

## VIRTUAL SCREENS. THE RELOCATION OF CINEMA IN *SECOND LIFE*

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Of all the places where cinema is being relocated<sup>1</sup>, that of on-line virtual worlds seems to be particularly attractive for film theory (and game studies)<sup>2</sup> due to its novelty and psychological significance. Today, one of the most famous and frequented on-line virtual worlds is *Second Life* (SL). SL is a world – not a game – inhabited daily by thousands of residents – not players – which simulates the actual world<sup>3</sup> where we live our *First Life* (FL), its physical appearance and its rules, but at the same time allows us to distance ourselves from it. For example, the logic of age and gender and the rules of social behaviour are uninfluential or unreliable, since real identities are inaccessible. In another example, economic thresholds, despite the existence of a true economic system, are loosened by the logic of gifting. Similarly, physical and spatial laws, though simulating the actual-world laws to an extent, are subverted<sup>4</sup>.

As is happening more and more often in the *first world* in SL screens are everywhere and the opportunity to make a filmic experience is expanded. Any time a resident enters an area where there is at least one screen, streaming controls pop up in the multimedia menu. If he/she chooses to activate the streaming, he/she becomes a spectator. Because of its difference from the FL, SL



Fig. 1 – Second Cinema Drive-in Theater.

represents a peculiar case of re-location of cinema, an improper terrain of filmic “colonization”. In this sense, the virtual filmic experience contributes to the contamination of spectatorship practices. But because of its similarity to the FL, SL reflexively describes the relocation process itself. By partially reproducing the FL, its practices and its experiences, the virtual filmic experience partially maintains the traits of the actual filmic experience. Thus, the relocated filmic experience is primarily recognizable by recalling its *first* nature, the form of the actual filmic situation: an experience situated in specific spaces equipped with screens and seats that allows a group of subjects to see and hear an audiovisual (Fig. 1). For both of these reasons, SL poses the same questions that the actual relocation of cinema does, as it involves at least three dimensions of the experience.

Firstly, the relocation is a dislocation of cinema within the *global space* of the experience; it is the shifting of cinema from theatres to new environments (urban, domestic, working, leisure and travelling spaces), and – with the advent of digital convergence – from projection screens to displays and monitors in on- or offline technologies (the internet, mobile phones, DVD players etc.). Therefore, I will take into account what may be considered the fundamental characteristic of SL: its being a *space* and, above all, an *explorable* space<sup>5</sup>. Especially to basic users, SL appears as a “grid” formed by continents and oceans, from which rise regions and cities (“sims”) marked by boundaries. From the spectator’s standpoint, this basic mutation involves the *sense of position and movement*. As the coordinates of the world change, so the way of exploring it changes.

Secondly, in the virtual worldwide space, the moviegoing experience takes place at all hours and in almost every sim. The spectrum of theatre typologies is truly variable and ranges from classic locations like drive-in cinemas, movie palaces, single-screen theatres and multiplexes to some very original configurations, such as mediacentres. There are also peculiar and paradoxical cases, like the YouTube virtual complex (Tube2SL): a 1920s-style movie palace hosting video screenings generated by the users and usually released on the YouTube web portal as well<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 2). As is increasingly happening in FL, innovative and “retrieving” practices cohabit and intertwine. As in the actual filmic experience, the relocation of cinema involves a transformation in the *local space* of vision. How do theatres and visual practices change? This dimension involves a reformulation of the *sense of vision*, or the relationship with the screen in the local environments of the experience.

Thirdly, the question of relocation involves the influence of the spatial aspect on the relational and behavioural dimensions. Technology is transforming our relational modes like never before, affecting the categories of spatial experience: nearness, contiguity, interaction, compresence, localization, visibility. To what extent do new media, and especially the internet, allow users to set up new individual and collective meeting practices? It is plain that SL is, also and especially, an enormous *space of socialization*, because it offers places where “people” can meet, chat, exchange and share experiences, including the filmic experience. It offers *common places*

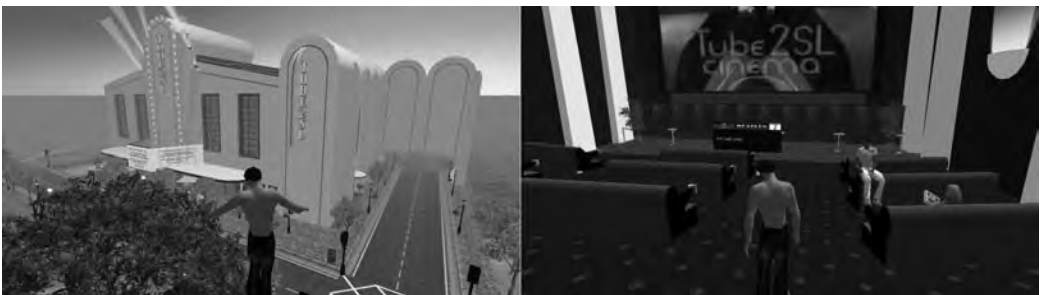


Fig. 2 – Tube2SL Cinema Complex.



Fig. 3 – ImageWise Mall&Cinema.

(streets, buildings, deserts, beaches, woods etc.) and *community places*, like cinemas and media-centres. These *places* become *spaces* only when they are frequented, or practiced, by users<sup>7</sup>, gathering a collective experience that engages *the sense of role and rule*. As the relationship of spectator with the Other changes, so the forms of interaction with the Other change (Fig. 3).

## A second embodied Self

The analysis of the spatial determining factors of relocation of cinema in SL will be focused on a very crucial aspect concerning the condition of the subjects of filmic experience: the problem of the *relocation* of the spectator by the *delocation* of his/her *body*<sup>8</sup>. SL is inhabited by subjects that “descend” and “get embodied” (according to the Sanskrit origin of the term) in their *avatars*. The avatar may be considered both as the “digital incarnation” of the Self’s auto-reflective nature<sup>9</sup> and the extension of the “spectatorship environments”.

We are dealing with an avatar-spectator that presumes and signals the presence of an actual spectator. On first appearance, it is a spectator who has partially devolved his/her faculties to a virtual delegate. The actual spectator does not physically leave a place to go to another (s/he remains in front of his/her PC); he/she never stops seeing an audiovisual (images and sound of SL as a audiovisual product); and he/she does not relate as such with others (s/he is alone in his/her own house and his/her identity is “hidden” by the avatarial mask). But if we look at SL as a case that describes the relocation of cinema in a *second world* by reflecting on the *first world*, then we are dealing with an avatar-spectator that has to move all over the world, has to equip and position him/herself to be able to see, and has to interact with others and share a part of his/her experience.

From a phenomenological perspective, the refiguration of the body into an avatarial form is the first step of cinema relocation in virtual environments. In other words, the filmic relocation in the

virtual world requires bodily relocation. The former cannot be possible without the latter. The avatar embodies the spectator's perceptual and cognitive faculties, bridging the actual and the virtual experience, since it allows the users to exist and position themselves in an explorable world and to have a range of experiences that includes the audiovisual spectatorship experience and consequent multi-user interactions. In other words, *the avatar-body is the medium of the experience*.

## 1. Loss of the flesh/Reconquest of the body

The first aspect we have to take into account to investigate the relocation of filmic experience in a virtual world by the mediation of the body refers to the problems of localization, practicability of routes and traceability of places. SL has to be conceived as an overall experiential space, a global environment where many possible experiences take place. It consists of a potential network of routes, defining a basic *geography* of experience, that describes the world and its features, its physical structures, and the historical evolution of places. Avatars inhabit and modify this environment. Moreover, a very important aspect in SL is residents' mobility (where the avatar is, where and how it moves, and how it gets to a known or unknown place, for example to a movie theatre). The *kinematics* of the virtual experience are frenetic in SL. Short distances are covered on foot, by walking or running, but avatars can also move from one place to another – even from one continent to another – without physical limitations (they can fly or be teleported, and the voyage's space-time dimension is reduced to the software loading time). In such a wide and complex world, graphic devices and visual technologies provide the avatars with constant support, offering him/her a system of localization maps (*World map* and *Mini-map*) and traceability (*Search* and *Landmarks*).

However, the virtuality of the world implies a peculiar relationship between body and space. There is a physiological paradox in standing still in front of a PC monitor and, at the same time, flying through the hall of a virtual movie theatre looking for a good seat. Briefly, the core of the problem consists in the fact that the proprioceptive and cinesthetic faculties lose their value. Unlike the FL filmic experience (where our body physically “belongs” to us in its totality, but is immersed and forced into a hypomobility situation), we inhabit a virtual world with a *visible* simulacral virtual body. Thus, as we lose our corporeal sensitivity, or the apperception of our body, we obtain its visibility and we realize our *otherness*. If we assume that the body is the surface of subjectivity, or the “skin” of identity, then we realize (and need to reduce) our otherness with respect to ourselves.

The avatar plays the role of *experiential transposer*, allowing the users (the spectators in FL) to localize and trace the experiences of their own body in the virtual body. At this basic level, the avatar-body has to be considered both as a *device of presence* (by affirming or signalling my existence, it helps me to know where I am, to locate my identity in space) and as a *device of exploration* of the world (the way the avatar moves from one place to another). By cognitively reducing the physiological gap between the body in the flesh and its digital form, the avatar embodies the perceptual devices supplied by the software into the refiguration of the Self as a space of experience. It mediates between the loss of body-based spatial references and the tendency of spectators to move around the overall space; in other words, between disorientation and freedom of movement.

## 2. Loss of the eyes/Reconquest of the gaze

The second aspect deals specifically with the experience of audiovisual, referring only to a local space limited by physical and perceptive boundaries. What is most interesting here is the dynamic relationship of objects and bodies in the local space of experience, both in their singularity and

mutual relations and in the positioning of the spectators relative to the screen, together with their point of view, which is strongly dependent on the avatar's simulated point of view.

In fact, the *first* spectator has partially devolved (though not at all given up) his/her scopic requirements, and this fact depends on the *loss* of the flesh body. As our avatar is partially free from our flesh body, so our visual frame is partially free from our eyes and interacts with a second, competitive visual frame. This paradox depends on the filmic situation, in which we move around and explore the world-space through vision while our body stands still – the world-space is actually a visual-space. The presence of the *second* body allows us to see in a double concentric frame. As Merleau-Ponty has asserted, the human body is both a part of the world and a point of view; it is an object in the world that experiences itself both as itself and as a part of the world other than itself<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, the spectator both sees and sees him/herself seeing.

The significance and the quality of the filmic experience strongly depend on the space configuration and positioning with respect to the observer. Curved screens and disfigured images are the rule in SL, since correct positioning with respect to the screen is a rather difficult operation, handicapped by the lack and/or imprecision of the controls. We must account for what might be called the bodily discipline of the virtual filmic experience, i.e. the set of rules governing bodily behaviour in the space dimension. It consists of a veritable discipline of position and exploration, concerning the proper ways of consuming audiovisual contents in terms of good visibility of the screens and positioning of the avatar-body in the environment.

This kind of discipline is possible thanks to the body, which is conceived as the referential point of the visual orientation system. The avatar-body as medium of the gaze, or a *device of vision*, provides the fundamental parameters of the configuration of objects and subjects by activating the appropriate devices and options. For example, the *camera controls* clear the view of the “incorporation” and provide a sort of unreal objective shot called *mouse look*. This function starts automatically any time the *sit here* control is activated: when you free yourself from your body (proprioceptive disconnection), you tie yourself down to the environment (exteroceptive activation), and vice versa. In addition, the *focus* and *zoom* functions allow the avatar to automatically reposition *its* point of view and *its* visual angle with respect to the screen. Such a system meets the need for perceptual and cognitive mediation between two different visual frames, i.e. between the lack of actual embodied perception and the multiplying of possible *looks*.

### 3. Loss of the Self/Reconquest of the Other

The third aspect combines the analysis of the spatial elements with their influence on the social dimension, intending the avatar-body as a *relational device*. The problems to be tackled in this case deal with the individual and collective rules to be followed in a place which this time is conceived as a *frequented place*, an environment where experience is constituted, spread and communicated through individual and collective interactions.

Firstly, the presence of an avatar in a filmic space does not necessarily mean that s/he is watching a movie. For images to appear on the screen, the play mode must be voluntarily and individually activated. Moreover, the play control can be activated by every user in the vicinity at any time, in streaming on-demand mode (except for shows scheduled at defined times). And this means that spectators can watch the same movie in the same place but staggered in time. Therefore, the virtual filmic spaces continue to be the location of collective and public experiences based on a bodily presence (you need to “go to the movie”), but the *possible* consumption of film may be an individual and private activity even in shared space and time. A shared experience requires a deliberate shared choice. In this (frequent) case, users play the movie simultaneously because they want



to make comments and interact with each other *during* the show. We could say that, in this case, the relational communicative nature of the experience prevails over the purely filmic nature (in this sense also, the virtual filmic experience is a “secondary” experience).

Secondly, the avatars’ behaviour is strongly influenced by the presence and position of other avatar-bodies in the same area, and by events scheduled in certain places. The topographic devices support the propensity to reach highly frequented places (*mini-map*) and to participate in events not scheduled beforehand (*world map*). The space orientation system is also a social orientation tool. Moreover, construction of a social identity implies construction of bodily appearance. So the self-refiguration into an avatar in SL requires an explicit “staging” and special attention, modifying your “skin” and, literally, *editing your appearance* – which means creating a social character that will interact with others.

Thirdly, a series of thresholds come into play. Access to filmic experience places is usually free. In some cases, however, it is conditioned by economic factors (you can enter only on payment of a consideration in Linden dollars, SL’s virtual currency) or an authorization is needed (i.e. belonging to certain groups is required).

Even in the virtual world, spectators have to follow a discipline based on bodily presence and appearance: from dress code to bodily connotation, from etiquette of pose to gestural expressiveness. However, it is not a rigid platform of instructions and behavioural rules, but a world that stems from and is characterized by great freedom of individual action and expression and which tends, *a posteriori*, to normalise and regularize itself in order to handle the cohabitation and the collective dimension.

## Expanded experience

Sense of place, sense of vision and sense of discipline of filmic experience are radically mutating in FL<sup>11</sup>, and we are witnessing a shift in the collocation of screens and in visual and interactional practices. Online virtual worlds like SL both host and describe these transformations by relocating the subject of the experience. I asserted that the body relocation logic operates on three levels, allowing the spectators to relate to the global, the local, and the social space – that is to say, with the World, the Screen and the Other. In all three cases, the avatar-body provides the spectator with a cognitive-perceptual embodied orientation system. At the first level, a *movement frame* counterbalances the disorientation due to the loss of proprioception and helps the users to know where they are and where they are going. At the second level, a *visual frame* mediates the interference between two gazes and helps the users to know what to look at and how to look at it. At the third level, an *action frame* reduces the interference between freedom and discipline and helps the users to interact with each other.

Therefore, the mediation of the avatar-body is based on a delocation/relocation logic. It seems that the nature of the experience is characterized by a paradoxical mutual necessity. On the one hand, the avatar takes possession and seizes the spectators’ actual body, eyes and identity; but on the other hand, the “self-suspension” leads to the assignment of a new, expanded spectatorship environment: a new body with new eyes and with augmented relational opportunities. As the avatar captures our body, our eyes and our social identity, it offers an expanded physicality, an expanded gaze and an expanded Self.

- 1 See Francesco Casetti, "L'esperienza filmica e la ri-locazione del cinema", in *Fata Morgana, Esperienza*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 23-40.
- 2 The "ecological" perspective I adopt in this paper forces me to put aside many relevant aspects: the mutual influence between cinema and videoludic environments in respect to aesthetic styles and narrative schemas; filmmaking practices (*machinima*); distribution, marketing and promotion strategies (i.e. film festivals and merchandising). For an overview of these aspects, see Matteo Bittanti (ed.), *Schermi interattivi. Il cinema nei videogiochi*, Meltemi, Roma 2008; Id., *Intermedialità. Videogiochi, cinema, televisione, fumetti*, Unicopli, Milano 2008.
- 3 I adopt a concept of "virtual" that is opposed to "actual" rather than to "real". For an application of these concepts to the subject of this paper, see Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life*, Owl Books, New York 1998; Matteo Bittanti, *Introduzione*, in Mario Gerosa, *Second Life*, Meltemi, Roma 2007, pp. 7-21.
- 4 On the capability of virtual worlds to re-think and represent actual-world spaces, see Derrick De Kerckhove, *The Architecture of Intelligence*, Birkhäuser, Basel-Boston 2001; Matteo Bittanti (ed.), *SimCity. Mappando le città virtuali*, Unicopli, Milano 2004.
- 5 See Marc Fetscherin, Cristoph Lattmann (eds.), "User Acceptance of Virtual Worlds – An Explorative Study about Second Life", <http://www.fetscherin.com/UserAcceptanceVirtualWorlds.htm>, June 2007.
- 6 On the contamination between YouTube and SL see Henry Jenkins, "La cultura partecipativa nei media digitali", in *Apogeo online*, <http://www.apogeoonline.com/webzine/2007/05/08/01/200705080101#>, 8 May 2007.
- 7 See Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, Union générale d'éditions, Paris 1980.
- 8 See Antonio Caronia, *Il corpo virtuale: dal corpo robotizzato al corpo disseminato nella rete*, Muzzio, Padova 1996; Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with New Media*, Routledge, New York 2006.
- 9 On virtual identity see Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1984; Id., *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1995; Michael Hardey, "Life Beyond the Screen: Embodiment and Identity through the Internet", in *The Sociological Review*, no. 50, November 2002, pp. 570-585.
- 10 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945; Id., *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Gallimard, Paris 1964; Vivian Sobchak, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Filmic Experience*, Princeton University, Princeton 1992.
- 11 See Francesco Casetti, "The Filmic Experience", <http://www.francescocasetti.net/en/research.htm>, March 2009.