads to Reality Shortage; Coney's multiple synthetic realities offer a replacement*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.62). Since the established reality was not enough – or, put differently, since the passion for the real that Žižek describes encourages people to pursue the "more-than-real" – architecture and technology were employed to create alternative, artificial, "privileged" realities. Therefore, from an instrument that made space for reality, architecture became this

"*technological apparatus that compensates for the loss of real physicality*" (Koolhaas, 1978, p.62) and produces fantasmatic – yet material – spaces.

The example of the enclosed amusement parks illustrates the need for these "other spaces" to make up for the inefficiency of reality in urban environments. For Michel Foucault (1986) there are two different types of such spaces, utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are not real places, but instead the "other" to real spaces, projections of a society in a perfected, or else, in an inverted form, aiming at infusing our reality with their discourse. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are these counter-sites that may constitute performed utopias, places "*in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted*" (Foucault, 1986, p.24). As discussed in Chapter 1, such places may have a real location, but they exist beside their environment, establishing an order of their own. They attempt to enact within real space different real places, even incompatible with each other, in order to produce the space of the "other". Due to their essential character, heterotopias have distinct boundaries, and a clear system of opening and closing that ensures their enclosure but permits the access. In relation to other spaces, heterotopias aim either at producing a fantasmatic space inside which other real spaces are reproduced, or at recreating a space that is perfect so that the rest of the outside world appears disordered and dirty. Then all spaces can create amalgamated experiences and exist between utopias and heterotopias. In effect, this interplay between utopia and heterotopia creates a mirror-effect phenomenon: the mirror constitutes this placeless place displaying a space that does not exist beneath its surface, and therefore a utopia, being at the same time a heterotopia since it exists in reality, projecting something that it is not[3].

The amusement parks described above stand as heterotopias in the sense that they constituted enclosed, illusory spaces, projecting the "other" to the rest of the world, and infusing reality with virtuality. Coney Island may have been a remarkable and original kind of space for the time being, and an experiment that affected the development of Manhattan into an assortment of illusions within a functional city, as Koolhaas argues.

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[3] "*The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.*" (Foucault, 1986, p.24)

Today, maybe due to the culture developed there, such "hyperreal" spaces extend beyond the boundaries of amusement parks, within the contemporary cities. Shopping malls, museums, and leisure centres aim at fantasy construction to indulge the visitors with illusions. Hyperreality goes out in the streets, and as we move towards an electronic age where digital networks and connections superimpose physical spaces, more of these complex hybrid-fantasmatic spaces are created to supplement our experience and counterbalance the "reality shortage". Chapter 6 explored the ways that the ground may be inhabited, extruded, reconstructed, or digitally reproduced, to express our attachment and/or our detachment to place. In the spaces described above, the earth does not incur any physical or digital transformation, yet a piece of land sets apart and turns into this dreamland that stimulates the imagination and produces sensational experiences. In Coney Island, it is the construction of a utopic space – materialised through cardboard and light bulbs – that counteracts the reality shortage and metaphorically extracts the earth's surface from its nature to create a different sort of space. The construction of the super-natural here replaces nature itself, and a "hyperreality" juxtaposes the reality of the earthly ground. Then within the very same environment we have the creation of a space that is "other", and responds primarily to our dreams and passions, rather than to our physical needs. Such spaces are at once physical – due to their materiality – and representational – drawing their references from the imaginary (and not from the ground they lie on) – questioning the reality and the virtuality of any kind of space. They stand between utopic space – that is by definition unrealised – and this "other" kind of space that attempts to recreate and materialise the utopic. Therefore they produce a space of fantasy, an enacted utopia that is called "heterotopia" by Foucault (1986), and "hyperspace" by Baudrillard (1993, p.245), with both terms aiming to emphasise on the construction of the illusion and the "other" within perceived space.

8.4 The Disneyland Phenomenon

As fantasy architectures escaped the enclosures of theme parks and merged into the city streets, identifying the real from the fantastic became more complicated. The "real-world" architecture of the shopping centre, the holiday resort, and the design of urban space in general, increasingly employed the features of such spaces to appeal to the

public and consequently raised the expectations for a similar development of the cityscape. The most significant example of a fantasyland that has been both celebrated and attacked for radically affecting the development of public space and the contemporary city is Disneyland. Apart from setting the foundation for an urbanism of pleasure and consumerism, the Walt Disney theme parks developed a philosophy different than that of their contemporaries: they attempted to combine the need for a fantasyland of leisure and play with the desire for a perfectly ordered, controllable and thus secure landscape that would reject any social disorder seen in parks like Coney Island. The virtual reality of Disneyland suggested a new sort of social space within absolute artificiality and an alternative to the disorder of the cities, a safe place and a place where nothing could go wrong, "*our cities' virtual reality*" (Zukin, 1995, p.77). For these reasons the term "*Disneyfication*" ["*Disneyization*" for Zukin (1995, p.128) and "*Disneyitis*" for Gill (1991)] is often employed to explain the expansion of the Disneyland phenomenon beyond the boundaries of the theme parks, into the city. The success of Disneyland derives partly from the fact that it constitutes a private space that amply offers all those aspects that the public space seems to have lost, civility, security, coherence, and recalls a world that has been long left behind: "*there are no guns here, no homeless people, no illegal drink or drugs. Without installing a visibly repressive political authority, Disney World imposes order on unruly, heterogeneous populations – tourist hordes and the work force that caters for them – and makes them grateful to be there, waiting for a ride. Learning from Disney World promises to make social diversity less threatening and public space more secure.*" (Zukin, 1995, p.77) All in all, Disneyland attempts to extract all the natural and technical features of a place and yet create a new sort of space – real or unreal – that evokes emotions and excitement. While Baudrillard sees Disneyland as this hyperreal space that reinforces the hyperreality of the rest of the world, the lawsuit against Linden Lab described in chapter 6 mentions Disneyworld several times as a parallel to the Second Life world in order to emphasise the actuality of both. The Plaintiffs' argument here is that both worlds constitute private platforms that provide ample representations of the imaginary aiming to entertain visitors and enable multiple financial transactions and business operations. They suggest that just like operations inside Disneyworld are subject to the laws of the United States of America and therefore are real, so the transactions relating Second Life should follow the same laws and thus be equally "real". Is it worth questioning the "reality" of theme parks and virtual worlds individually then, or should we rather treat the world as a

continuum – along with its heterotopias and its digital extensions – the reality of which we need to question?

Figure 6: Main Street USA. Disneyland

In Disneyland past and future, playfulness and the determination of the "real" world, and also utopia are found here in a series of representations (fig.6). The parks were conceived by Walt Disney himself at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the film Fantasia proved a failure and Disney started obsessing with the idea of creating a tangible and true place, yet perfectly ordered, a place where nothing could go wrong (Marling, 1997, p.35). Here, the play with the imagination becomes a fixed and unchangeable image. The World's fairs of the early twentieth century may be considered as their precedents: these international exhibitions created temporal, miniature event-cities that celebrated modernity and technological progress and enabled visitors to imagine the future and live their fantasies in it. According to Karal Ann Marling, "*Walt Disney's Imagineering – Walt's own term: imagination + engineering = Imagineering – has conceived a whole range of retail stores, galleries and hotels, expressly calculated to create and sustain a mood*" (Marling, 1997, p.30). Disney believed that the proper combination of imagination and technology were enough to materialise his fantasyland. He wanted to create this perfect place as a counterbalance to the roughness and the social disorder of his contemporary leisure parks and the likes of Coney Island. His response to the carnivalesque atmosphere of freak shows and circus that turned the world "upside down" and temporarily liberated people from their everyday burdens was a rather "timeless" world of cartoons that immersed the visitors in the wonderful innocence of a child's play and a playground that recreated the past

into a nostalgic memory (fig.7). For fear that this paradisiac perfection would make people easily bored, Disney kept injecting his atemporal world with new themes, spectacles and performances to be consumed, which would make people return to the park over and over again. In the place of the "industrial saturnalia" of Coney Island, Disney proposed a "commercial saturnalia" according to Cross and Walton[4]. Nostalgia, memory, the past and the future were all to be consumed and through these the entire process of consumption was to be transformed into an enjoyable play.

Figure 7: Main Street USA. Disneyland

Such were the guidelines that shaped the Disney theme parks and made Disneyland a typical feature of the American landscape[5]. From the very first moment the place imposes its own system of signs and behaviour: when arriving in Disneyland, visitors have to leave their car – and in that way the medium that brought them there – in a vast open parking lot. Leaving one's private car (especially in California where the first

[4] "*Both an affirmation of a consumer culture and an escape from its daily form… an answer to the banality and boredom of suburban consumer society, recalling in playful delight an era of coherent and human-scale space before the contemporary era of the freeway, the mall, and the sidewalkless suburban residential streets.*" (Cross, Walton, 2005, p.248)

[5] Although Disneylands differ in size and in complexity, they all share the same key themes: "*they all have a live stream railroad line, a pedestrian Main Street modelled after the turn-of-the-century streetscape of little American city, a tall castle to orient the visitor in space, and a variety of fictive 'lands' based on scenes in Disney movies and Walt's personal vision of history. They all have a peripheral berm, a barrier separating the enclosed precincts of the park from the outside world. And they all have similar footprints: a heart-shaped plan with a single entry at the point, centred on the hub, affording both visual and physical access to every segment of the park*" (Marling, 1997, p.29).

Disneyland was built) has to do with the abandonment of a pragmatic utility and the acceptance of the system of playful signs that dominate here. Then the visitors go through the ticket booths where they buy Disneyland money in order to proceed. This monetary substitution has once again to do with the adoption of the code of the "other" and the acceptance of its different vocabulary. Entering Disneyland signifies the immersion to this other world that calls for childhood forgotten memories and imagination. Space is constructed by an accumulation of images taken by films and comic strips, realised by wood, stone, and plaster, and animated by real people dressed up as movie characters. Louis Marin argues that in Disneyland the way image is duplicated by reality is twofold: the image becomes real (made by wood, stone, plaster) and at the same time reality is turned into an image (as it is the figure that stands for the figure itself, Marin, 1984, p.245). The visitor, who has left "his reality" outside, finds another reality in the interior: "*a real imaginary: a fixed, stereotyped, powerful fantasy*" (Marin, 1984, p.245). At a place where the "*site is sight*" (Zukin, 1995, p.57) and space is experienced via photographs and videos reality is reduced to a film stage set, a visual effect and a two dimensional image that creates emotions and excitement. But is this place different than the rest of the world or is it that the world has been absorbed into this sort of virtuality due to the "Disneyfication" of things? Is Disneyland a phenomenon of Virtual Reality, or is it an attempt to capture within its boundaries the outside world and project it in some sort of a reality show? By extension, is reality imprisoned within theme parks or is there no real world anymore?

To Baudrillard's thinking the answer to this question is that there is no real world anymore, as everything has been absorbed within virtuality (Baudrillard, 1998). We no longer live in the society of the spectacle that Guy Debord described as it is not the spectacle that has transformed reality, but instead the condition of virtuality that rendered the real and the spectacular ineffective. Within this virtuality real space is flattened into a three-dimensional virtual image, while the past, the present, and the future are merged into a single narrative. Places and periods synchronise into a "*single atemporal virtuality*" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.54) that make anything possible and everything eternally reproducible. But through advertising, mass media – and the Internet in recent times – this universe of virtuality extends beyond the boundaries of theme parks. The real world consequently turns into this phantasmagoria, a reality show inside which we are all turned into "extras": "*being an extra [figurant] in virtual reality*

is no longer being an actor or a spectator. It is to be out of the scene [hors-scene], to be obscene" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.53). In this virtual world we are neither passive observers nor active protagonists but rather interactive components of the general picture that can no longer have an impact on the world. Ideas, works, events, and actions are all mixed up, yet rendered totally ineffective. Therefore "*reality itself, the world itself, with its frenzy of cloning has already been transformed into an interactive performance, some kind of Lunapark for ideologies, technologies, works, knowledge, death, and even destruction. All this is likely to be cloned and resurrected in a juvenile museum of Imagination or a virtual museum of Information.*" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.53) In this "Luna Park" of ideologies, history, time, and three-dimensional space, all flattened into an image, can no longer be imagined, therefore a hallucinatory utopia is constructed upon them.

Figure 8: Disneyland California Map.

By studying Disneyland in "Utopics: Spatial Play", Louis Marin attempts to show how certain patterns of spatial organisation, although realised in real space, still qualify as utopic. To Marin Disneyland is ample in utopic symbols. The prospective tour that the visitors on their entrance there are about to follow plays the role of the narrative that characterises utopia, while the map that they buy to orientate themselves stands for the utopic description (fig.8). The fact that they have to abandon their car before entering and convert their money into Disneyland money signifies the adoption of a "utopian" vocabulary. A series of unique "Disneyland features" reject the established order that exists at the outside: enclosure against openness, continuity against fragmentariness,

past and future against present. The visitor, who has left his reality outside, finds the "other" to reality: a predetermined powerful fantasy. However, according to Marin, this is not utopia, but instead the reality abandoned at the outside that returns, only transformed into an image, and as such into a fixed thing, a "*degenerate utopia…caught in a dominant system of ideas and values and, thus, be changed into a myth or a collective fantasy*" (Marin, 1984, p.240). In effect, since the image becomes real and reality changes into an image, Main Street USA and the "utopian place" to which this leads, come to represent reality in its hallucinatory appearance. Reality as fantasy is staged and supported by a well-ordered and predetermined system of representations designed by Walt Disney in the form of the famous images of Disney's films, but in a fantastic vocabulary appropriated by the visitors. In this way, the visitors' wishes and desires are trapped into the collective fantasy that the place implies, that of the fantastic return of reality. In other words, Marin here suggests that the past and the future, the real and the imaginary, playfulness and the determination of the market are all brought together in a way that even utopia is present in Disneyland but only as a representation (Marin, 1984, p.248). Within this "hyperspace" the utopic fiction is reduced into an ideological figure and therefore it is the collective fantasy and not this fiction that becomes the trademark, the sign, and the symbolic image of Disney's utopia. This contradictory reality that Marin describes is neither true nor false, neither real nor imaginary, at least in a conventional way of thinking. The quest for the creation of the "perfect place" that is well ordered, perfectly organised, and timeless leads into the flattening of everything into an image. The real world, absorbed into virtuality, ceases to exist, giving space to a degenerate utopia.

8.5 Accounts on Hyperreal America

If Disneyland has evolved into a key feature of the American culture, by extension the American landscape has been studied by many thinkers as the ultimate example of hyperreality. The land of Coney Island and Manhattan, of Las Vegas and Disneyland is largely composed, for many, of spaces of imagery and virtuality within urban space. In "*Travels in Hyperreality*" (1995) Umberto Eco navigates in an America not of Frank Lloyd Wright or of Jackson Pollock, but in that of Pop Art, of Mickey Mouse, and of Las Vegas. He journeys the American hyperreality by narrating his visits to wax

museums, theme parks, and museums of reproductions, spaces where illusion takes over to level historical periods and geographic locations in order to abolish any distinction between reality and imagination. Eco focuses on two slogans that dominate the American advertising, "*the real thing*" (referring to Coca Cola) and "*more*" to describe the American "reality". The overuse of these two slogans in everyday life signifies the obsession firstly with realism, and then with fullness. It is exactly this persistence on the real and its reconstruction in its overabundance – similarly to the passion of the Real that Žižek described – that leads in the construction of the fake, in other worlds, the iconic, the representation, the "real copy". The obsessive quest for the "more" and the "real thing" produces not simply a "real", but the "more-than-real", the "hyperreal". Here the sign becomes the thing in its perfect likeness, not to reference the original, but so that the reference to the original is unnecessary: "*we are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original*" (Eco, 1995, p.19). Anything that looks real is real. Past and memories, fantasies and desires are reconstructed and re-experienced in a continuous, new sort of space. This space may have been constructed materially-actually, nevertheless it features unreality and a world made of simulation.

In Jean Baudrillard's formulation, time and space no longer provide a fixed framework to stage reality[6]. The real is replaced by the "more than real", the hyperreal, as the product of hypersimulation that is generated by codes and models, and is always and already reproducible. For Baudrillard in "*Hyperreal America*" (1993), America in the 1970s illustrates this hyperreal: an achieved utopia and a materialised fantastic space where everything is possible. In order to do so, America provides this extended, empty space for the image, disengaged from history and culture, and even from its geographical dimension. It is in emptiness that virtuality and illusion can take place, he claims: "*the desert is the virtuality of space, its total availability for any event*" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.245). The elimination of any context allows the fantastic to

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[6] "*Not a concentric space. A sort of centrifugal space. As is well known, the cities can be extended to infinity in every direction, and they are not characterised by the symbolic space of traditional urbanism. No public space either, but a form of publicity of space. In other words, a sort of deterritorialization, a disqualification of things, but also the possibility of visualising, materializing everything. No space for discourse in the sense in which we understand it, for critical discourse; a space for the image. No space for historical memory, but rather a space for dispersal, dissemination, a space like that of the desert, the space of potential amnesia and never-ending circulation. In short, a geometric space, but one different from geometry.*" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.245)

develop. Amnesia instead of historical memory and deserted space instead of a culturally rich background are the key features of this space – a non-place according to Baudrillard – that can stage the image and represent anything. This is not a space of past and memory, or of future, but a space of the image, where anything can be visualised and materialised. This initially neutral space becomes the site of intensification and overdimensionalization: "*it is this sort of extrapolation, overdimensionalisation, that gives America its real fascination*" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.247). Within this context of hypersimulation, it is constant displacement instead of placeness, and representability instead of materiality that matter. The American landscape becomes this "enacted utopia" in the sense that it abolishes all the distinctions between culture and nature, subject and object, and creates a non-culture that prevails and allows anything to be represented. This environment constitutes, of course, fiction. Although material, it is its reference to the imaginary and its ability to create the illusion that is important. The ground here, again, does not incur any physical transformation; however it is deprived of its essence and distanced from its surroundings in order to provide this blank space for fiction and the event to happen.

Then to Baudrillard, the great American cities like Los Angeles and New York along with microworlds like Disneyworld that spring from them constitute "*pure allegories*" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.246). Absolutely artificial and therefore non referential, they are built upon one single role, therefore Las Vegas has developed into this world for gambling, a superficial environment made more of lights and signs rather than of architecture to promote the superficiality of gambling itself. Accordingly, Los Angeles is organised around the movies production and the freeways according to Baudrillard: the city is reduced to a horizontal road network of no organic substance whatsoever. And if Los Angeles is flattened into horizontality, New York on the other hand is dedicated to the architecture of verticality, an application of all the technological achievements that have been previously tested in Coney Island. Cities become almost "single-purposed", whereas artificial microcosms developed on the cities' models may produce even more excessive illusions. Disneyland extends leisure activities and illusions for touristic consumption on a field that takes on the dimensions of an entire city, while Disneyworld represents an entire world within its boundaries. This artificial world becomes a model of anything that needs to be represented, history, memory, nostalgia in order to be consumed. Most generally, America in its cities and its theme

parks becomes this dreamland that transcends the earthly materiality of the ground for the superficiality of the image and the sign.

If the American landscape comprises of cities modelled on theme parks and of theme parks that represent the whole world, then Las Vegas is a pure example of a hyperreal environment as described by Baudrillard. Las Vegas, a city literally built on the desert, has generated an architecture of styles and signs over materials and an architecture of communication over space. Constantly changing images give space to illusions and fantasies that form the urban experience here. In *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour analyse pop-culture and the sign-board imagery of Las Vegas and illustrate the role of signs and billboards as place-making material in the city. *Learning from Las Vegas* suggests that styles and signs may impose an "*anti-spatial architecture*", making symbolism and communication comparable to forms and functions. Movement, image, play, and, why not, irony as well may become tools for the organization of space and the creation of the fantastic. Through these, the spectacular, however ephemeral and temporal, dominates. In Las Vegas buildings may suggest several historical styles, however they bear no connection to historical space (Venturi et al, 1972, p.11). A new spatial order is introduced by the fast movement of the cars and the highway communication that makes architecture disengage from pure form to employ mixed media: "*because spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: the big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66*" (Venturi et al, 1972, p.11). Styles and signs respond to high speeds and commercial needs and image turns into a phenomenon of architectural communication. Iconography defines the "Strip architecture". The graphic sign addressing the moving body and the astonished eyes on the highway dominates, while the actual building often sets back, surrounded by parking lots. The imagery becomes more important than architecture. Sometimes the building itself becomes a sign in order to persuade and inform. As long as communication regulates the spatial order, "*if you take the signs away, there is no place*" (Venturi et al, 1972, p.12). Within this context of constant mobility the signs define placeness.

In the Las Vegas Strip the technology of movement and communication contribute in a cinematic experience of rapidly changing images and a mixture of intertwining

activities, continuity and discontinuity, motion and stasis, cooperation and competition (fig.9). The fantastic landscape is shaped simply by the use of signs and lights: "*day is negated inside the casinos and night is negated on the Strip. The signs are, contradictorily, for day and night.*" (Venturi et al, 1972, p.31) The hotness of the outdoors space in contrast to the cool dark interior, the strong iconographic symbolism of the place combined with the lightness of its construction immerse the visitors into new roles and illusions. Anybody can turn into anything during his stay there. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour place the powerful iconography of Las Vegas within the context of the world's greatest "pleasure zones" and suggest that symbolism and allusion are able to produce a spatial "other" and an allegorical architecture (Venturi et al., 1972, p.58). Similarly to Koolhaas' arguments on Coney Island, Learning from Las Vegas suggests that the architecture of the fantastic – even if this is made out of light bulbs and billboards – is necessary to supplement the inefficient reality – or the dull Modernity – and create new "hyper-realities".

Figure 9: Upper Strip, driving north, Las Vegas.

The Coney Island and Las Vegas examples designate America as the platform for the illusory and the fantastic. Going back to Baudrillard's characterisation of America as the place of an enacted utopia, multiple questions arise: what made America in the 1970s different from the rest of the world and able to stage the hyperreal and, most importantly, is it still different from the rest of the world or are we all turning into

potential sites to stage fantasylands? Baudrillard's response is to speculate that there was neither the primitive accumulation of time nor the centuries-long accumulation of the truth-principle there (Baudrillard, 1993, p.251). That put America into the position of living in an eternal present and within a continuous condition of simulation. This is what Baudrillard calls "enacted utopia": "*a utopia can be achieved only in simulation, not at all in the sense that it is false, of course, but in the sense that the question of true and false cannot even arise. We have entered a very singular hyperspace.*" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.245) Thus simulation abolishes any distinction between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false and this hyperspace introduces its own rules and its own realities.

The hyperreal due to simulation for Baudrillard comes disconnected from the reference to any original being, the essence of the things, or the concept of an original territory. It no longer has to do with the notions of the double or the mirror as there are no precedents for it. It is "*the generation by models of a real without origin or reality*" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.1). Hence in simulation, it is the representation that precedes the territory and in fact generates this territory, but most interestingly, this territory is a matter of no particular importance. The reason for this is that the imaginary of the representation no longer exists, but instead, it "*disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive*" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.2). Therefore the mythic background of things disappears in favour of the simulation. If anything that looks real is real, this real coincides with the models of simulation and is always and infinitely reproducible through models of control and code. This real does not lie between the ideal and the negative according to Baudrillard, but only exists for procedural reasons, without meanings or imagination to envelop it. This "other" real is produced by a system of signs that dominate referencing simply themselves, denoting that there is nothing behind. Consequently hyperreality has nothing to do with the appearance of things, but instead is a matter of absolute simulation that bears no relation to any reality and absorbs any sort of representation in the form of a simulacrum: "*(the image) has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum*" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6).

If the real is no longer possible, what happens to illusion? Within this context of hypersimulation Baudrillard argues that it is impossible to isolate the process of simulation from the non-simulation – or the process of the real from the hyperreal –

therefore staging illusion is also impossible. In this case America does not stand for the (empty) land that allows the hyperreal to happen, but instead it is eventually becoming this land of hyperreality in its entirety. The example of Disneyland illustrates this argument. According to Baudrillard, this playful and hallucinatory construction constitutes a masked reality trying to confirm and celebrate the American way of life and the American values: Disneyland's imagery is presented as a "*deterrent machine*" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.13) that restores the "myth" of reality at the outside. It is its apparent hyperreality that makes the rest of the world appear real, while it is being absorbed by its fiction. Baudrillard here suggests that within the topography of a real space Disneyland creates this other space that not only rejects the authenticity of the original territory but it also attempts to extend its constructed reality beyond its boundaries. The aim is to conceal the fact that Disneyland is the "real" country and that "real" America is Disneyland. Thus the real is no longer real. Just like Žižek's passion for the Real that leads into absolute virtuality, these hyperreal spaces exist to reinforce the hyperreality of the rest of the world. Consequently Disneyland, shopping malls, and – why not – virtual worlds are simply media of the culture of simulation concealing the fact that everything is simulation.

If the need for the "more-than-real" has absorbed the world into virtuality where the real is no longer possible, then what is the difference between this world's virtuality and the virtual reality produced by computers? The world of simulation described above is a world eliminated of any context, a space emptied of functions and distanced from any historical and cultural references, that transcends the earthly materiality in order to give space to the image and subsequently identify itself with the image. Here the representation comes before the territory and generates the territory, and iconography imposes an infinite present, an enacted – according to Baudrillard – or degenerated – according to Marin – utopia. Is there a long distance between this condition and the digitally constructed virtual worlds? In Second Life islands appear and disappear in the virtual ocean due to demand. The territory comes up – "emerges" – only when there is something to be hosted on it, an event, a function, a business, or an activity. And when the space is no longer in use, or when the owner stops paying the tax called "maintenance fee" for it, the island ceases to exist. Even with smaller parcels of land that are sold by one resident to another, it depends on the new owner whether s/he keeps the content of the property, the "terraforming" and anything built on it, or if he restores

the ground to default and start anew. In representational space the activity on the digital ground not only defines the ground but it is almost the prerequisite for the existence of the ground. And anything that is built on this ground is a visualisation of one's intentions, imagination or ideals. An entire iconographic space envelops individuals' actions and interactions.

8.6 Simulations

Robert Venturi et al. in "*Learning from Las Vegas*" (1972), Rem Koolhaas in "*Delirious New York*" (1978), Jean Baudrillard in "*Simulacra and simulation*" (1994), Umberto Eco in "*Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*" (1995) describe America as the land of simulation. Theme parks, signs, lights, and replicas of great historical monuments attempt to supplement the "insufficient" reality with virtuality and end up forming a complex and fascinating world in which the real disappears. Although this hyperreal – and also surreal – environment and its forthcoming extensions may have seemed extraordinary in the 1970s when Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour talked about iconography as a phenomenon of architectural communication, or later when Baudrillard and Eco identified the desire for a "more-than-real" world generated by code and models, it is construed differently within the context of digitisation. In recent times virtual reality is also generated by the superimposition of electronic networks in the physical world and the free flow of information in the form of image, sound, and/or text. Digital imagery similarly supplements "insufficient" reality creating hyperreal conditions, setting apart the question about copies and their original, and merging everything into a hybrid whole. Three different examples of hyperreality are here discussed to approach the virtualisation of space and the question of the role of groundedness.

8.6.1 *California: Replicas in an empty landscape.*

In "*Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*" (1995) Umberto Eco describes how the European past can be reconstructed and thus re-experienced on the coast of California, in between amusement parks and fantasylands. Wax museums, collections of replicas, and museums where original artwork meets simulated artwork illustrate the relation of the American culture with the past, and consequently with the present and the future and

form an absurd, yet very symbolic landscape. The components of this landscape all declare to be "realer than real". In the innumerable wax museums historical figures, like Julius Caesar and Marie Antoinette, stand equally next to fantastic characters that never existed, like Tom Sawyer and Alice in Wonderland. In art galleries, original artwork and historical buildings that have been bought, dismantled and rebuilt in place (in total or partially) are accompanied with others that couldn't be transferred and for these reason have been reconstructed anew. Altogether, one has the opportunity to witness several versions of Michelangelo's "Davids" and "Pietás", tens of "Mona Lisas" and "Last Suppers" by Leonardo da Vinci (in one case reproduced in three dimensions), combined by replicas of Renaissance Palazzos and Ancient Greek temples. As mentioned above, in hyperreal America everything that looks real is real. The sign, disengaged from its reference, becomes the "real thing" that becomes identical to the "completely fake". The formula, according to Eco, is simple (here, on J. Paul Getty Museum):

"*Put your objects all in a row with explanatory labels in a neutral setting. In Europe the neutral setting is called the Louvre, Castello Sforzesco, Uffizi, Tate Gallery (just a short walk from Westminster Abbey). It is easy to give a neutral setting to visitors who can breathe in the Past a few steps away, who reach the neutral setting after having walked, with emotion, among venerable stones. But in California, between the Pacific on one hand and Los Angeles on the other, with restaurants shaped like hats and hamburgers, and four-level freeways with ten thousand ramps, what do you do? You reconstruct the villa of the Papyruses. You put yourself in the hands of the German archaeologist, taking care that he doesn't overdo; you place your busts of Hercules in a construction that reproduces a Roman temple; and if you have the money, you make sure that your marble comes from the original places of the model, that the workers are all from Naples, Carrara, Venice, and you also announce this. Kitsch? Perhaps. But in the Hearst Castle sense? Not exactly. In the sense of the Palace of Living Arts or the magic rooms of the Madonna Inn? The Venus of Milo with arms? Absolutely not.*" (Eco, 1995, p.33)

The desire for the perfect imitation and the placement of this imitation next to the others create a new condition, to which reality will always be inferior. This makes America, as Baudrillard and Eco argue, an empty space, suspended from any historical, cultural, or geographical dimension. In the place where Disneyland merges all historical periods in

an atemporal mode in order to erase any distinction between reality and fantasy, and where in Las Vegas one finds Venetian palazzos next to Egyptian monuments, all housing casinos and hotels, such appositions become the only way to present history, and the only way to construct a "reality", a real story out of it. The ground here resembles a blank page, taking its character from the artefacts that are placed on it.

8.6.2 *The Beijing World Park: A landscape that simulates the world*

Figure 10: Image from the Beijing World Park website

One would think that in the age of digitisation, where the Internet allows everyone to explore the world's most famous constructions – and Virtual Reality enables their three-dimensional reproduction – in various ways, there would be no need for the Californian museums of the 1990's that simulate the history of European Art aligned with "duck-shaped" buildings and Mickey Mouse in the American landscape. However an entertainment park in China rejects this. The "*Beijing World Park*" is a theme park in the southwest part of Beijing that boasts giving its visitors the chance to see the whole world without even having to leave Beijing (fig.10). The 46.7 hectares park first opened in 1993 and it receives 1.5 million visitors annually (China.org.cn, 2005), most of them Chinese. The park is modelled on the globe, representing the oceans and the continents by their most famous landmarks. The Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, the Acropolis, the London Tower Bridge, the Taj Mahal, the Sphinx, the Grand Canyon, the Sydney Opera House, the Statue of Liberty, the White House, the Capitol, even a miniature of the Great Wall are only few of the replicas that can be found there, made out of their original materials, forming a continuously evolving landscape. Every attraction is placed in the park according to its location on the – real world – map, scaled down

appropriately in order to fit to the environment. Inside each different "region", various cultural activities and performances are staged to create the proper atmosphere. As the 2008 Olympic Games Website describes: "*lawns in the park are dotted with 100 well-known sculptures, among them the Statue of Liberty, the Little Mermaid from Copenhagen, Michelangelo's David and the Venus de Milo*" (Beijing 2008, 2008).

The park is also the subject of the Chinese film "*The World*", directed by Jia Zhangke (2004), who presents a discontented vision of contemporary China by focusing on the lives of people who work at several positions in the park. The protagonist is a young female dancer, Tao, whose life takes place almost exclusively within "The World". She and her boyfriend, a security guard named Taisheng, strive for a better life outside the park, but any attempt to exist beyond the boundaries of this manufactured world appears despairing and uncertain. Tao is depicted as living a life split between the spectacular illuminated stage of her show and the dark corridors backstage, the crowded dressing rooms and the depressing performers' accommodation (fig. 11-20) – that is, a life that moves between the inside and the outside of fiction. The protagonists go about their everyday dreary and repetitive lives, while in the background the Taj Mahal, the Pisa tower and the Manhattan skyline form a bizarre and continuous recombinant landscape that envelops them. The Eiffel Tower, centrally positioned to be visible from anywhere in the park, acts as a point of reference and orientation. The main advertising slogan of the park: "see the world without ever leaving Beijing" is repeatedly heard throughout the film, juxtaposed with the protagonists' dreams to acquire a passport and abandon the country hoping for a better future.

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Figures 11-20: Stills from The World (2004).

8.6.3 *The Frank Lloyd Wright Museum: A Virtual Reality landscape*

In recent times virtual worlds have attempted to recreate the world as the Beijing World Park does, free from physical constraints. Second Life clearly does so in the sense that one can possibly find any famous building's representation among its thousand virtual islands, some randomly placed all over the world and others put one next to the other. An interesting example is that of the Frank Lloyd Wright virtual museum in Second Life, launched at the beginning of 2010. The museum operated under a licensing agreement from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation for educational purposes and aimed at recreating the work of the architect on a digital island named Usonia. On this island, simulations of a number of the most famous works by Wright were positioned, some of which were used as museums and archives of the architect's work, while others were simply open to the [virtual] public, available for exploration. The main buildings of the site – the museum, the visitor's centre, the shop, and the iconic Falling Water – were centrally arranged, mediated by an intense landscaping formation, paying tribute to the architect's passionate concern for the interrelationship

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of buildings with their natural environment. A series of other important buildings by the architect were also placed nearby, forming a neighbourhood reminiscent of a typical American suburban district. All the buildings were carefully modelled and rendered to display the original materials both on the exterior and the interior, accompanied with the appropriate furniture in an attempt to immerse the visitors within the simulation. The buildings of an architect whose work was so much about the nature of the site, rootedness and the interrelation of the building with the setting and the environment, were represented on an artificial digital ground, in a row, all archived and labelled (fig. 21-5). An assortment of buildings – originally scattered across the United States – modelled the one next to the other and labelled appropriately may create a bizarre and rather surreal environment, however it bears little difference to Umberto Eco's description of the American museums of simulations. Through a series of interactive three-dimensional models, and also photos and digital reproductions of the original drawings made by the architect, this virtual museum aims at recreating an atmosphere more affecting than any original experience, as it would have been impossible for anyone to see and experience all these buildings together, the one after the other. Interestingly, in less than a year from its launch, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation had to withdraw the license to the Virtual Frank Lloyd Wright Museum in Second Life and Usonia disappeared from the Second Life world (Au, 2010b). One of the main reasons for the termination of the former agreement was reportedly that the Foundation was not happy with the fact that the architect's intellectual property was widely sold via the Second Life Marketplace. The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation's reproductions were not to be reproduced[7].

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[7] As Rowan Derryth, Virtual Museums Inc. Board Member argues: "*the most surprising complaint the Foundation aimed at us was the erroneous assumption that items on the SL Marketplace which were being sold under the name Frank Lloyd Wright (and of course not approved by the Foundation) were somehow the responsibility of the FLWVM/VMI*" (Derryth, 2010).

Figures 21-5: The Frank Lloyd Wright Museum in Second Life (Antonopoulou, 2010)

8.7 Towards Grounded Claims

"*The simulacrum, in rising to the surface, causes the Same and the Like, the model and the copy, to fall under the power of the false (phantasm). It renders the notion of hierarchy impossible in relation to the idea of the order of participation, the fixity of distribution, and the determination of value. It sets up the world of nomadic distributions and consecrated anarchy. Far from being a new foundation, it swallows up all foundations, it assures a universal collapse, but as a positive and joyous event, as de-founding (effondement).*" (Deleuze, 1983, p.53)

In "*Plato and the Simulacrum*", Gilles Deleuze (1983) analyses the Platonic theory of Ideas as a process of drawing differences between the "thing" itself and its various images, between the original and the copy, between the model and the simulation. According to Deleuze, to share something means to possess, at best, second-hand, and this initiates a process of third- and forth-hand possession, "continuing to the nth degree of debasement", until one possesses no more than a simulacrum. Copies constitute "second-hand possessors" and well-grounded claimants of the Idea, authorised by resemblance, while simulacra stand for "groundless claims", built on disparity, difference, and dissimilarity, referencing the model of the "Other". Consequently, the domination of the simulacra aims at the subversion of the world, and contains a power that would reject the copy and the original, the model and the representation. As quoted above, the prevalence of the simulacra would suggest a process of "de-founding", a condition of absolute groundlessness that would diminish any essence of the things. This could explain the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation's concern about the virtual museum: it is not the fact that the architect's buildings are being reproduced that is at stake, but the uneasy feeling that this infinite reproduction – followed by an unlimited circulation – might diminish or even taint the value of the architect's work. Here, the

problem is neither the absence of a material ground, nor the fact that the architect's buildings were represented as one next to the other, extracted from their history and their original context. Instead, it was the construction of a "groundless claim", a groundless fantasy that leads nowhere. Similarly, the issue raised from the "World" film does not have to do with the fact that the replicas of the famous buildings of the Beijing World Park stand on a piece of earthly ground that that is emptied and suspended from its earthly reality, but rather, with the fact that – despite this suspension – there will always be a need for well-grounded fantasies. Here, the life of the female protagonist is experienced through the domination of the fantasy that she is forced to act out (in order to please the spectator/consumer). However the reality that she experiences at the backstage is equally more awful. Living between these two worlds, she is instinctively driven by yet another fantasy construction, the real world beyond the simulation, into which she dreams of escaping. Then, maybe, there can be no attachment without fantasy, even if the dream object to which we are attached has its value because it seems more real than the clearly virtual from which we are escaping. Most generally, what matters in this virtual reality world that we all experience – regardless of its digital or physical construction – is not to preserve the native/original ground, but to make sure that we are still able to create well-grounded fantasies in order to invest our [digitally or physically constructed] grounds with meanings and attachments, and, reversely, to build [physical or digitally mediated] connections that will infuse these grounds and create meaningful contexts. The aim in digitisation is not to overcome fiction, but to create meaningful fantasies that would help us to re-create with both physical and digital means a ground that supports our wishes and desires.

It is exactly this need for well-grounded fantasies and well-grounded claims that this research project aimed to address. The need for situatedness may have disengaged from the materiality of any sort of environment in an epoch that stands beyond the corporeal body; nevertheless it can never be based upon groundless claims.

Chapter 9. Conclusion: The Place of Context

9.1 Everyday Spaces of Virtuality: Google and Facebook Office Spaces

Although new technologies are not responsible for the construction of the virtual but only for the popularization of the "computerised virtual" as described extensively through this thesis, they are probably behind its vast expansion beyond the boundaries of theme parks and shopping malls, in the streets and in everyday life experience. Wireless telecommunication networks have contributed to the creation of complex spaces that mediate between materiality and information and produce illusory effects. Moreover, the more digitisation becomes part of the everyday life, the stronger the interrelation between virtual and physical spaces becomes: not only do virtual worlds simulate the physical environment, but also the design of the physical world increasingly draws its references from cyberspace. In effect Internet, software, and social media corporations like Google Inc. and Facebook Inc. tend to design their – physical – workspaces in novel ways that refer more to computer game environments or even to social media platforms. These ludic environments, which resemble playgrounds or cosy living rooms rather than offices, intend to radically change the work experience and increase productivity in spaces that encourage collaboration and interaction. Such design concepts were initially developed in Silicon Valley, California, where the major Internet and software companies' headquarters are located, in accordance with the hyperreal Californian styles, but have recently spread around the world following the expansion of their businesses.

Google is probably a pioneer in this unconventional approach to the workspace. The colourful headquarters in California (called "the Googleplex"), along with smaller-scale versions in New York, London, and Zurich, attempt to show that working there is a fun and enjoyable process. The place looks like a miniature theme park. Egg-shaped and spacecraft-like meeting pods, thematic common rooms, hallways full with exercise balls, firemen's poles and slides to allow easy access between the floors, English country house styled libraries, workout rooms, aquarium relaxing rooms, and games rooms compose this extraordinary environment (fig. 1-6). The old fashioned office cubicles have been replaced by shared worktables and special attention is given to

meeting places and common rooms: "*whiteboards are everywhere, allowing ideas to be written down wherever they are thought up and there is a heavy emphasis on the idea that work and play can co-exist.*" (Wakefield, 2008) The employees are encouraged to find a balance of work and pleasure, from which they could profit in new ideas and collaborations. They are free to occupy any space available for their tasks, to take a break and challenge someone to a billiard game, get some rest lying on a hammock, or enjoy a coffee and a snack – all provided by the company. The photo-coverage of these spaces through magazine and blog articles displays them doing all these things. By default, the 20% of engineers' time is to be devoted in research to other than their key objectives, so that they might come up with something new. If employees have children, they do not need to worry about them – or feel separated from them – as a nursery inside the building is in operation at any time. The idea of a "fun office" becomes for Google a symbol of the flat and open working structure of the company and represents the free flow of information throughout. Nelson Mattas, vice-president of engineering suggests: "*The lava lamps, free food and games are all part of the Google culture. It is informal and a structure that isn't dictated from the top*" (Wakefield, 2008). The pure, clean, simple, and fun attitude promoted though Google's multiple applications is here transformed into real space that reinforces the company's initial ideals.
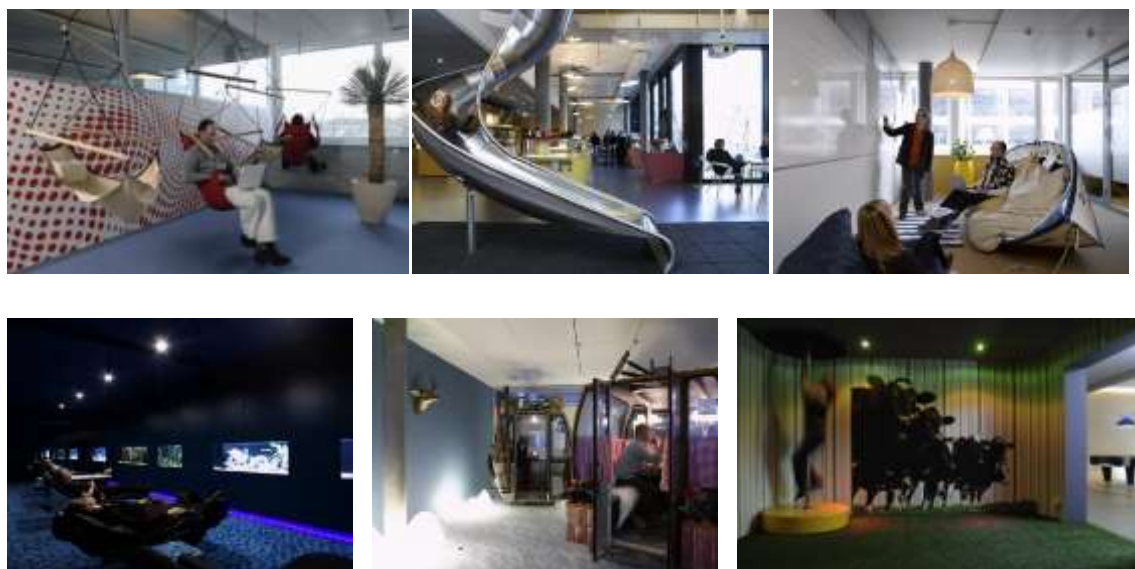
Figures 1-6: Google Offices, Zurich (Searer, 2008).

If Google offices look like a playground, Facebook offices in Palo Alto, California resemble more of a reality show stage set (fig. 7-12). The architects here claim to have

worked in collaboration with the employees in order to create the desirable workspace. The Facebook platform itself was used to organise polls within the company on the design decisions, to post photos of the construction progress, and keep everyone informed of the developments. An advisory board made out of employees from all departments contributed at all the different stages of the project, from the design process to advising on the finishes (Basulto, 2009). The former industrial aesthetic of the building has been maintained so that the high ceiling and the skylights, along with the open plan layout, give out a sense of transparency and publicness. This open plan dynamic gives space to areas of worktables, a large meeting area that can transform into an impromptu auditorium, more private meeting rooms, relaxation spaces and common rooms that look like private living rooms without partitions around them, placed in the middle of nowhere. Recreational opportunities involve an outdoor basketball court and indoor table-tennis tables. Many walls and spaces are left unfinished to be appropriated by the employees, who are free to write on the walls, add their personal artwork and rearrange the furniture according to their needs to create a continuously evolving environment. "*The design takes its inspiration from the patchwork nature of Facebook users and employees, bringing together seemingly disparate elements to form a cohesive pattern and using colour and interior spacing to create neighbourhoods within the open plan space. The company's executives sit in central areas, accessible to all employees. Large lounges and open spaces provide venues for the community to come together. A kitchen and café continue Facebook's tradition of providing gourmet meals to staff at all hours, while drinks and snacks are available at micro-kitchens throughout the headquarters.*" (Basulto, 2009) Somehow the principles that rule Facebook are all readable here. Within this vast, continuous "funspace" that has been created by individuals' contribution, everything appears visible, accessible, and traceable. Employees are encouraged to create their own "neighbourhoods" – networks of collaboration according to their common interests. And the combination of the high ceilings with the few, low partitions give the impression that everything is being recorded, as if taking place within a television show stage set.

Figures 7-12: Facebook Offices, Palo Alto (Basulto, 2009).

Comparing even to the most comfortable and enjoyable workspace that most people have seen or experienced, the workspaces described above appear like fantastic spaces and products of the imagination. However, within the context of virtualisation, these scenes look like normal environments of everyday life. Clearly, through their workspaces, both companies aim at displaying nothing less than what their digital presence suggests. On the one hand, Google's office design gives out this pure, fun, and playful aspect of a company that creates applications that make life easier. On the other, Facebook illustrates this transparent, open world made out of networked people and their personal contribution to a collective construction. In reality these workspaces constitute physical manifestations of the digital image that the companies attempt to communicate. And although spatial, they simply constitute intermediate stages of images that transform into other images. In effect, in both cases, a webpage [image] becomes an office [space], only to be photographed [converted to image again] in order to illustrate a blog post [image] that will reinforce the image of the webpage. And it is through this sequence of images that the company – that here identifies with the webpage-image – appears more "real" and honest to its clients. Thus space becomes only a medium in the creation of a more convincing image. In the world of virtualisation, large scale companies – comprising of thousands of employees that work in large building complexes – are reduced to images of webpages and blog posts in order to become more powerful. The workspace, following the example of Disneyland,

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creates atemporal, utopic spaces, with ample common rooms destined not for recreation but for collaborations that might produce new ideas, and with integral nurseries so that employees do not need to worry about their children or leave the office. Is this the transition from all work to all play that Donna Haraway described (1991, p.161), or rather is it the complete absorption of play, and indeed the totality of life (the nurseries, etc.), by work – a work that, in its complete identification with the life of the employee, never ceases? Similarly to Baudrillard's thinking on Disneyland (1994) described in Chapter 8, Google and Facebook offices do not constitute the realisation of the imaginary and the [computer-generated] virtual in real space, but instead a mask that aims at restoring the myth of the reality, in this case not only at the outside [physical world], but the "inside" as well, in cyberspace.

9.2 The Question of Context

The above examples bring up again the issue of the "virtualisation" of the physical environment. The term is here employed to describe the displacement of conditions and behaviours that apply in cyberspace into the physical world, which results in our perception of the physical environment and everything happening within it as "virtual" – in other words as a series of projections that reduce individuals, things and situations into their images. Although within the framework of this research cyberspace has been regarded as a continuation and a reconfiguration of the physical world through the freedoms – but also the restrictions – that digitisation has introduced, the phenomenon of virtualisation also suggests a reverse situation: the expansion of the conditions and the relationships of cyberspace back into the material world, in an attempt to infuse it with information and at the same time to degrade its materiality and complexity. As this research has extended from the digital reconstruction of worlds to the expansion of the "computerised virtual" in the physical world, virtualisation has already been studied in various forms here. The analysis of Flash Mobs in particular has explained how digital communities may transform into physical actions in the city, and how an entire culture based on individuals' ways and means within cyberspace has been developed and then exported in the physical world. More specifically, Chapter 3 discussed the construction of the avatar body and whether this suggests an experimentation with the human body or a composition of an image following consumerist models, and how these reflect back

on the subjects' visions of the world. Further, Chapter 4 questioned mass assemblies in their physicality, whereas Chapter 5 asked how effective such assemblies can be in their attempt to change the world when they constitute physical enactments of virtual collectivities. Finally, through the parallel study of theme parks and virtual environments, Chapter 8 described how virtualisation may suggest the abolishment of the idea of the ground as meaningful and the elimination of any context for the sake of the image. This analysis raises multiple questions concerning the significance of the contemporary environment and our actions within it. Is the world of digitisation infused in information and thus augmented in terms of meanings, connections, and attachments, or is it instead transforming into a series of projections, following the construction and the culture of cyberspace? After the attempt to approach the "where" of things in this complicated world and their relationships with materiality and symbolism, it is worth discussing what makes the context for this "where" and whether this accordingly becomes subject to the information that superimposes the physical environment. This discussion is very significant here because, as designers, and before the generation of any particular concept, we need to understand what is that we design for [place], as well as to what we need to respond to [context] through architecture.

If we consider the body as an open-ended entity in an ever-connected environment, the "where" of which we wish to approach, the question arises as to whether the idea of the context of things, as a setting, a surrounding, or even as a stage where things happen, change within digitisation, due to the endless connectivity and the confusion of the digital and the physical realm. If place is the "where" of things in the world and context suggests the wider setting of this "where", what is it that defines this setting in the world? In recent times, "cloud computing" suggests that we are able to use computer resources delivered to us over a network, so that we can store our data – not only our archives and files but also our digital extensions – online, in order to be able to access them from anywhere, and thus "live in the cloud", as most web service providers advertise. The "cloud" here is not an ethereal as the clouds suspended in the atmosphere, but only a symbolization of the possibility to store all the information that we need in data centres located "elsewhere" that we can retrieve from anywhere. Being in the cloud means that there is no longer a single place for the human body, but a complex composition of "wheres", all gathered by this body. Accordingly, if this "where" of things today is composed by multiple "elsewheres", many questions arise

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about the definition of context. Does the discussion about context refer to a visual, a historical, or a functional setting, and what makes the "immediate" surrounding of things when this study has suggested the end of a geographically ordered space as a determinant factor of placeness? Due to the hybridity of things that has been extensively analysed here, it is also important to ask whether the surrounding of things is something that we may perceive when physically present to a place, or possibly an image and a virtual setting, or even a series of images of things that exist in different locations around the world.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines context as "*the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood*", and in addition to that, as "*the parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning*" (Oxford Dictionaries). According to this definition, the context has to do with the conditions within something occurs, which are not independent from its existence, but instead they contribute in the determination of its meaning, and reversely, they are crucial for its understanding. In architecture, context often refers to the spatial and experiential settings that designers need to respond to and make space for. Defined as the setting, context is by default distinct from the activity that takes place within it, and as such distinct from the body and its place, however it assigns meanings to them and consequently it contributes to the process of emplacement. Although sometimes associated with the physical site of architecture, the plot and its surroundings, which results into a discussion about physical characteristics and a superficial critique of aesthetics and forms, evidently context refers to a wider range of conditions such as culture, meanings, connections, and also symbolism, memory, tradition, economy, politics, environment, and most generally as a container of meanings and relations, which make the task of responding to through architecture a very complicated process. For some, context becomes a matter of interpretation of things (Tschumi, 2004, p.12), while for others architecture becomes more of a communication tool that needs to respond to a certain iconography (Venturi et al., 1977). In recent times, the question of context comes to the foreground as connectivity and the visions for globalisation trigger the discussion about the development of a universal civilization and a common style that does not need to respond to specific local conditions. Thus the peculiarities of a particular place become marginalised in favour of a "universalism" and consequently

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the understanding of context shifts from regional and traditional characteristics to the development of a "common ground" that appeals, if possible, to everyone. In his famous essay "*Toward a critical regionalism: six points for an architecture of resistance*" (1998), Kenneth Frampton relates the former condition with regard to groundedness and the latter with the establishment of placelessness, arguing that it is important to mediate between a nostalgic historicism and a universalism that connects to a mass consumer culture: "*the bulldozing of an irregular topography into a flat site is clearly a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute placelessness, whereas the terracing of the same site to receive the stepped form of a building is an engagement in the act of 'cultivating' the site*" (Frampton, 1998, p.26). Again, the ground here becomes a depository of meanings to either respect or abolish. However, as seen previously, digitisation does not aim at the negation of the local to the advantage of the universal, but instead constructs complex conditions upon connections, and combines elements from the past and the future, from the approximate and the distant, from the reality and the imagination, in order to construct meaningful grounds, either physical or synthetic, material or digital. Therefore, if architecture aims at "concretizing" meanings, attachments, connections in order to create meaningful places, then the open-endedness of the contemporary world calls architecture to respond to the complex relationships developed, and engage in an interplay of materiality and immateriality, and also of context and activity.

9.3 Context in Media Space

As this research has very often used the method of looking into synthetic worlds in order to understand how we reconstruct certain spatial conditions digitally/immaterially and how this relates to our perception of them, it will at this point explore the meaning of context within computational systems. Such account is very significant if we also consider the ways that information infuses everyday life, increasingly confusing the boundaries between the conceptual and the material. In his paper "*What we talk about when we talk about context*" (2004), Paul Dourish discusses the meaning of context in representational space and argues for an alternative, dynamically defined model for it. According to Dourish, the notion of context has a double meaning: on the one hand it suggests a technical term that refers to the background of human action within

computational systems and the methods developed to support it, and on the other hand, drawing references from the real world, it stands for the social settings of the things that are taking place. Interestingly, context as a representational problem is not particularly different from the architectural context as described above. It refers to the place and character of nearby people and objects, to the environment and the time, to the identity of the surrounding people, communities, physical and digital objects, whereas it also gives space to changing and mobile entities, such as connectivity, communication, and social conditions. Most generally, as Dourish summarizes, context in the human-computer interaction is considered as a form of information, as a delineable entity that can be estimated in advance and as such a stable condition, and finally, as something that is clearly distinct from the content, which is the activity that takes place in it, so that "*the content or activity is 'within' while the context is 'without'*" (Dourish, 2004, p.22). However he has a different take on this definition, arguing that context is in fact not a representational but an interactional problem. Thus, opposite to the definitions given above, Dourish suggests that "*contextuality is a relational property that holds between objects or activities*" (Dourish, 2004, p.22) so that what matters is not whether something is in or out of context but instead whether and how it relates to it through a certain activity. Moreover, in this scope the context cannot be outlined in advance, but always dynamically, which makes it an unstable and occasional condition, the relevance of which cannot be made in advance. Therefore context and content are not two separable entities, an argument which takes us to the definition of an activity-based context, based on the use, the enactment and the appropriation of the environment. According to Dourish "*the important of context is not what it is but what it does in interaction – the role that it plays and the ways in which it is sustained and managed*" (Dourish, 2004, p.28). In this way, context escapes the fixity and stability of a given environment and becomes the outcome of practical action, standing at the same time against any predefined times and places (Dourish, 2004, p.28). Then, going back to the initial Oxford Dictionary definition of context as the circumstances in terms of which something can be fully understood, Dourish similarly suggests that context delineates the ways in which actions are rendered meaningful, by adding that both meanings and context become open-ended in a process of mutual exchange and definition, and thus closely linked.

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9.4 The Place of Context

The analysis of the human-computer interaction that Dourish builds up shifts the meaning of context from the container of meanings and relations that is independent from what is contained within, to an understanding of context as inseparable from its content. Fixity, stability, established order, give their place to relativity, activity, and open-endedness, as representation is replaced by interaction. This way of thinking naturally questions the role of context as a representation and an independent container in the physical or, better, in this hybrid world as well.

The investigation of the notion of groundedness in the second section of this thesis reflects and extends this line of study. The Flash Mob at the Grey Monument in Newcastle, for instance, described in Chapter 6, where hundreds of people instantly gather around the monument to form an "out-of-nowhere" street party that lasts for less than ten minutes does not only outline an event-based place, but it also a non-conventional understanding of context. The context of this performance is not so much the shopping centre of the city, or the monument that has stood there since 1838, as it is the virtual community of the flash-mobbers itself (the individuals that commit themselves in the participation of the event as without a virtual mass assembly first, a Flash Mob would have been impossible) and the means that have put it together and have mediated in its transformation in a physical performance.

In "*Event Cities 3: Concept vs. Context vs. Content*" (2004), Bernard Tschumi calls for a definition of context that goes beyond the visual dimension and any aesthetic conservatism to include factors such as history, geography, culture, politics, and economy (p.11). To the tension between context and content analysed above via Paul Dourish, Tschumi adds another: context is not independent from the concept either, but the two also engage in a complex relationship, and altogether context, content, and concept, their interrelations and their conflicts compose the contemporary urban culture. Thus a concept may be contextualised if it adapts to the current political, social, or physical setting, and conversely, a context may be conceptualised by drawing the particular characteristics of the context at the centre of attention (Tschumi, 2004, p.11). Consequently context becomes a matter of ideology and a personal understanding of things: "*rather than a given, context is something defined by the observer, in the same way that a scientific fact is influenced by the observation of the scientist. Contexts are*

framed and defined by concepts, just as the reverse is true. Context is not a fact; it is always a matter of interpretation." (Tschumi, 2004, p.12) Not far from Dourish's approach, Tschumi also suggests a dynamic definition of context, based on individuals' activities, understandings, and cultures, and an "event-based" context in the sense that it does not stay at the background of things, but it transforms and also it is being transformed by whatever takes place within.

If the "where" of things is no longer considered as a matter of physical locality, but a concentration of multiple differently constituted places through the human/cyborg body, context becomes accordingly composed by connections, attachments, and narratives. In his lecture titled "The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe" (2013), Bruno Latour argues that instead of engaging with the notion of the globe and any global thinking, and thus with unifying rather than composing the image of the world, we should shift from the model of the globe to the innumerable loops that slowly draw it:

"*It's not that suddenly the tiny human mind should be transported into global sphere that would anyway be much big for his or her tiny scale. It's instead that we have to weave ourselves, to cocoon ourselves within a great many loops, so that progressively thread after thread, the knowledge of where we reside, and on what we depend for our atmospheric condition can gain great relevance and feel more urgent. This slow operation of being wrapped in successive looping strings is what it means to be of this earth. And it has nothing to do with being human in nature, or human on the globe, it's rather a slow and painful progressive merging of cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic virtue, because of the way the loops are rendered more and more visible for instruments and art forms of all sorts. For each loop we become more sensitive and more responsive to the fragile envelops we inhabit.*"

Through the metaphor of the cyberspace that exists both everywhere and nowhere, this research has explored a wide range of connections that describe placeness and question context in this complicated world. The example of Second Life has outlined the complex relationships between the virtual and the real, which extends towards a different understanding of both the human body and its environment. The ways in which the users/residents contribute in the design of this new world, the fact that they wish to construct homes – either on artificially constructed grounds or suspended in the

virtual atmosphere – and the fact that all this engagement reflects back on their physical lives and infuses it with experiences, attachments, and feelings, suggests that it is through meaningful actions that we may construct meaningful worlds of all sorts of origins. Taking these ideas to the contemporary urban environment through the phenomenon of Flash Mobs, we must argue that in the electronic age, place is defined by the ways that we perform in spaces, and the ways that we invest them with meanings and narratives, even if these are temporary and electronically mediated. Flash Mobs have highlighted that within digitisation permanence may also be constructed digitally (since everything becomes recorded and permanently stored and as such searchable and fixed), while the physical becomes increasingly subject to the event and the ephemeral. Most generally, this research regards the world as networked and interactive. Similarly to Latour's thinking, it has studied being on the earth, inhabiting it, as the outcome of infinite connections – "*successive looping strings*" – that render us active, sensitive, and responsive to our environment. Here, connections, narratives, and attachments have been the media for the dissolution of the fixed and the stable, the established and the given, and also the original and the authentic, and finally the deconstruction of any pre-given ground, in favour of the reconstruction based on complex interrelationships and meaningful purposes.

9.5 Conclusion: towards "Well-Grounded Claims"

In its aim to study the interplay between the physical and the digital, this research examined the way in which the two come to permeate and structure one another: Second Life is saturated with "real-life" metaphors, and conversely, Flash Mobs are dense with allusions to cyberspace. Where the former takes features of the everyday material world and reproduces them inside a virtual world, the latter enacts online behaviours and "cybercultures" within the city. Although very contemporary, both phenomena should be understood as continuations of long standing cultural tendencies, with Flash Mobs as a post-modern re-enactment of earlier 20th century crowd orchestrations (of the kind studied by Siegfried Kracauer under the rubric of the "mass ornament") and disruptive events (such as those staged by the Situationists), and Second Life as an extension of utopian imaginaries into the interactive virtual community made possible by new technologies. Both of them carry forward the problematics of the understanding of place

and space in an increasingly complex world. Hence this thesis studied the two together, aiming not only to explain the transformation of the physical into the digital and vice versa, but to show, on the one hand, how deeply the digital world is embedded in the everyday life and, on the other, how this everyday life determines many virtual constructions. In a context where things and information come from "everywhere" and "nowhere" due to digitisation, it attempted to understand the significance of the "where" of things in this world, and how we construe this "where" today, by seeing what we call reality as a continuum that encompasses both the physical and the digital, and the body as open-ended and ever-connected and, as such, comprised of many different agencies and multiple interactions.

Hence Flash Mobs and Second Life have been, for the purpose of this research, vehicles for the study of contemporary groundedness and its re-coding by different means. Flash Mobs and similar activities have managed to establish an idea of a "lighter" ground that may appear and disappear due to the event and the happening. They have saturated cities based on the electronic networks that take place in them and thus they support the argument that the attachment to connections can be equally or even more meaningful than the attachment to the material world. Second Life, on the other hand, illustrates how the attachment to land denied in real life can be passionately played out within virtual worlds, again leading to a stronger sense of attachment to connections, and in pursuit of a – lighter again – ground that does not restrict us but supports us in a new way. Throughout this investigation, the initial hypothesis of this thesis, that the need for "situatedness" remains within hybrid or even entirely virtual constructions of space, has been confirmed and supplemented: this analysis has led to the identification of a persistent need for attachment in this complicated world, yet an attachment to the virtual, which may – or may not – later translate into some sort of materiality.

The first section of the thesis examined this central role of connections – and by extension the shift from the material to the virtual – in the constitution of the world as we inhabit it today. Chapter 2 discussed how the body is simultaneously reasserted, transcended, and augmented within digitisation, and thus built entirely upon connections. In Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor, the body becomes an active part of a highly technological and dynamic environment; it brings together conditions previously considered as incompatible, and it creates monstrous entities that establish

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new kinds of reality. Fiction and lived experience, imagination and material things blend together in unprecedented amalgamations. Every single cyborg body becomes a unique assemblage of organic and machinic parts, and of fears and desires, standing against anything pre-given and fixed, and most importantly against the ideas of the fixed body and the fixed place. Thus connections become tools for the reconstruction of the human body and by extension for the establishment of new relations between the body and the world. The world in its entirety translates into a field of connections. Taking this idea further, Chapter 3 challenged the way in which this newly conceptualised body that contains the "many within the one" is constructed and represented via new technologies. By examining the avatar body and its place within the multiplicity of the cyborg body, it has argued that embodiment is not about a fixed location or a static body, but instead about critical positioning and relativity. Compared to the "body without organs" as framed by Deleuze and Guattari, the cyborg body becomes first and foremost a virtual entity, liberated from physical constraints, and thus open to all possibilities. A body built upon connections gives space to experimentation, also exaggeration and excessiveness, and is oriented towards open-endedness. Gregory Little's and Peter Greenaway's "avatar" projects, each in its own unique way, play with bestiality and hybridity, fantasies, myths, and desires to express this open-endedness and to construct bodies that connect to an accordingly ever-connected world. Then Chapter 4 shifts the attention from the construction of the individual body to the construction of the body of the crowd in the digital age. The science fiction story of the "Flash Crowd" (Niven, 1973) suggestively anticipates both the practices of the Flash Mob and the world of Second Life to suggest that electronic communication does not simply challenge physical presence, but it also increasingly constitutes a pre-requisite for physical co-presence. In the case of the Flash Mob the crowd initially assembles virtually, to then become physically instantiated in the city. On the other hand, Niven's story read within the context of Second Life suggests that, even in representational space, the desire for co-presence and the need to be found with one another in public and be part of a collectivity remains as strong as ever. This chapter concludes the first section by arguing that if the physical space appears abstract and inadequate to gather individuals together so that they can build connections and attachments among them, then perhaps it is the role of information and connections to organic bodies (with hybridity superimposing physicality) to reconstruct co-presence and groundedness in complex ways.

Extending this line of study, the second section of this thesis examined the transformation of the notion of groundedness within a world perceived as a field of connections. The development of a telecommunicational civilization that is by default "ungrounded", putting the traditional concept of place as "groundedness" into question was the focus of Chapter 6. New technologies introduce new forms of ground, the construction of which is always a matter of re-construction and a re-composition of elements. Such grounds are composed of one's everyday reality and imagination, the past and the future, illustrating the exciting interplay of materiality and virtuality within digitisation. As seen extensively in the virtual property case study, the degree to which people invest in virtual worlds and attach to them highlights the great desire for the construction of a ground that supports but does not restrict us. Then, on the other hand, Chapter 7 attempted to describe utopia as a condition of no ground and no-place, and as such a generator of infinite possibilities. In the context of utopia it is not the process of negation alone that creates endless possibilities, but instead a condition of double opposition and double cancellation that creates the neutral, a self-referential condition that acts in full power. Thus the utopic narrative becomes a "*determinate type of praxis*" according to Fredric Jameson (1977, p. 6) instead of a plain form of representation, by projecting a double figure of affirmation and negation, reality and imagination, true and false, the in-between space of which cannot be located. It is only this utopic otherness – and always as a narrative that cannot transform into a material reality – that holds the potential to transcend the limitations of any present "reality" – and ground – and opens up infinite possibilities. Finally, after the discussion on groundedness and its transcendence, Chapter 8 analyses spaces of virtuality and virtualisation that regard the image as ground, and, based on these, questions the essence of the contemporary environment. This chapter cites examples – both physical and digital – that immerse us into virtuality, raising the question as to whether our experiences in the contemporary environment are composed by things or by the images of these things. To Robert Venturi this signifies the transformation of context into iconography, whereas to Jean Baudrillard this suggests the elimination of any sort of context. Thus from the digital Google Art Project to physical spaces such as Disneyland and Las Vegas, and from theme parks that simulate the world to virtual reality landscapes that feature buildings from the real world, leaving aside the distinctions between materiality and illusion, the copy and the original, the model and the representation, this section asks whether everyday life takes place in a meaningful environment or within a "virtual reality", or

better, in a *"real virtuality"*[1] (Castells, 2012). By questioning groundedness in its essence, it argues that well-grounded fantasies matter more than material grounds drained of meanings.

The point of departure is this thesis has been the expansion of the human body and the augmentation of the world through digital technologies, as well as the understanding of both body and world as open-ended in a new kind of way. The thesis has studied how bodies, communities, crowds transform within digitisation, and how the world diversifies and becomes re-distributed due to the digital reconstruction of grounds. It examined the ways that individuals attach to these digital grounds to create bonds and connections, and then the detachment from the physical ground and its signification, as well as the rejection of any sort of ground in order to generate endless possibilities. Finally, it explored how these virtual environments return to become materialised on "earth", resulting in a real-world simulation of digitised space. This phenomenon of virtualisation of the physical world occurs not just within the boundaries of shopping malls and theme parks today, but also within the culture of everyday life, and in the way that we understand the physical world and we perform in it. After this analysis, we must conclude that the need for connectedness does not cease to exist in the electronic age, but it shifts from the material to the virtual, with the term "virtual" here signifying not merely the digital but instead the fantasmatic, the "unrealised" that supplements the "real" with its imagery – as extensively described in Chapter 8. Therefore the need for "groundedness" remains, stronger than ever, in the form of a search for "well-grounded claims" and even "well-grounded fantasies" to support our existence within the multiplicity of things.

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[1] *"We live in a culture of not virtual reality, but real virtuality because our virtuality – meaning the internet networks – are a fundamental part of our reality."* (Castells, 2012)

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