Illustration 1: Film still from a demonstration of Ivan Sutherland’s Sketchpad (1963).
Since its invention, virtual reality has promised strictly localized and simultaneously boundless mobility: it gives the user the impression of being in a whole new world while remaining in the same place and time. This paradox strips distant and simulated locations of their sense of danger and their exclusiveness, while eliminating the user’s need to actually travel to reach them. You can practice flying a fighter jet or driving a tank without putting passengers and equipment at risk; you can engage in combat without actually risking your life; you can relax in a tropical paradise without having to fly to get there; you can fly through buildings without running the risk of falling – and all this while staying put. The cybernauts chase their phantasms from within a cube with an edge length of one meter, as if they were figures in a painting by Francis Bacon. Virtual reality is the only technologically possible method of immersing into computer worlds that remains thoroughly paradoxical. How this is possible and where this leads are the focus of this essay.

1. Immersion as Illusion
The Technology of Virtual Reality

Virtual reality, a highly sophisticated, technological, and extremely complex informatic illusion-producing machine, has, since its invention by Ivan Sutherland in 1968, been beset by a significant paradox. The striking contradiction between the freedom of movement it promises and the physical ‘dispositif’ of its users seems to be at its phantasmic core. While cybernauts effortlessly travel through an endless virtual world, they are in a kind of iron maiden that encloses them on the spot. Immobile freedom, or local boundlessness – this seems to be the paradox of virtual reality as a technology of immersion and is the subject of this article.

We will see that the materiality of virtual reality, as described by Ivan Sutherland in the mid-1960s, was the cause of this phantasmic charge. Newer technologies that, in principle, have the same function, though in entirely other forms, appear completely different, or at least do not give rise to comparable paradoxes. Classical virtual reality is thereby historicized as a maximally invasive technology of immersion.