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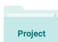

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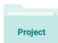

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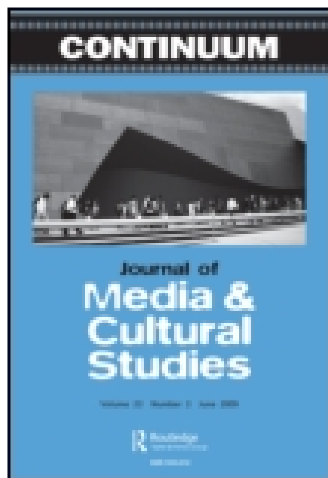

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What would Nietzsche have said about virtual reality? Dionysus and cyberpunk

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Within Nietzsche's mythological system, the Apolline dream world of the stage action is married to the Dionysian 'real' world of the satyr-chorus: what is born is the tragedy as a reflection of real life. However, neither Dionysus nor Apollo suggests a flight from reality into an abstract virtuality. Both are advocates of reality even though they attain the stage of reality only through a paradox: the Dionysian man manages to stay close to reality only through the dreamlike element of the Apolline. Nietzsche might have been against virtual reality (VR) because for him it is the tragic consciousness of the drunken gambler and not the self-righteous enjoyment of the cold technocrat that creates the Dionysian spirit. Nietzsche puts forward 'reality' as a transcendent interplay of the Apolline and the Dionysian. Nietzsche might, however, have had sympathies towards another, more interactive form of VR in which a Dionysian quantity constantly challenges too static forms of the Apolline, preventing it from becoming an official world. What is required is, rather, the correct management of a paradox already anticipated by Nietzsche.

In 1844, the year Nietzsche was born, Samuel F.B. Morse went to Congress to request an extension of the only existing telegraph line from Baltimore to New York. Some years later, hundreds of messages per day would be sent along several lines in the United States. The 'Victorian Internet' (Standage 1998) soon extended to Europe where, in 1852, an instant message was sent from London to Paris. During Queen Victoria's reign, 'a worldwide communications network whose cables spanned continents and oceans [. . .] revolutionized business practice, gave rise to new forms of crime, and inundated its users with a deluge of information [. . .] A technological subculture with its own customs and vocabulary was establishing itself' (viii).

Nietzsche could observe the rise of a globalizing system of communication during his lifetime; but what could he have anticipated about the Internet or about an apparently futuristic concept such as virtual reality (VR) as a virtual landscape made up of all information in the world? What could he have thought of a culture of simulation that has begun to conceptualize our thinking and, therefore, also our relationship with the real? The present article considers Nietzsche's potential reservations with the virtual taking into account his views on history and modernity by interpreting them within a contemporary context of economic and cultural globalization. Nietzsche's thoughts on the virtual are conceptually connected to his ideas about the tragic on one hand and to dialectics on the other. Most importantly, Nietzsche counters optimistic techno evangelism by putting

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forward the original Greek concept of the tragic. Most recently, the urbanist Mike Davis has called the 'gilded dreamworlds' that are overtaking the planet in the form of Disneyfied suburbs 'narcissistic withdrawals from the tragedies' of real life (Davis 2007, xvi). A re-evaluation of the Nietzschean idea of the tragic helps to formulate a criticism of those virtual stances that permeate everyday life in the contemporary world. Nietzsche anticipated the work of Heidegger, who held that the advance of simultaneity in technicized civilization suggests that 'time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples' (Heidegger 1956, 31). However, as the present article will show, a distinction needs to be made between different manifestations of VR, some of which Nietzsche might have disliked and some he might have supported.

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The tragic, the dramatic, the virtual

Nietzsche's philosophy is a critique of modern Western culture and its moral values, political values (democracy and egalitarianism), philosophical values (Platonism and all forms of metaphysical dualism), and religious (Christian) values. Nietzsche suggests new values transcending the nihilism that has so far governed European history under the influence of Christianity. Within this context, the notion of the tragic becomes predominant. No other philosopher has defined the tragic in more subtle terms than Nietzsche who, in fact, stated that the 'tragedy suggests that nobility is possible, that courage is admirable, and that even defeat can be glorious' (Kaufmann 1968, 349–50). While in his early work Nietzsche tended to defend the drama as compatible with the tragic, he later designed an anti-dialectical concept of the tragic that is *opposed* to the dramatic and is important in art while coming closer to an existential notion of play.

The tragic is different from the dramatic, which is pompous and full of pathos and often involved in dialectical calculations. Nietzsche insists that the tragic artist is not a (dramatic) pessimist, but rather a playful manipulator of tragic events. His concept of the Dionysian as the aesthetic and existential element of drunkenness puts forward the tragic as a positive power:

> Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types – *that* is what I called Dionysian, *that* is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. (Nietzsche 1966–77, 160/80)

At first sight, a dissociation of the tragic from the dramatic is difficult, which becomes clear when reading Philip Bagby's analysis of historical science in the twentieth century:

> In recent decades some historians have adopted what they call a 'tragic' view of history, by which they mean the assumption, not only that the good need not triumph at the end, but that it can never be fully realized because of the inherent limitations of human powers and human nature. This has been a useful corrective to the overweening optimism of the liberal historians, to their tendency to see everything in terms of the predestined victory of Reason and Democracy, Progress and its age-old battle with Reaction. But such a tragic view is still a moral view, it still interprets history in terms of good and evil. (Bagby 1959, 2)

However, tragedy is more than a drama with a bad ending. As long as history is interpreted in terms of good and evil, it is made to follow the model of the drama, but not that of the tragedy which reaches beyond good and evil as well as beyond optimism and pessimism. In this sense, the tragic is most clearly opposed to moralistic, progressive, dialectical Hegelian historical systems which view history as a dramatic – though optimistic – event.

Francis Fukuyama, the dean of all contemporary Hegelian 'End of History' visionaries, insists that Hegel's idea of History is 'implicit in our use of words like

"primitive" or "advanced," "traditional" or "modern," when referring to different types of human societies' (Fukuyama 1992, xii). Based on these understandings, Fukuyama describes a 'coherent development of human societies from simple tribal ones based on slavery and subsistence agriculture, through various theocracies, monarchies, and feudal aristocracies, up through modern liberal democracy and technologically driven capitalism' (ibid.). While Fukuyama's dialectical world theatre presents a drama with a 'good' ending, Nietzsche suggests a world which is modern without following any Hegelian scheme of civilizational perfection. He views the 'tragic' as a quality able to consider 'reality' in the way that it is, while simultaneously suggesting to us 'that life and the world are beautiful in spite of all the suffering, cruelty, and terrors of existence' (Kaufmann 1968, 347).

The contemporary economically and technologically developed world – even more than the world described by Bagby – has brought about the apparent loss of the tragic in culture and fostered the kinds of dialectics that Nietzsche disliked. First, civilization in industrialized countries has managed to exclude most of the tragic events that were still common in the lives of those born only a generation earlier, as illustrates in a description by Richard Sennett:

> Our parents and grandparents were filled with anxiety in 1940s, having endured the wreckage of the Great Depression and facing the looming prospect of war. What's particular about uncertainty today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. (Sennett 1998, 31)

War became a 'cold war', that is, a *potential* war creating uncertainty but not the feeling of tragedy. Further, the loss of the tragic becomes manifest in VR where reality is not defined as an existential, ever-changing phenomenon but appears as an extended, stable quantity in which no tragic losses will bar the way to an eternal, virtual life.

It is clear that the role VR plays in society is more complex than the preceding statement suggests; varieties of more or less tragic uses of VR exist and will be presented below. However, first I want to make clear what I mean by the absence of the tragic in VR, which can best be illustrated by looking at computer games. Computer games can be *dramatic*, but they will not be *tragic* in the sense of a mental participation or of a suffering sparked off through enactment. The 'virtual' tendency to eternalize or accumulate within the same 'absolute present', a maximum of elements coming from the past, present, and future, opposes the structure of *tragic* time as it is lived in real life and where events have *real* consequences. Computer games are anti-tragic phenomena par excellence and the virtual, as it is striving towards 'immortality and transcendence' (Graham 2002, 159), attempts to stop the mortal coil of real life and to 'ascend into a brilliant celestial realm'. Cyberspace, as has said Graham, 'becomes effectively a portal into another world' (170).

Walter Kaufmann's judgement of the tragic as being able to make us 'feel that suffering is no insuperable objection to life, that even the worst misfortunes are compatible with the greatest beauty' (Kaufmann 1968, 347) alludes to dynamic gaiety based on the reunifications of opposite extremes. Also, Sartre's existentialist views are a good illustration of 'tragic reality'. All our choices are free, but once the choice has been made there are no opportunities to clean the slate after the fact. This makes life tragic and, in principle, the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too ideology of online existences in the style of Second Life attempts to elude this consistency. Here the 'hyperreal' is seen as being constituted by nothing other than the play of surfaces brought about by a paralytic fascination with exteriority. The mode of signification used in VR is one in which 'signs are divorced from their referents in the object world, becoming organized into a

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"hyperreal" of screen surfaces' (Poster 2001, 133) in which all referentials have been liquidated.

This is the negative conception of 'the virtual' as the empty play of commutation and convergence in which elements refer to each other but to nothing essential. Since today no part of culture is exempt from VR, an often bizarre interlinking of 'real' life and the virtual has led many people to the conclusion that 'First Life' suffers from a similar loss of the tragic. Illustrations of the 'coldest' form of modernity very often evoke images of a digitalized world in which reality as a whole is lost because it has been subsumed under a reality that is virtual, or, as Michael Benedikt wrote 20 years ago, that 'life is not really lived anywhere but arranged for the viewing' (1991, 10). Andrew Keen describes 'gated communities where all the people have identical views and the whole conversation is mirrored in a way that is reassuringly familiar' as a 'dangerous form of digital narcissism' (Keen 2007, 55). 'CoolTown', which is for Jeff Rice a locality concentrating in itself all devices of cold techno-coolness, is described as a place 'where the physical world and the virtual world meet, where technology works for you' (Rice 2007, 125). This is a structured world with a collective mind where 'the collaborative intelligence of tens of millions of people' forms a 'networked you' (Keen 2007, 28). It goes without saying that in this world *real* power remains 'beyond the reach of citizens' control [as it has been displaced] into the exterritoriality of electronic networks' (Bauman 2000, 40).

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Nietzsche and the virtual

Gilles Deleuze has pointed out that 'according to Nietzsche it has never been understood that the tragic = the joyful' (Deleuze [1962] 1982, 36). In spite of Nietzsche's tragic Dionysian ambitions, for some people his philosophy that propagates a sort of superhuman world cut off from all 'all-too-human' values represents a precursory movement of VR. Deleuzian philosophers have attempted to use the notion of the virtual, as it has been developed by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, as a concept that has affinities with 'Nietzsche's configuration of the Dionysian' (Cox 2005, 505). This makes sense to some extent, but is problematic in general. Deleuze distinguishes between the *actual* (in the sense of empirical objects) and the *virtual* as a flux of not yet stabilized forces (Deleuze 1994, 260) that remain irreducible: 'The virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual' (208). According to Deleuze, whenever we think of reality 'we must avoid giving the elements and relations which form a structure of an actuality which they do not have' (ibid.). One can indeed be tempted to interpret this concept of the virtual as Dionysian but it will be shown below that such observations are difficult to support once they are reflected against more systematic philosophical formulations of reality.

The other motive that leads to associations of Nietzsche's philosophy with VR is the philosopher's ambition to view the world *in its totality*, be it through the Will to Power or through Dionysian forces. Artificial reality as the realm of a post-human world 'in which humanity, having displaced the gods, achieves heights of wisdom and self-aggrandizement' (Graham 2002, 155) seems to concur with a technopaganism that some people find in Nietzsche. The god Dionysus breaks the *principuum individuationis* and swallows up all individual rationality. The result is the formation of something like a general, collective form of reason reminiscent of the Internet.

It is thus not surprising that Kroker and Weinstein designate Nietzsche as the patron saint of the hyper-texted body whose concept of the 'Will to Power' creates a 'World Wide Webbed Body' present as a Dionysian outflow of virtual achievement similar to Keen's 'networked you'. In their article 'Nietzsche Gets a Modem', Kroker and Weinstein write:

> Refusing to be remaindered as flesh dumped by the virtual class, the hyper-texted body bends virtuality to its own purposes. Here, the will to virtuality ceases to be one-dimensional, becoming a doubled process, grisly yet creative, the hyper-texted body swallows its modem. (Kroker and Weinstein 1994, 3)

However, Nietzsche's Will to Power, just like Schopenhauer's concept of the Will, need to be seen in utmost proximity with the Dionysian musical symbol of the will, and it is difficult to understand how this can result in something as abstract as VR. It remains difficult even when we define the virtual prudently as the 'not yet actualized', as does Deleuze. Schopenhauer saw the will as 'released and satisfied willing (joy) and even more as an impending will (sorrow), always as emotion, passion [Affekt], an agitated state of mind' (Schopenhauer 1978–1982, 349/250) and Nietzsche's 'Will', as it is opposed to judgements that are made merely in terms of ideas, remains immediately linked to concrete and real life. It is true that the Dionysian character can become dissociated from reality, but this will not be due to an act of fatalistic resignation but rather to a disgust caused by an intensive contact with life:

> The ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, which destroys the usual barriers and limits of existence, contains, for as long as it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion thus separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience from one another. (Nietzsche 1976a, 81/94)

The Dionysian man is like Hamlet who has grasped an essential truth and thus becomes incapable of action. He is disgusted by society because he knows life too well. The only way to prevent incapacity of action is to link the Dionysian to the Apolline. It is not desirable to have knowledge alone, but knowledge needs to be veiled by a dreamlike illusion in order to become bearable. The soothing illusion is provided by Apollo. Apollo is the god of all creative and imaginative forces and also the god of prophecy. Where Dionysus provides an immediate insight into the tragic realities of life, Apollo provides beautiful appearances and artistic fantasies that humans find necessary in order to endure the Dionysian realities. For Nietzsche, Apollo and Dionysus are not opposite terms. They are not 'extremes to be regulated into some kind of golden mean' (Lenson 1987, 22), but they complement each other as they both strive to resolve the contradiction of existence. While Dionysus is drunkenness, Apollo is dream. While Dionysus is suffering, Apollo is the element which overcomes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of eternity. Dionysus is shattering while Apollo is suggestive. Within Nietzsche's mythological system, the Apolline dream world of the stage action is married to the Dionysian 'real' world of the satyr-chorus: what is born is the tragedy as a reflection of real life.

Neither Dionysus nor Apollo suggests a flight from reality into an abstract virtuality. Both are advocates of *reality* even though they attain the stage of reality only through a paradox: the Dionysian man manages to stay close to reality only through the dreamlike element of the Apolline. 'Reality' is only what is produced by a combination of both a well-measured and wise representation of savage truth, which is different from any calculated and bombastic effect of dramatic presentations of historical reality or of dialectical philosophies about its overcoming.

Most probably Nietzsche would have had no sympathies towards VR as a dystopian cyberpunk vision of reality that is not 'real' though constantly searching for a Dionysian form of pleasure within a reality that has been reduced to images. There are many reasons to state that VR, which had initially raised dreams of a new critical system or of a new Surrealism able to revise disparities and to raise modernity on a more humane level, has ended up as a self-conscious, self-sufficient World Wide Webbed Body bearing the same

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symptoms as the reality which spawned it. If this is VR, Nietzsche could only have been against it because for him it is the tragic consciousness of the drunken gambler and not the self-righteous enjoyment of the cold technocrat that creates the Dionysian spirit. Nietzsche puts forward 'reality' as a transcendent interplay of the Apolline and the Dionysian.

Nietzsche might, however, have had sympathies towards another, more interactive form of VR in which a Dionysian quantity constantly challenges too static forms of the Apolline, preventing it from becoming an official world. This version of VR will be explained below.

In general, Nietzsche 'abhorred excessive and uncritical transcendentalism' (Graham 2002, 173), just as he disliked the concept of art as a self-contained and self-enclosed sphere of activity and experience detached from the rest of life. Kroker and Weinstein's vision of a postmodern Will to Power smoothly flowing into a Will to Virtuality has dramatic and untragic undertones of resignation that can be found neither in the idea of the Dionysian nor in that of the Apolline. The 'Will to Virtuality' comes closer to Fukuyama's concept of history that has come to an end. Strangely, Fukuyama uses Nietzsche's philosophy in order to back up his Hegelian project when writing that '[Nietzsche's] last man had no desire to be recognized as greater than the others, and without such desire no excellence or achievement was possible. The last man ceased to be human' (Fukuyama 1992, xxii). When the end of history is reached, all struggle, danger, risk, and daring are neutralized within a serene ambiance of historical accomplishment. However, Nietzsche does not attribute the Will to Virtuality, but wants the Dionysian to remain a drunken and instinctive insight into life's tragic reality. There are no suggestions of a serene escape *from* reality that Fukuyama believes to find in Nietzsche. Though it is right that Nietzsche remains anti-Aristotelian in general and privileges 'suffering over action and the aesthetic over the moral' (Witt 2007, 26), it would be entirely contrary to his intentions to equate his Dionysian philosophy with that of Schopenhauerian resignation and inactivity. Nietzsche believed that it 'is Dionysus's task to make us graceful, to teach us to dance, to give us the instinct of play' (Deleuze [1962] 1982, 18). The Dionysian element fractures and delays the flow of cold, 'official' civilization. Nietzsche believed that 'the satyr himself, the imaginary natural being, is related to the cultural person in the same way that Dionysian music is related to civilization' (Nietzsche 1976a, 80/92).

The Apolline and the virtual

Since Dionysian culture is unsuitable for equations with VR, does the virtual have more affinities with the Apolline? The Apolline stands for dream, which suggests the existence of an 'unreal' world. However, the Apolline dream functions only like a screen that will remain empty as long as it does not receive Dionysian projections of the will. Once again it is important to point out that the unification of the Dionysian and the Apolline does not follow a dialectical process though it is often represented as such (cf. Pizzato 2007, 186). Any dialectics neutralizes the Dionysian power of the tragic. Hamlet was no master of dialectical reflection but he had a spontaneous insight. Apollonian aesthetics stabilizes this insight, but this has nothing to do with dialectics. Also, Deleuze affirms that 'in general, dialectics is not a tragic vision of the world but, on the contrary, the death of tragedy, the replacement of the tragic vision by a theoretical conception' (Deleuze 1982, 18).

The unification of the Dionysian and the Apolline becomes an 'original enjoyment of the world's eye', a 'double art' that we hear only in the tragedy (Nietzsche 1976b, 207). There is no suggestion of an all-embracing view of the world in the sense of VR achieved through the work of dialectics. Nietzsche wants objectivity and uninterested

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contemplation not scientific resignation. Both Dionysus and Apollo speak artistic languages; the former that of a drunken visionary and the latter that of aesthetic measurement and stylization. None of them likes the cold distance that a scientific vision of the world establishes between the subject and the living world and none of them can be associated with VR.

Joel Wainwright speaks in his article 'Nietzsche Contra the Real Word' of Nietzsche's 'pyrophilosophy' that he opposes to geophilosophy's conventional notions of the world as a measurable phenomenon. He concludes that Nietzsche's world is 'neither 'the real world,' nor imminent materialism, but world – burning, becoming, Dionysian. Within the apparent world, one seeks not being, nor one fire, but instead a pyrophilosophy of local fires through which the world endures' (Wainwright 2010, 26). This shows how much the hot/cold aspect, once it is approached in terms of space, reflects also the tension between the local and the global. Local identity can only live through global culture or, more precisely, just because reality is composed of Dionysian localities, it needs the cooling effect of the Apolline. This bears no link with a virtualizating detachment from reality, but leads to the production of a tragic reality dependent on the cool rhetoric of the anti-dialectical juxtaposition of both the Apolline and the Dionysian.

For this very reason the Dionysian–Apolline presentation of reality never becomes an all-embracing, authoritative discourse; the Nietzschean reality is based on a measured knowledge of the self that is always conscious of its own tragic status. Megalomaniac self-dramatization, on the other hand, is 'demonic' and derives from the 'pre-Apolline era of the Titans':

> Apollo, as the ethical divinity, demands moderation from his followers and self-knowledge. And so alongside the aesthetic necessity of beauty run the demands 'Know thyself' and 'Nothing in excess.' Arrogance and excess are considered essentially hostile daemons of the non-Apollonian period, the age of the titans. (1976a, 63/61)

Cold flows of dramatization occur in the music of Wagner whom Nietzsche perceives as the decadent representative of one who has not understood the imperatives of the new tragedy. Hegel's (or Fukuyama's) dialectics would be another example for such a cold dramatization of culture.

The virtual and the Socratic

The contrary of Dionysian–Apolline tragedy is for Nietzsche the Socratic or Schopenhauerian intellectualization of life, Euripides' anti-tragic reformulation of art and theatre, and Wagner's operas. It all started with Socrates: 'Dionysus had already been chased off the tragic stage by a daemonic power speaking out from Euripides. But Euripides was, to some extent, only a mask. The divinity which spoke out of him was not Dionysus, and not Apollo, but an entirely new-born daemon called Socrates' (110/145). Rational, Socratic thought excludes mystery and ambiguity, believing that in order to be beautiful, everything must first be intelligible. Often this thought is no more than a snobbish rationalization of reality. This is why, for Nietzsche, Socrates is 'the first genius of decadence. He opposes the idea to life, he judges himself in terms of the idea' (Deleuze [1962] 1982, 13–14).

Euripides has integrated this decadence into his plays and into aesthetics: 'It was Euripides's disposition to dislike whatever was "ambiguous and subterranean" and to excise every powerful Dionysiac element from tragedy and to rebuild it, purified and new, upon the foundation of non-Dionysiac art, morality and outlook' (Danto 1965, 57). However, 'Euripides did not succeed in basing his drama solely on Apollonian principles

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[but] his un-Dionysian tendencies much rather led him astray into an inartistic naturalism' (Nietzsche 1976a, 112/149).

In many instances the Socratic agenda overlaps with the project that we today call 'modernity', a project that was 'a sworn enemy of contingency, variety, ambiguity, waywardness and idiosyncrasy, having declared on all such "anomalies" a holy war of attrition' (Bauman 2000, 25). To 'separate true knowledge from appearance and error seem to the Socratic man to be the noblest, even the single truly human vocation ...' (Nietzsche 1976a, 129/180). Today, the Socratic, anti-tragic reality wears the face of globalization, the search for fun, as well as theatrical discourses of Disneyfication; and the World Wide Webbed Body, as an all-embracing imitative and anti-tragic second world, does certainly go hand-in-hand with this discourse.

The scientific spirit of Socrates that speaks through Euripides changes the constellation of *all* elements that are supposed to define reality. What matters now is no longer the cooperative opposition of Dionysus and Apollo but rather the self-righteous opposition of cold Socratic culture to 'hot' Dionysianism. This is, as Nietzsche explains, how a 'new comedy' became possible as well as the 'middle-class mediocrity, on which Euripides built all his political hopes [...] Up to that point, in tragedy the semi-god and in comedy the intoxicated satyr or semi-human had determined the nature of the language' (104/134). Nietzsche's shift from Socrates to Euripides expresses more or less what Sherry Turkle has formulated as computer culture moving from a culture of calculation to a culture of simulation (Turkle 1995, 19).

The parallel can also be easily reproduced within the framework of Wainwright's 'pyrophilosophy' for which hot localities are 'neutralized' by cold globalization or a sort of McWorld. Here, the concept of a Dionysian–Apolline tragic middle-state is lost. Nietzsche clearly defines the consequences, suggesting that the 'bourgeois mediocrity' of a cold, state-sponsored cultural system advances to the status of unquestionable reality.

The system of the 'new comedy' promotes naturalism as much as optimism and bans all tragic Dionysian presentations. More precisely, it painstakingly distinguishes between 'reality' and 'appearance', the former being scientific and accepted and the latter being rejected for its scientific incorrectness. In this system there is little space for the notion of 'artistic reality' or for that of 'local reality' just as there is little space for myths; but there is plenty of space for imitation. Music, for example, will be 'criminally turned into a mimetic demonstration of appearances, a battle or storm at sea, and in the process is totally robbed of all its power to create myths' (Nietzche 1976a, 142/203). All this happens through Socrates' art-killing tendency.

Nietzsche saw the opera as the latest product of the Socratic European culture; a dramatic and imitative reproduction of reality excelling in the character of pleasurable play with form invented not by the artist but by the technically talented layman who 'succeeded with alarming speed in stripping music of its Dionysian world meaning and stamping on it a formally playful and entertaining character' (158/232). Nietzsche's analysis of the spirit of the opera indeed shows amazing parallels with that of computer games as a caricature of dramatic, but anti-tragic, reality: 'Thus what the features of opera express is not at all the elegiac pain caused by eternal loss but rather the cheerfulness of eternal re-discovery [die Heiterkeit des ewigen Wiederfindens]' (157/231). Nietzsche wanted to combat the ascetic ideal underlying this Socratic culture by advancing not only the Dionysian idea of the tragic but also the equally Dionysian one of innocence and games. Games are answerable to the idea of art as a form of play that has been emptied of its subjective components and which corresponds most correctly to Nietzsche's aesthetic sentiments: 'The only subjective artist we know is the bad artist and the prime demand we

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make of every kind and level of art is the conquest of subjectivity, release and redemption from the 'I'' (66/66). According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, play is not 'the freedom of a subjectivity engaged at play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself' (Gadamer [1975] 1989, 101). The project of VR as it is conceived in computer games, on the other hand, can too easily appear as a typical manifestation of the 'death of the tragic through reason'.

It becomes clear that, from an anti-Platonic, Nietzschean point of view, nobody else but the theoretical, Socratic man could have invented VR as a place for fun, games, and control. Of course, this is only true for the dystopian side of VR that we will call Socratic. A confusion of Socratic dialectics with Nietzschean tragedy will necessarily lead to entirely wrong interpretations of Nietzsche's possible relationships with contemporary phenomena, a confusion that has been the focus of Allan Bloom's interpretation of a part of American Nietzsche scholarship. Bloom points out that though 'Nietzsche sought with his value philosophy to restore the harsh conflicts for which men were willing to die, to restore the tragic sense of life at a moment when nature had been domesticated and men become tame', his 'value philosophy was used in America for exactly the opposite purpose – to promote conflict-resolution, bargaining, harmony' (Bloom 1987, 228).

Twenty years later, Bloom's points can be clarified by reflecting Nietzsche's philosophy against the current culture of VR. The Socratic Virtual is compulsively fixated on technology by viewing it as a source of salvation from reality and makes its users into passive consumers by marrying them to a technological determinism that does not give them power, but makes them 'virtually powerless'. Here, the world appears as flattened through electronic representation and the self can become unstable, fragmented, and decentred. Individualism cannot subsist when all individuals melt into a single mass. The result is the kind of 'electronic wanderer wired to the world but separated from much that matters in human life' (Slouka 1995, 132). Computer technology has been developed in order to improve global communication, but in many cases it has led to the isolation of individuals in their homes. This means that the individual 'Will to Power' (through information) has created a comprehensive *network of power* by which the individual is subsequently swallowed until it retreats into fortified technologized private worlds.

What we deal with here is, in the words of Katherine Hayles, 'the penetration of computational processes [...] into the construction of reality itself' (2006, 161). However, there is no reason to oppose this per se. Nor should one be opposed to the interference of computer representations with individual imagination or to shifts in embodied experience through VR. Rather, what is required is the correct management of a paradox already anticipated by Nietzsche. It is indeed possible to imagine a VR compatible with Dionysian–Apollonian principles. Nietzsche found not only that the Socratic principle turns the world into a technologically mediated representation. He also found that the Dionysian element, as long as it is not compromised by the Apolline, will break the *principuum individuationis* and swallow up all individual rationality, creating 'another world' reminiscent of a private VR that is disconnected from all social life.

The solution to the paradox is that it should not be solved, but maintained in a tragic fashion: the Dionysian man stays close to reality only through the dreamlike element of the Apolline refusing to accept the 'death of the tragic through reason'. While Dionysus is suffering, Apollo is the element which overcomes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of eternity. Again, this is not dialectical; both the Dionysian and the Apolline are supposed to subsist in the process.

There is a version of VR that can be characterized as Dionysian–Apolline which can be cultivated. Virtual reality is separate from the real yet it is also part of it and this

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paradox needs to be affirmed. Critical cyberculture studies should not give in to excessive and uncritical transcendentalism, nor should they see VR as a purely operational phenomenon. According to Ken Hillis, 'optical technologies such as VR clearly have utilitarian applications; however, in no way do these applications preclude VR from being positioned within "the social imaginary" as a transcendence device' (1999, xx). Not only is real life often like VR, but VR is often like real life. The reason is that technology is 'always already infected by social, political, theoretical, and ethical assumptions' (58).

Terrorist groups recruit members on Second Life. The virtual realm is never perfect, but reflects much of the banality and the danger of everyday life. Second Life communities are 'heavily coded and particular cultural mores are firmly embedded in people's online relations' (Hickey-Moody and Wood 2008, 807). In virtual existence there even remains an awareness of corporeal existence. It is indeed useful to distinguish, like Hillis, between virtual reality and virtual environments, which makes it impossible to reduce reality to images. Virtual reality is not a disconnected realm; instead, it is integrated into a life that appears as an event as tragic (though also as playful) as life itself. According to Hickey-Moody and Wood, Second Life communities can foster diversity and act as an alternative to the capitalist economy (807–9). Philip Rosedale, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Linden Lab, suggests that participation in Second Life does not lead to self-virtualization, but rather to self-actualization: 'There is a very strong sense that you are in a way becoming more of yourself' (US Government Printing Office 2008, 67).

Research by Turkle has shown that the redefinition of the self as a 'multiple, distributed system' (1995, 14) is not necessarily negative as long as it does not enter an autistic circuit of virtual self-sufficiency. As long as the computer is used as an evocative object, it can function as a new location for our fantasies. Even psychologically challenged individuals can engage in constructive role playing in Second Life (188). In 2000, 'some disgruntled employees in the Philippines wrote a virus program that disrupted governments and economies across the globe. With the Internet, Goliath is having fits with David' (Poster 2002, 16). A typical example of this is 'Wikileaks for Transparency', which published an entire repository of classified material that is embarrassing for world leaders. The boundaries between the real and the virtual are eroding which is – tragic. But this is the only chance we have to derive positive qualities from VR. The undialectical coexistence of Dionysian suffering combined with Apollonian glorification of eternity must oppose purely technical, Socratic forms of VR.

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