2. Posthumanism: The “Autistic Condition?”

Bouterwek’s foundation permits a further development of the virtual as an abstract, philosophical notion. Before showing how this virtual affects the culture of those societies that make use of VR it is necessary to establish the virtual with regard to its precise linguistic and philosophical meanings. In this chapter the virtual will be opposed to the tragic, a distinction that permits to reflect the virtual against a condition that I see – in a metaphorical way – as closely linked to autism. As mentioned in the introduction, autism is not referred to here as the concrete manifestation of a neurodevelopmental disorder, but is used in a metaphorical way in the context of a specific social critique. Roughly it stands for self-enclosure and impaired social interaction. The French newspaper *Le Monde* recently reported that five French youngsters had devastated a Jewish cemetery by smashing two hundred-forty tombs. The young people are not known as hooligans but are above-average students. One of them is even known to have anti-fascist political tendencies. So why did they do it? The local rabbi (the Grand Rabbi of Strasbourg) discards anti-Semitic motives but believes that “the act is due to those young peoples’ incapacity to perceive something like a ‘before’. They are living in a world that is virtual and autocentric. All there is is them and the present; they don’t see their parents, their grandparents. This is emblematic for our time” (Van Renterghem 2015). Though the comments are reminiscent of “technological suicide through virtualization” scenarios produced by a networking culture and artificial intelligence known from Paul Virilio’s writings, it is necessary to recuperate the human also in this culture. I suggest retrieving the human in the form of the existential.

1. The Virtual, the Existential, and the Imaginary

The virtual is essentially distinct from the simulated. While the latter represents an unreal place aiming at the simulation of an already existing reality, the virtual establishes an autonomous reality supposed to be lived *like a reality*, independent of any resemblance it could have with a preexisting reality. The virtual thus represents a *total* reality annulling all interferences between interior and exterior, and, in this
way, any activity of simulation as well as of dissimulation. Its particular effect of reality and authenticity is acquired by an integration of the spectator into a virtual place by trying neither to simulate nor to dissimulate outside reality. This means that the virtual does not try to produce an actuality, but exists beyond the distinction between the actual and the non-actual. Thereby it is also distinct from the imaginary.

How can one characterize the imaginary in opposition to the virtual? In Western culture, the imaginary is often seen in connection with artistic expressions. The imaginary is an actuality that appeals to a stylistic rhetoric. The virtual, on the other hand, does not appeal to an artistic rhetoric of persuasion trying to act from the outside on the interiority of the spectator. More efficiently, it seems to absorb the spectator through its character of pure interiority. Marie-Laure Ryan mentions that this immersion has often been compared with an entrapment of tourists in self-enclosed realities of theme parks (Ryan 2001: 11) and does not agree with this comparison because immersion can also involve a considerable amount of interaction.

The question is whether this interaction can also provide an existential sense of experience including various intellectual and emotional stances such as imagination and self-reflexivity.

Among the main sources providing an abstract analysis of the meaning of the virtual that have so far been offered by critics of VR, is French linguist Gilles-Gaston Granger’s book The Probable, the Possible, and the Virtual. Granger notes that despite its effect of total absorption, the virtual never reaches the degree of existentiality that imagined reality seems to reach with relative ease (Granger 1995: 14). Existentiality signifies here a state in which the self is aware of its own position within the everyday world. This everyday world is composed of concrete being and not of abstractions. In this sense, French philosophers like Sartre and Camus representing French Existentialism were interested in the kind of awareness of existence provoked by profound emotional experiences leading towards the discovery of the self’s own position within a concrete world. If we understand existence in such an existentialist way, we will always be inclined to describe it as linked to either an actuality or a possibility.

The problem that arises is that while the imaginary seems to know how to catch this actuality through artistic expressions, the virtual, by definition, does not. The reason for this is that the virtual’s declared aim – with regard to its linguistic definition – is to cancel all distinctions between the actual and the non-actual (potential). Any opposition