



KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
RADIO, TELEVISION AND CINEMA DISCIPLINE AREA

**BERLIN, THE HYPERREAL,
AND
VIRTUAL REALITIES OF SEX IN A DARK ROOM**

BURAK ŞEN

SUPERVISOR: ASST. PROF. DR. DEFNE TÜZÜN

MASTER'S THESIS

ISTANBUL, SEPTEMBER, 2017

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Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences of Kadir Has University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's in the
Discipline Area of Radio, Television and Cinema under the Program of
Cinema-TV

ISTANBUL, MAY, 2017

ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

This work entitled "Berlin, The Hyperreal, and Virtual Realities of Sex in a Dark Room" prepared by Burak Şen has been judged to be successful at the defense exam held on 18.09.2017 and accepted by our jury as master's thesis.

Asst. Prof. Dr. Defne TÜZÜN (Chair)

Kadir Has University

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Melis BEHLİL

Kadir Has University

Asst. Prof. Dr. Emrah Suat ONAT

Dokuz Eylül University

I certify that the above signatures belong to the faculty members named above.

Prof. Dr. Sinem AYGÜL AÇIKMEŞE
Institute Director

I, Burak Ően, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Burak Ően

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Burak Ően', written in a cursive style.

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ABSTRACT

ŞEN, BURAK. *BERLIN, THE HYPERREAL, AND VIRTUAL REALITIES OF SEX IN A DARK ROOM*, MASTER'S THESIS, Istanbul, 2017.

Berlin's unique history as an urban epicenter for the key events of the previous centuries also witnesses an era which is known as the "Golden Twenties". The sexually liberated atmosphere of the then Weimar Berlin is, in a way, being simulated inside spaces, urban phenomena, called the "dark room". A popular type of accommodation in the nightlife scene of the city in 2017 which serves as an entertainment space for the people who seek to experience a sexually charged escape from the humdrumness of reality. Meanwhile, the advancements for the technology of Virtual Reality are catching up with the philosophical visions for virtual realities. This thesis intends to discuss the mind's capacity to imagine, through a philosophical examination and debate on reality, and whether or not there are virtual realities, by opening Berlin's dark rooms, Virtual Reality technologies, the history of art, films and film theory to discussion. Contextualized by Jean Baudrillard, the hyperreal, is one of the key concepts in making clarifying and criticizing these points of discussion. Furthermore, the thesis revisits ancient philosophical debates such as Plato's allegory of the cave, while making observations on the most recent examples in Virtual Reality such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's installation, *Carne y Arena* (2017). Although, this thesis intends to refrain itself from analysis on a microscopic level, concepts and ideas of film theorists who worked within a psychoanalytical framework will also be revisited to be able to suggest an explanation to certain phenomena such as the dark rooms, in analogy with virtual reality. The general aim will be to open points of discussion, which are thought to be significant for critique of recent examples in entertainment.

Keywords: abstraction, aesthetics, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Berlin, carnival, carnivalesque, cinema, darkness, dark room, film, film theory, homosexuality, hyperreality, hyperreal, Jean Baudrillard, metropolis, realism, Weimar Republic, Germany, Virtual Reality.

To the beast within; in a strange loop, and in constant awe of the sublime.

1. INTRODUCTION

As quoted by Mel Gordon in *Voluptuous Panic*, from an issue in 1932 of *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Siegfried Kracauer, a major contributor to film theory, states about a city: “Whoever stays for any length of time in Berlin hardly knows in the end where he actually came from” (2006, p.247). Berlin’s epic history places it in a unique position. The current capital of Germany has witnessed the major shifts in the history of political landscapes from the front rows, and at times it assumed the role of the protagonist – or the antagonist. In this thesis, I will elaborate on the historic background of Berlin before I concentrate on its certain locales in an allegorical analogy with virtual reality. In *Voluptuous Panic*, Mel Gordon examines Berlin demographically before he suggests that the city has a very specific character of its own to argue that it has created a “self-conscious urban identity” (2006, p.8). In the first chapter, the resonance of this identity in certain venues and spaces in Berlin will be examined within a framework which is contextualized and informed by the works of Georg Simmel, Mikhail Bakhtin, Mel Gordon and Robert Beachy. Simmel’s thoughts on the idea of a metropolis, and analysis of the formation of an individual’s psychology against the metropolitan backdrop becomes significant in the efforts to understand Berlin as an idea. On the other hand, Bakhtin’s analysis of the Renaissance images of the feasts, and the carnival provides a foundation in allegorizing the action in the dark rooms, and the clubs of Berlin for the virtual reality as a concept, and the Virtual Reality as a technique. The valuable researches of Mel Gordon and Robert Beachy help in understanding the city’s history, and to base the existence of spaces in the subject matter of this thesis.

Following the illustrations about Berlin’s dark rooms, and reading them as a “carnavalesque” stage in the Bakhtinian sense, where the partygoers assume the role of

the actor within these illusionistic spectacles, the second chapter opens a discussion on the philosophical connotations of virtual reality. In this discussion, especially the debate on realism in cinema from the history of film theory becomes prominent. Pointing at cinematic escapism and the illusionist cinema, Robert Stam examines in “The Question of Realism” by referring to Noël Burch who marked this kind of tendency in cinema as “a product of the bourgeois dream of a perfect simulacrum of the perceptual world” (2000, p.225). The dark rooms in Berlin serve as an allegorical introduction to the world of the simulacrum, which is then followed by the focus of the next chapter, VR, is about a more recent technique in deception, which has “reality” in its name, and which incorporates a certain number of cinematic techniques. Thus, including but not limited to the discussion of reflexivity in film theory, a number of theorists’ works will be visited in the chapter while examining the more recent thoughts and visions about VR by its pioneers. Also Jean Baudrillard’s ideas will provide a valuable framework with his debate on simulations. This debate will provide a key link in creating the analogy between the dark rooms and the VR experience, while a much more recent work by the famed director Alejandro González Iñárritu will be mentioned as a grounded, yet unsettling example in VR. While doing so, Baudrillard’s concept, hyperreal, emerges as a key concept and discussed as a subject matter in itself. The discussions on the experiences in the dark rooms, and in the darkness of the VR installation spaces will be brought up on the axis of a debate on realism during clarifying certain distinctions between them to suggest in the end that one of them uses the principles in mechanism of the other. The former, namely the dark rooms, have a way of creating simulations in adult entertainment. The latter, Virtual Reality technologies, mimic the mechanisms of simulations itself by bringing the subject a previously designed world to view. In the

chapters about virtual reality, the realism debate will be under focus with emphasis on a simulations debate. This, hence, will be connected later to the issue of dark rooms in an allegorical link by suggesting Berlin's venues to be as an example of the simulacrum. Moreover the dark rooms, as spaces in themselves, will emerge as spaces of fantasy and spectacle, in a way that the cinema theaters or the interior spaces of Virtual Reality goggles are. And finally, heading to a conclusion, this thesis will mark these spaces in a fashion as mentioned above, by allegory to highlight different forms of escapism from reality.

2. BERLIN AFTER THE DARK FALLS

Ab Incunabulis¹

1. POOR BUT SEXY

Berlin, thanks to its former mayor Klaus Wowereit's words, is remembered with the popular slogan "poor but sexy" (The Economist, 2017). Although it may still appear a tad provincial in comparison to other European capitals like Paris, Rome or London, it has one of the highest population numbers in the European Union. Berlin has a unique history, and as a city which virtually built the world history, it also knows how to turn its gaze towards the future. The city attracts people of all ages, and of different origins with its vibrant nightlife, low-cost yet higher standards of living, multicultural atmosphere and the spirit of freedom – hence the slogan: "arm aber sexy," translated from the original German: poor but sexy. The sexual appeal of Berlin, although very much visible throughout the city if one knows where to look, could be better understood by putting the societal developments into historical perspective. In the following chapter, I intend to provide my reader first with some insight regarding the historic phases which Berlin went through. For the purposes of providing a retrospective look into the history of the city which is relevant to my research, I will mark the late 19th century as the beginning of a new era for Berlin. The relevance and significance of this era lay in the relations between urban spaces and the foundations of the male homosexuality as an identity. Laying out these foundations will be able to give one a better understanding to how the spaces known as the dark rooms have become a part of the city's nightlife, as well as in understanding why the parties, clubs and bars which

¹ From the cradle.-Lat.

house these spaces accommodate this urban and social phenomenon. The earlier days in the city's rich history, when a new, modern identity was being born, were when these spaces first started to find ground in the city.

Having made that remark about a new identity, I must maintain, my point of view about identities. Throughout this thesis, one of the key focus areas will be the sexual orientation of individuals. I should clarify that the urban phenomena in the upcoming discussions will bring these matters forward. It is not my intention to suggest that the individuals who visit the discussed venues all have the same fixations, desires, or needs. Nevertheless, the identity of an individual is not defined by the positioning of others. Their identity is born in themselves, and is incorruptible by others' sayings. Whether or not they visit the venues which are part of the subject matter of this research does not claim definitions to their identity. I intend to strip my words from making any claims in regard to the identities, sexual orientations or patterns of action of the people who visit the said spaces. Yet, having stated such grounds, the venues also have a strongly expressive image, one that illustrates their identity as well as their frequenters' identities, which they have fought to keep. Therefore, tapping into the subject of the evolution of this urban identity should prove rather beneficial for the discussion, both to create an order in terms of creating a historical perspective, and to make an effort towards a more panoramic understanding of these venues. The groundwork of Robert Beachy which I intend to put forward in pursuit of highlighting the sexual history of the city is an effort to remark and to document how the city's nightlife has come to accommodate a sexually liberated atmosphere. Moreover, this research will focus on these spaces in themselves, and particularly in how they are produced as an allegory in the minds of the visitors.

2. THE DOMINO EFFECT

According to Robert Beachy, the author of *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, “The nineteenth century has served as the more common focus for locating the origins of a modern homosexual identity” (2015, p.xiii). Berlin, as Beachy further illustrates, has witnessed the first gay rights activism movement in modern history. Looking at history in hindsight from 2017, if one would try to answer a question about the roots of the gay rights activism movements, the answer would most likely be about a popular time between 1960s and 1970s, with the events of Stonewall Riots in Manhattan, New York City or Harvey Milk’s struggles as an activist in Castro District in San Francisco. Beachy’s book extensively lays out a remarkably different and richly documented history on the same question by going back to the 19th century Germany. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895), a German activist, and the modern world’s first homosexual to be out of the closet started a public struggle that eventually stirred even minds like Arthur Schopenhauer and Karl Marx (Beachy, 2015, p.24). Ulrichs, at the same time when a German legal unification was being promoted in what was then the German Empire, was preparing to confront a jury in Munich, in an effort to protest the German anti-sodomy laws, and the criminalization of same-sex love (Beachy, 2015, p.3). Ulrichs’ act which took place in August 1867 is perhaps better illustrated by Beachy’s account of the event:

Ulrichs heard hooting, catcalls, and cries of “Crucify!” from groups on his left and directly in front. On his right stood those who were not prepared for the content of his address and out of curiosity demanded that he finish. But the cacophony overwhelmed Ulrichs and forced him to descend from the podium without finishing his speech, while the assembly chairman attempted to reestablish order (Beachy, 2015, p.5).

Ulrichs' story is a tale that reads as a melodramatic narrative from a 21st century viewpoint, and it has touched other individuals in a newly unified Germany to the extent that "the world's first movement for homosexual rights, launched a generation later in Berlin, in 1897" (Beachy, 2015, p.5).

Berlin was already becoming popular before the imperial government was replaced by the revolutions in 1918 and 1919 by a republic. As the German principalities steered into a path that would lead to a unified German state, Berlin was already the seat of the imperial government, and a center of commerce with lots of attractions. *Berlin: Portrait of a City*, a book published by Taschen Publications under the direction of Benedikt Taschen portrays Berlin's ascent into becoming a prominent urban center, a metropolis from 1860, to its other periods as a prominent urban center in the history of world. According to Taschen's book, the period after the Franco-Prussian war, witnessed "immense vitality" and "Berlin possessed an immense power to attract and assimilate" (Taschen, 2015, p.13). The combination of a climbing economy, urban attractions, and the seat of a powerful military state resulted in rapid expansion of the city's population:

With the exception of the Brandenburg Gate, the old walls and gates of the city were demolished, despite the army's objections. In 1877, the population of Berlin exceeded one million for the first time, and as early as 1905 it exceeded two million (Taschen, 2015, p.13).

In addition to mentioning the then-newly famed appeal of the city, its new citizens have been described demographically as if they were in a strange juxtaposition with it:

And yet Berlin continued till the turn of the century to become more and more a city of the working and middle classes. This evolution led to friction between the progressive, liberal and indeed in later years "red" municipal government on the one hand and the conservatism of the monarchy and the upper echelons of the state establishment on the other (Taschen, 2015, p.13).

As Berlin's demography was about to change in such ways, a new "imagined community" was becoming possible in the same country that the city governed. Beachy

remarks that “by 1900 a progressive school of German psychiatry had formed around the belief that same-sex attraction might be congenital, and somehow an integral feature of a small sexual minority” (2015, p.6). According to Beachy’s account and research, Ulrichs’ efforts “played a critical role in this development” and “Ulrichs spearheaded a conceptual revolution that transformed erotic, same-sex love from an idea of deviant acts into a full-blown sexual orientation with its own distinct quality and character” (2015, p.6). At the turn of the 20th century, as though it might have been done anywhere else in the world, it was happening in Germany. The empire of the time, recently unified after a wave of nationalist movements, was witnessing a rather more silent movement which sought to defend one’s rights to their own sexual desires. Yet, rather than the countryside, or smaller towns and cities, a great metropolis of the time like Berlin was an easier setting to exist for those who identified themselves to be different from the others - especially in a city in which the industry was booming, hence making it more inviting to outsiders from all social strata. In his chapter, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Georg Simmel examines the individual’s existence against a metropolitan background, and at times points out examples from Berlin (2003). As the chapter’s name implies, he analyzes the individual’s psychological state in an urban setting. Starting out to impose the problematic he asserts that:

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life (Simmel, 2003, p.30).

Simmel continues to suggest that the metropolitan individual’s existence is built on the psychological grounds, in which one is exposed to a fast-paced variation of external and

internal stimuli in succession (2003, p.31). In Berlin, at the entrance of a modern century, and during the times of rapid political shift and swift urban expansion, Simmel's analysis on the questions of individual expressions becomes worthwhile in terms of understanding how Karl Heinrich Ulrichs may have affected the lives of others. Beachy accounts that even though Ulrichs may have died before reaching his goal of legal reform his actions did not go unrealized (2015). Two years after his death in 1897, in Berlin, a committee was founded under the leadership of Magnus Hirschfeld by getting inspired by him. Beachy further adds that the committee was named Scientific-Humanitarian Committee and it represented the world's first homosexual rights organization (2015). The simultaneous developments such as the expansion in the number of population of the city, the movements that drew inspiration from Ulrichs, and the fall of the imperial government towards a democratic republic which would later be called the Weimar Republic formed an urban setting in Berlin for the arts, the culture, the sciences and the individual expressions to freely flourish. The world war had ended. The successful commerce boom due to the prior arrival of labor power in combination with the revolutionary and expressive public mindset after an overthrown emperor left the city in 1918 created the soil for what came to be called as the golden twenties in Berlin. The 1920s in Berlin was marked by expressive freedom in arts and sciences, and a diversely satisfactory entertainment attitude. The city, in between the two world wars, entered a period of nonchalant festivity. Apocalypse had a sexy appeal.

3. APPEAL IN APOCALYPSE

In "The Metropolis and Mental Life", Simmel compares small towns and urban centers before he further examines the individual's life:

The sphere of life of the small town is, in the main, enclosed within itself. For the metropolis it is decisive that its inner life is extended in a wave-like motion over a broader national or international area. Weimar was no exception because its significance was dependent upon individual personalities and died with them, whereas the metropolis is characterized by its essential independence even of the most significant individual personalities; this is rather its antithesis and it is the price of independence which the individual living in it enjoys (2003, p.41).

Not to be confused with Weimar Berlin, Simmel gives the example of the city of Weimar as a cultural centre in contrast with the metropolis as it is exemplified in Weimar Berlin, or contemporary Berlin. The city, as an idea, comes before the individuals – a concept that Berlin successfully incorporates. Weimar Berlin, or in other words, Berlin during the 1920s happened because its history had already declared it independent of the people, or of the government which it was accommodating. Before the establishment of the republic and after the First World War ended, the city had already gone into a hedonistic style of living. In *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, the author Mel Gordon, as the title of his work implies, examines the sexual affairs of the city during the years of the republic. Before he goes deeper into the “Golden” years of the city, he asserts that the “native Berliner” had not been the most orthodox of Christians, in efforts to provide a character analysis (2006, pp.7-8). Later, Gordon goes on to examine the lifestyle of the *Berliner* amid the political turmoil, and the revolution which sweeps the city during 1919, when he makes the following observations:

Through much of 1919, Berlin waged a war against the promoters of popular dance. But the universally reviled campaign was doomed from the start. A delirium for social dance (Tanztaumel) had swept the city and much of Germany since the cessation of fighting. Klaus Mann, the son of the Nobel Prize laureate, recalled the choreographic outbreak as “a mania, a religion, a racket.” Secret dance parlors, hidden in the Friedrichstadt and in Berlin North, became the craze. In workers’ quarters, Apache-like tango dances, cakewalks, and foxtrots played out under streetlights

and in parks. Life in postwar Berlin had become bizarrely eroticized and dance-madness was its improbable visible symptom (2006, p.19).

In Gordon's account of the setting back then in the city, dance was part of the evolution. For the time around the establishment of the new republic Gordon recounts that "A dizzying panic overtook Berlin in October 1919. Not since Paris in the 1860s had a European city experienced the Edenic flush of total erotic freedom" (2006, p.20). Before the Nazis took power, such a sense of freedom ruled the city throughout the 1920s. The city became internationally notorious as a cheap destination for sexual escapades:

To the merry-making Ausländer, Berlin was conducting a clearance sale in human flesh. Sex was everywhere and obtainable on the cheap. The Kaiser's Germany, in the minds of many, was finally repaying its war debts (Gordon, 2006, p.25).

There were many venues popping up across the city which served in the business of pleasure, and Nollendorfplatz area in the city's Schöneberg district mainly accommodated venues which catered to a clientele of mostly gay men (Beachy, 2015, p.60). However widespread or popular such venues had become, there was still a need for privacy. The places, even to this day in 2017, do not commonly advertise what they accommodate except for sporting a rainbow flag outside. In the context of the previous century, this need for privacy was much stronger, and even the apocalyptic sexual mania of the roaring 1920s had drawn a line to keep secrets. In *Voluptuous Panic*, Gordon makes a remark that:

The Nollendorfplatz, an out-of-the-way section in Berlin's proletarian South, featured Erwin Piscator's Communist theatre as its best-known nighttime draw. One could also find a surfeit of cocaine and S&M clubs just to the south of Walter Gropius' temple of Red art. Another six blocks further south and east was the clandestine land of black-curtained homosexual lounges and Racehorse salons for the delectation of straight sadists (2006, p.37).

Be it curtains, blacked-out doors or taped-over glass windows, there was a way to separate the internal spaces from the external world. This is seemingly a way to keep away the prying eyes of intruding spectators, and a way to protect the privacy of the interactions which would be played out indoors. On one hand, there were other types of locales which were basically grounds for people to socialize with their same-sex while being entertained with drinks and food and on the other, there were places as such mentioned by Gordon, venues in which people can express their sexual fantasies freely with other interested participants. Many of these venues were places to fulfill certain fantasies, and the patrons entered to escape the gloomy reality of economic depression, turbulent wartime politics or their personal everyday anxieties. Thus, the black curtains become a border in a sense, a line which is drawn to keep things in order. Georg Simmel suggested that a metropolis was defined “by its essential independence even of the most significant individual personalities” (2003, p.41). On the issue of borders, Simmel’s continued to contribute for the subject of the metropolis:

The most significant aspect of the metropolis lies in functional magnitude beyond its actual physical boundaries and this effectiveness reacts upon the latter and gives to it life, weight, importance and responsibility...A person does not end with limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanates from him temporally and spatially (2003, p.41).

People are more than what is within their physical limits, and although physical boundaries cannot contain them, they can keep them away from intruding strangers who are not ready to see them. The curtains that hide the playful actions inside these venues were crucial in a time when the censorship on the artistic and the scientific communities had to be eliminated during the Weimar Republic (Beachy, 2015, p.164). However, “the freedom to speak and to write” as Hirschfeld then said, was not going to last long. A different order of things was about to be established by the National Socialists, or the

Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler. In about a decade from the moment in Berlin when the head count on the gay men in 1929 was posted as “in excess of 100,000” the city would look completely different in terms of sex industry, and everything else for that matter (Gordon, 2006, p.90). In addition, Gordon goes on to describe the rising intolerance in Berlin:

The growing Nazi and Nationalist menace nationwide began to affect the Berlin social climate. In March 1932, the city’s frightened liberal vice establishment declared male transvestite nightclubs an affront to public morality and, under Paragraph 168, used their authority to close them permanently. Seven months later, the Nazis made a poignant effort of transforming the Eldorado on Motzstrasse into one of their district electoral headquarters. It was as if a desecrated Nordic temple had been thoroughly cleansed of polluted influences and re-sanctified for the virtuous torch-bearers of Adolf Hitler’s New Germany” (2006, p.129).

By the time Hitler’s forces were defeated in 1945 to mark the end of the war, and the capital city of Berlin had fallen, there were inevitably left no signs of the legendary 1920s. Along with everyone else who was discriminated, displaced and murdered, people of diverse sexual profiles had been lost too. The venues had already been shut down, and the city was in a moment of deep despair before it would be dissected by the ally countries who won the war against Germany. Ian P. Beacock, in his article “Gay Berlin” for *The Point Magazine*, asserts that “Queer spaces are shadowy by nature, hard to see and even harder to find again once they’ve been lost” (2017). Even though Beacock’s remark is meant towards only a specific category of the venues which are being discussed in this research, it makes a significant and relevant point for a very common characteristic of these spaces. He goes on to assert that:

It’s what makes writing their history so difficult— and so important. For they’re also quintessentially liberal spaces: sites of daring and experimentation where it seems more possible than anywhere else to take risks and imagine new ways of being (2017).

Indeed the venues and parties, which have become a massive part of the tourism and entertainment businesses and popular choices among the nightlife scene in the city by 2017, are keen on creating and sustaining such a way of experimental and liberal scene. However, the “shadowy nature” of these venues back in time, in both pre- and post-war Berlin, had a different meaning in the context of pride and shame. They were spaces to be used as suitable arena for the “daring” patrons. However, even indoors, there was a policy of privacy in many of them to keep the bar for drinking, and a “back room” for sexual play. In his article titled, “Sex, Shame and West German Gay Liberation”, Craig Griffiths examines a period in West Berlin almost as many decades after the war as before the city’s reunification in pursuit of finding a correlation between the human rights movement, urban development and the influence of the press on matters considered taboo in a time of the HIV epidemic crisis. During his observations, Griffiths mentions that a bar which was opened in late 1975 and called “Knolle” was home to “one of the first dark rooms in the country,” and it was visited by men with a specific fetish for leather (2016, p.460). Although Griffiths visits the urban phenomenon in the paradigm of shame, his observations neither comment on the spatial characteristics nor do they discuss the many possible grounds for the men to be driven to prefer these spaces. He concludes to assert that the dark room was rather a need more than a hedonistic option to keep one’s anonymity intact (2016, p.461). However true these remarks might have been for a time when one could still face much harsher discrimination for one’s sexuality, they would come short in extent to define the contemporary versions of these spaces.

An article on a local magazine, *Tip Berlin*, titled “Berlin: Hauptstadt der Darkrooms” – translated as, “Berlin: The Capital of Darkrooms” - researches the urban phenomenon

via interviews with the bar owners and visitors of the venues that Berlin has to offer (2017). The article, published in 2009, examines how the dark rooms have become a popular option as spaces to have casual sex, or to get excited at the chance of having any, in Berlin almost two decades after its reunification. The dark room, in spite of what its name speaks for, is usually not pitch-dark. Also, it is usually not only a room, but a large space depending on the size of the bar, or the club which accommodates it. In Nollendorfplatz area, there are many bars which are famed with their dark rooms. In these places, usually tunes from the bar's playlist sneak into the sexually charged, dimly lit space of carnal needs. Either the room is lit by the shimmering faint light waves which move in from the front bar area, or they are equipped with colorful LED lights, or blacklight under which people's eyes and teeth glow - to put a hint of grotesque to the image of this atmosphere. During a trip into one of them, a visitor is mentioned in Tip Berlin's article to be stating that the darkrooms which are slightly brighter would not be as desirable for them. In some other larger venues, such as Lab.Oratory, the gay sex club located in the same building as the world-famous club Berghain, the club is dedicated to cater only men, and to entertain their hedonistic, sexual desires with a free-of-judgment attitude. Formerly named Ostgut, Berghain used to be renown as such a place that Lab.Oratory is known for today. However, in an online article by Cuepoint titled "The Berghain Backstory: Building Berlin's Most Legendary Nightclub" the sex club is mentioned as:

During the Ostgut era, the club Lab.oratory, run in the same space, also saw the light. This club was primarily dedicated to a gay male clientele, with a focus on sexual activities that were a bit too extreme to coexist with the mainstream crowd (2017).

Considering other dark rooms in Nollendorfplatz bars, Lab.Oratory is perhaps a dark dungeon in comparison as it stands in its current place today. The music, either from

Berghain or Lab's own playlists, is a stimulating form of techno music which fuels the crowd inside. The darkness here is a matter of degree, up to the patrons' choice of visibility during an act. The space which is a very large cruising labyrinth has the capacity to hide, or to reveal. However, as in all of the other cruising bars, the whole space becomes a stage for sex acts. The spectacle, either under full glow of lights, or in rather dark corners is continuous during the climax of the nights, or the mornings – depending on the party.

4. FREEZE-FRAME ACTION

In Berghain, and in Lab.Oratory, one can feel that there is a manifesto of the venue which revolves around the idea to keep it as a work of art in itself, considering various aspects from its architectural design to the free-flow of people inside. The infamous door policy of its bouncers allows a stream of people wearing black inside, as the word-of-mouth buzz around finding ways to enter the club goes. Although black may be listed as the official color code in online guides about clubbing in Berghain, it hardly creates a uniform for the guests. Freely expressive people among the crowd make the place into a living artwork by performing in their unique way, under the keenly maintained light show of the main dance floor. The light show is usually neatly engineered to fit the beats and the rhythms of the performing DJ. When watched from the balcony up the stairs, outside of Panorama Bar's entrance, the sight of the crowd dancing in wave-like motion resembles an impressionistic painting which moves forward in time in intervals between the flickers of light. Impressively unusual for the club is the fact that the door policy does not necessarily depend on what the visitor does, who they are, or how much

money they have in life outside the venue's boundaries. Inside, everyone from all hierarchic distinctions may come together to play, dance and be intimate in any way which they would like. In this sense, each of the venue's famed Klubnachts, German word that literally means Club Night, becomes an event like the carnival festivities that Mikhail Bakhtin depicts in a glance over the work of François Rabelais on folk culture in the medieval ages. In his *Rabelais and His World* which was published in 1965, Bakhtin makes a significant contribution to literary studies on Renaissance period as he examines Rabelais' work in the context of folk culture during middle ages. He puts forward the carnival festivities among the folk culture of this period, and compares them to the official feasts which were more institutionalized by the church, and the state. In his analysis he puts forward that:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed...People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced (2007, p.199).

In this framework, Berghain's Klubnacht may be seen as an epitomized example of how a contemporary carnival would be like. However, it may also be discussed that the selection at its doors to allow certain people inside eliminates any chances of it becoming such a romantic image of the carnival, one in which unity among all ranks is possible. This is possibly symptomatic of the elitist creation of a focalized, and privileged, center around which certain ideals are formed. However, my concern is not to discuss whether clubbing culture is becoming institutionalized. What I would like to stress here is that the carnival in Bakhtin's study is an adequate analogy in the way of

describing the Berghain's atmosphere inside its walls. A space which is famed after the reunification of Berlin, and chosen its name as a portmanteau of Berlin's once-separated quarters can be seen as a symbol for unity as an idea, and simulating its vision of the world behind its doors every weekend. A Klubnacht in Berghain is no less a spectacle in the sphere of art, in the sense Bakhtin speaks of the carnival:

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle...But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play (2007, p.198).

By the same token, the sexual play between people in Berghain, or in Lab.Oratory becomes a public act, almost as if it is a show. Live sex shows are not as popular as they may be in other cities in Berlin, they are rather experienced through in the venues. For Bakhtin, carnivals "were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (2007, p.199). The darkrooms can be seen as an equally even playfield as a stage for actors who dress up in their fetish gear, or other costumes to express and to impress their audiences while they put on an act. Therefore, even though when acts are played under more lit areas of these spaces for everyone else to see, they become a form of artistic spectacle, a pornographic simulation, bordering between reality and art. As a stage play, real and live action is seen to be acted between individuals who wear a variety of costumes from fetish gear, to being completely stripped naked. However, in spite of acting and performing a certain way, they do not escape their true names, or identities, which makes one to see this as a performance staged by people in their real life. This way of seeing these acts may also be superimposed by the idea of a rather internal process of creative play. However well-lit an area inside these venues may be, there is still a lot that would

depend on the imaginative force of the actors. To take this further into darker areas means more restraint on the imagination. The eye does not fully adjust to the lack of light in these spaces. Faces appear in flashes. Bodies appear in silhouettes. These fleeting images do not merge to form a wholesome view, or a total image of the other person. Only flashes exist to be seen in there, leaving big gaps for one's imagination to fill in the blanks. In sight, a former version of reality has been replaced for a twilight realm in which the mind takes pleasures of imagining while forming encounters. The reasons why such an experience in these spaces is so exhilarating for the many frequent visitors could perhaps be seen as a symptom of how people tend to take pleasure in a real world experience which partly resembles a simulation in terms of its perception. With all the costumes that people wear, and the staged performances they act in, it makes an allusion to the simulations of Disneyland, however this time, it is rather a very adult, kinky and to some, perverted version of it. The mind of the participant is able to simulate a pleasant environment through imagination. The spectacle of body parts in flashes pass on as if one is watching the action in a film which is projected in a succession of freeze frames. The lights flicker, the music goes on and the real action is simulated in the minds of their actors in a ritualistic fashion through other senses – mainly tactile. When considering the acts in the dark rooms from an artistic perspective, these spectacles can be read as if they have their own narratives in the sense that there is always a rush towards an ending, up until the time of an actor's climax. A narrative which is narrated in a succession of images, with the help of flickering lights inside the dark rooms, while the actors are staging a simulation. This calls to mind the idea of cinema, specifically with the more traditional form of projection it had when images

were projected onto the big white screen by directing light on the celluloid film stills in a succession.

5. THE AGE OF VIRTUAL REPRODUCTION

In *What Is Cinema?*, “The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon,” asserts André Bazin in his article “The Myth of Total Cinema” in which he opens a discussion, and perhaps a battle with the obsession over realism, on the founding of cinematic technologies. He asserts, speaking for cinema that:

The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers (1967, p.164).

Throughout his discussion, he articulates his idea that the invention of cinema was not merely a technological advancement, that it was a rather philosophical breakthrough in the history of arts, and humanities. However, he suggests that the technological advancements in various forms of capturing reality, to repeat it in its miniaturized forms later, have been instrumental in realizing the dream of cinema for its pioneers:

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time (Bazin, 1967, pp.165 – 166).

The “obsession”, as Bazin points out, was the driving force behind “the myth of total cinema” (1967, p.166).

Throughout this chapter, the subject of dark rooms has been mentioned as the urban-social phenomenon which epitomizes an expressive way of existence for the people of

Berlin and therefore, illustrating and allegorizing them as part of artistic practices in efforts to open a discussion on realism. In addition to these, it can be suggested that the dark room becomes an arena in simulations of a reality, of a desired virtual reality, which was created in the minds of both its players to be a staged act for its audiences. Furthermore, its players become audiences of a deeper simulation which is run by the imagination with the force of their minds behind it - the deeper simulation being succeeded by the performed simulation of the individuals in the act in these venues. Therefore, one might tap into the philosophical meaning of sex in a dark room, to implore the conceptual significance of virtual reality in an age when Virtual Reality technologies becomes part of the mass entertainment markets. A few decades more than a century after the invention of cinema, VR technologies become the new dream, and thus bring up old questions, such as Bazin's quest in understanding the invention of cinema, along the borders of realism and arts. Because, as Bazin points out for cinema, virtual reality is not, and has never been only about the technological progresses in history – but about a dream trying to find its way.

3. VIRTUAL REALITY & VR¹

In Medias Res²

1. DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

In *Contemporary Film Theory* (Easthope, 1996), in her groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey discusses the ways how patriarchal ideology is embedded in mainstream cinema, by tapping into the subjects of the Freudian unconscious, voyeurism, and the idea of a patriarchal society. She asserts that “The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures” (1996, p.713). One of these is according to her, scopophilia. She justifies that “There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (Easthope, 1996, p.713). She, then, refers to Sigmund Freud’s topography of sexuality, and his way of marking the scopophilic desires to be sexually motivated. Mulvey continues to apply this in film theory, to the cinema spectator’s interaction with the film:

...the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium...and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire on to the performer (Easthope, 1996, p.714).

¹ At this point, the distinction between VR and Virtual Reality terms should be clarified: the latter will primarily be used in this chapter to convey the philosophical and conceptual implications which the term connotes, and the former one to cover the meaning of the advancements in technology and science (eg. Equipments such as VR goggles, VR headsets etc.).

² Into the middle of things.-Lat. Refers to the technique of starting narration from a middle point of action in the plot.

In reading Berlin's dark rooms as a carnivalesque stage in which sexual plays are performed, the economy of looking that Mulvey mentions can be applied to the relationship between the actor, who is also the spectator, and the spectacle. As introduced briefly in the previous section, the subjects' positions inside the dark rooms are versatile, sliding between the role of an actor and a spectator. Concept of the scopophilic drive which Mulvey derives from Freud's work on sexuality is seemingly at work, however, because the role of an actor is superimposed with the role of a spectator in these venues, Virtual Reality experiences can be argued to work better as an analogy to the dark rooms. In VR, the role of the spectator, who is experience this reality, is also assumed as an actor in the narrative. Furthermore, VR is a simulation, just as there are different forms of simulations at work in Berlin's venues. Having said that, there is a caveat, a distinction between how simulations function in either. In the following chapter, Virtual Reality technologies and virtual reality as an abstract concept will be discussed in efforts of clarifying such distinctions, while examining different symptomatic examples from the history of art practice by framing the discussion mainly around Plato's and Jean Baudrillard's thoughts.

2. A MAGICAL DESTINATION

Frank Biocca, in his book "Communication in The Age of Virtual Reality", makes the assertion that simply says: "Virtual Reality is not a technology; it is a destination" (2013, p.4). The term "Virtual Reality" has indeed been up for some debate since its conception, and popular usage. In his book, *The Theater and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud shares his vision for the theater in a way that still resonates as influential today (1958). He uses the term "virtual reality" meanwhile making an allegory between the

theater and alchemy, in which he practically coined the term for the current day name, VR:

All true alchemists know that the alchemical symbol is a mirage as the theater is a mirage. And this perpetual allusion to the materials. And the principle of the theater found in almost all alchemical books should be understood as the expression of an identity (of which alchemists are extremely aware) existing between the world in which the characters, objects, images, and in a general way all that constitutes the virtual reality of the theater develops, and the purely fictitious and illusory world in which the symbols of alchemy are evolved. (1958, p.49)

One can make the assertion that in Artaud's words, there is a desire to make the theater more convincing. He allegorizes the art of alchemy in the pursuit of manifesting his vision for the theater. In his analogy both practices are like a "mirage," and neither are real in the sense of the "proper" reality experiences (1958). Therefore, it can be suggested that he uses the term "virtual" to describe the on-stage action on the theater before "reality." This very conception of the term "virtual reality" could be seen in alignment with Biocca's usage of the term when he speaks of it as a "destination" rather than a technology (2013). If reality proper is what we experience in the everyday world around us through our senses, a representation of this reality could be spoken of as though it was a virtual version of it. However, there is a caveat, in both Biocca's and Artaud's versions of the word. In cross reading both authors, virtual reality becomes a destination, and a representation at the same time, which bears the following question in the mind: How can a representation of reality *become* a destination? Artaud goes on to make an invitation:

We want to make out of the theater a believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bite which all true sensation requires. In the same way that our dreams have an effect upon us and reality has an effect upon our dreams, so we believe that the images of thought can be identified with a dream which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the necessary violence. And the public will believe in the theater's dreams on condition that it take them for true dreams and not for a servile copy of reality; on condition that they allow the public to

liberate within itself the magical liberties of dreams which it can only recognize when they are imprinted with terror and cruelty (1958, pp.85-86).

Here, one can make the assumption that Artaud dreamt of creating the art of theater in a way that the public would be able, and more importantly willing to make a distinction between the reality and the representation thereof. However, one can also assume that in naming a new technology a “destination,” this distinction is hardly posed as a problematic of the practice by the pioneering minds behind it.

3. PRISON BREAK

The questions posed in the following words by Edward Branigan in his article “Apparatus Theory (Plato)” during his reworking of Plato’s cave allegory and Jean-Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory allude to the distinction between reality and its representation in arts, and moreover, to life itself:

Plato’s cave story concerning appearance and reality in Book VII of *Republic* has been an enduring allegory within Western philosophy. It continues to influence issues in epistemology and aesthetics. How do we know whether the way something looks is what it truly is? Could it be that the world of our daily activities is not at all what it seems – that we are held tightly in a robotic trance by many compelling illusions and simulacra? Is art itself one of these deceptions? More fundamentally, how can we be certain that we truly know what we think we know? Might having a feeling also sometimes be a delusion? (2014, p.21).

Even more ancient than the cave story is the mind’s ability to create projections before the reality proper. The simulations of the mind are the key feature which VR utilizes as a simulation in itself. The imaginative power of the mind, is the fundamental technique that VR uses. VR, as implied in its name, virtually imitates the simulations of the mind, by immersing the subjects into a simulation. This force or rather the capacity of the mind to simulate is imitated by the techniques of VR which incorporates in itself the

techniques of cinema, such as dramaturgy, cinematography and computer-generated imagery.

VR as a technology is advancing in research and development for wide-ranging usage in areas such as gaming, cinema, entertainment, healthcare and education because of its key feature to simulate reality. However, before being immersed in a debate of simulations, it would be more illuminating first to go into the fundamental visions behind VR. Biocca quotes Ivan Sutherland, a visionary pioneer in VR, to highlight the drive behind a vision to create an advanced virtual reality technology:

It is a looking glass into a mathematical wonderland. There is no reason why the objects displayed by a computer have to follow the ordinary rules of physical reality. The ultimate display would, of course, be a room within which the computer can control the existence of matter” (2013, pp.506 - 508).

However, in addition Biocca claims Sutherland’s dream to be a very old, in fact an “ancient” one (2013, p.7). Namely, the dream of an “ultimate display” has been the motivating vision behind many breakthroughs from the paintings in the Lascaux caves to trompe-l’œil and to the application of perspective inside a frame, and so on to the advancements to the motion pictures. The need for transcendence, and the driving force that caused the history of art to happen, is a very old pursuit to “free the mind from the prison of the body” (2013, p.7). André Bazin, in *What Is Cinema?*, in his article “The Ontology of The Photographic Image” boldly asserts that “Perspective was the original sin of Western painting,” while pointing out that throughout the history of art, “the need for illusion” has been widely sought as a rule of thumb in “our obsession with realism” (1967, pp.160-161). Furthermore, he continues to suggest that the application of perspective eventually came short in satisfying the pursuit of realism:

...painting was torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely the duplication of the world outside. The satisfaction of this appetite for illusion merely served to increase it till, bit by bit, it consumed the plastic arts. However, since perspective had only solved the problem of form and not of movement, realism was forced to continue the search for some way of giving dramatic expression to the moment, a kind of psychic fourth dimension that could suggest life in the tortured immobility of baroque art (1967, p.160).

Although Bazin was making his point in these words, to arrive at a criticism of cinema at the time; his words resonate as well for today's VR techniques, and simulations with their pursuit of the duplication of the world outside. When a pair of VR goggles is worn, the proximity between the subject and the spectacle of the simulation reduces down to the point of the physical world, by which the illusion of unity is formed as opposed to the illusion of separation in cinematic voyeurism. Forced perspective in architecture, as exemplified in *Aula Palatina* or *Konstantinbasilika* in Trier, Germany, has worked on the mind of a subject in a very similar fashion. The surroundings, as the subjects enter the miniaturized world of a Roman emperor, are physically enclosing their sight to the point of convergence with their peripheral vision. Certain points made throughout Jean-Louis Baudry's examination of cinema in his article, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," resonate significantly as a framework for VR (1975). He argues that the cinematic devices including the theatrical screen for the projection, is working in collaboration towards creating a spectator subject who is unaware of the underlying ideological work of the spectacle. He asserts that "The dimensions of the image itself, the ratio between height and width, seem clearly taken from an average drawn from Western easel painting" (Baudry, 1975, p.41). Granted that Baudry's criticism of the cinematographic techniques examine the characteristics of the cinematic devices, however, VR is building on these exact devices by incorporating several technological advancements which have been made thus far.

Now, with VR goggles, this sensation is created by the graphic display for the visual senses. The subject is immersed in the sight to the point of experiencing a momentary “escape” from their bodies. If one would feel as though they are seeing the total image of Roman Empire through the spectacle and the masquerade in Constantine’s Basilica, would they experience the full evil force of Red Skull and the total innocence of his victims inside the VR goggles when they watch *Captain America*? If this is the destination, can we remember the point where we jumped on the Millennium Falcon, and into the hyperspace? Having posed this question though, a distinction also needs to be made of which the work of the Basilika, mimed by the VR installations, differs from the work of the cinematographic apparatus. Baudry builds an argument around the concept of a “transcendental subject” to explain the processes at work for cinema. His analysis heavily emphasizes the work of imaginary processes towards creating an illusion in the cinema theatre. However, these processes are merely mimed by the VR installations, rather than depending or relying on them to work. A further examination of the processes analyzed by Baudry and how VR installations create mimicry of these processes in analogy with the experiences in the Basilika, or Berlin’s dark rooms would be more grounded by first visiting Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the simulation.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulations*, in “The Precession of Simulacra”, Jean Baudrillard speaks of the caves in Lascaux, and their exact replica which was built to preserve the original: “It is possible that the memory of the original grottoes is itself stamped in the minds of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication suffices to render both artificial” (2014, p.8). Whether the simulation is an “exact” replica or an “artificial” one does not matter to the subject. The subject feels and experiences the simulation, and they are immersed in it, and they are

exposed to it, so it becomes their world, hence their reality. “For a time, a film is the Universe, the world, or if you like, Nature” says André Bazin, in “The Screen and the Realism of Space” when he discusses spatial realism. Imagine what he would say if he lived to see what VR goggles do (1967).

4. CASTING SPELLS WITHOUT MAGIC

In the foreword of Michael Heim’s book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Myron. W. Krueger makes the observation that the print media began to lose the war against the digital (1994, p.vii). He asserts that the reader is able to maneuver freely in ways that the author had not intended to communicate their thoughts with the utilization of non-linear formatting of hypertext. He argues that “the black-and-white, static, symbolic, sensory-deprivation world of the intellect has begun to yield to multisensory modes of presentation” in which illustrations dominate (1994, p.vii). He then jumps in an ironically quick way to a conclusion: “By totally immersing the consumer in illustration, virtual reality is the momentary culmination of this evolution” (1994, p.vii). This is the temporal nature of the radical change which happens in the modes of communication with virtual reality. Furthermore, one can suggest, this almost sounds like a promise that in VR, the subject will be able to jump to a different set and setting without necessarily taking psychoactive substances. Hypertext made it possible to spear through time like the Millenium Falcon speared through time and space through hyperspace. Virtual reality makes it possible to spear through time and space to arrive at a destination external to these dimensional boundaries. The ultimate display, even in its wording, has the implication that “the dream” has arrived at a destination. The ultimate

experience. The ultimate reality. Krueger poses the question thereof: “Will real action lose its immediacy when it is but a recapitulation of simulated activity?” (1994, p.vii).

Artaud, when he was coining the term for it, most likely did not envision the triumph of simulations in virtual realities. However, in Baudrillard’s oeuvre, it can be seen that he was consistently keen on making a more cynical approach when his subject was tendencies of the society. Although now, one would not jump to any conclusions to suggest that as if Baudrillard’s philosophy resonates only cynically, as if he was against the developments in technology, or that he did not see the better in humanity. However, his body of work could be seen as a critique to sort out the necessary and the evil in the progress within the previous century. A famous excerpt from *Simulacra and Simulation* reads that “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (3). Baudrillard’s claim, from this discussion about Borges’s fable, can be read also as once the destination is arrived at, there is no longer a beginning.

In a world of simulation, such as what the virtual reality installations entitle, a kind of reality is created from which one can never turn back from. One would, of course, be able to come back to the physical world, to reality proper as soon as they take off the goggles. However, once another reality is experienced, would it be possible to unlive it, pretend as if it was not there? In his discussion Baudry’s apparatus theory in the framework of Plato’s cave story Branigan poses similar questions:

What is real about reality? Suppose, for example, someone told you that the room in which you presently sit is only a ‘reflection’ from another place/dimension that you cannot see because no matter in which direction you turn, you see only what is being projected ‘in front of’ you (2014, p.26).

Building on reflections within this context, Baudry's propositions also resonate in similar fashion when he asserts that "the mirror, as a reflecting surface, is framed, limited, circumscribed. *An infinite mirror would no longer be a mirror*" (1975, p.45). A distinction becomes harder to appear in such abstractions.

The virtual reality technology is also developed, and has started, to be used by the healthcare industry for therapeutic purposes. If the same technology could cure post-traumatic stress syndrome by immersing the subject in a reality simulation, could another simulation of reality be ever *really* escaped? This point can perhaps be better illustrated by quoting Baudrillard as he speaks within a similar technological context:

The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere (2014, p.3).

The hyperreal is cyclical in the sense of it being operational. It is not linear, and furthermore it is also not non-linear in the ways that a twisted linear object would be unless that object is a Möbius strip. It is no more possible to contextualize within a binary system, within the dimensions that the physical world operates. It is, just like reality, its way of registering itself to the mind of the subject, hence becoming real virtually. Once the subject perceives it, it becomes their experience as if it is an experience in the reality proper. In this sense, the experiences in Berlin's dark rooms can be seen as symptomatic of Baudrillard's hyperrealities and VR installations as simulations of the hyperrealities, by extracting and implementing the working processes of them. VR aims to create an experience that is lifelike, whereas Berlin's carnivalesque experiences offer an alternate route within proper life. Therefore, it can be argued that

VR is merely putting on a show in which the subject is framed with no utilization of the imaginary processes that would be utilized in the hyperrealities of Berlin, Constantine's Basilika, or the replica caves of Lascaux.

Blascovich and Bailenson in their book, *Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of Virtual Revolution*, suggest that "Virtual reality begins in the mind and requires no equipment whatsoever" (2011, p.14). Assuming that any reality is in fact virtual, they assert that there is a relativity factor in the way the subject perceives reality, just like they perceive time. Blascovich, during a TEDxTalk session, moves into a discussion about psychological relativity by starting out with a rhetorical question for the audience about where they will be during his talk titled, "Digital Freedom: Virtual Reality, Avatars, and Multiple Identities: Jim Blascovich at TEDxWinnipeg" (2017). It is understood that he is joking about the mental flight risk of the audience, when he claims later by saying: "If you are like the average North American, your mind will take you someplace else 40 times, in the 18 minutes I have for this talk" (2017). The mind wanders. The mind has the capacity to take the subject to a different set and setting at any given time. Baudrillard calls "the charm of abstraction" for the ability which is worked in the mind's capacity to do so without any equipment (2014, p.3). Baudrillard observes that "it is difference that constitutes the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real" (2014, p.3). If the map and the territory becomes the same, then there is no charm. If there is only a simulation which is perceived by the subject, in a hypothetical scenario of total immersion of all of the senses, then there would be no more an original base of reality to make an abstraction from. Thus, there is no more cause left for the imagination to operate for. The mind enjoys the concept that it is taking a flight from the reality, as it is

entertaining itself with a simulation. If the mind is immersed in a total simulation in a representation of reality, then it cannot entertain the thought of escaping from somewhere. The charm of abstraction, as the joy of taking a flight, entails a takeoff and a landing spot. When there is no abstraction, the movement becomes cyclical, and half-twisted onto itself like a Möbius strip, which as an object has the mathematical characteristic of being unorientable. Like in Baudry's proposition about the infinite mirror, the light bounces between reflective surfaces an infinite number of times towards no ends. The ideas regarding simulations and the infinite mirror which are presented thus far have been illustrated to a certain extent in a film about compulsions, dreams, and escaping reality by Christopher Nolan.

In *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), a science-fiction film in which the characters are able to create simulations inside a subject's mind while they are dreaming, a point about these simulated worlds can be seen as an allegory for simulations. The simulation's addictiveness or rather the people's tendency to become addicted to them is portrayed in a distinct manner in one of the scenes. Dominick Cobb, the protagonist who has issues with abusing the dream space too much, accepts a final mission deal. If he is successful with the mission, he will be able to get out of exile and go back home, to his children. His job is to commit inception within a subject's mind, meaning that he should implant an idea deep within the subject's mind to influence their actions in real life. What makes this mission different from Cobb's usual gigs is that he usually performs theft from the subjects' minds. Therefore, an implantation of an idea within the mind would be very difficult to perform as Nolan's film illustrates it in a neatly articulate manner. In order to succeed, they are supposed to go deeper than usual into the subject's mind, which requires more time and more sedatives to make the subject

sleep this long. Therefore, they go searching for an adequate sedative which would be fit for the job. They end up in Mombasa, in Morocco and inside a rundown and shady building that resembles an abandoned asylum more than a chemistry lab. Yusuf, a pharmacologist who runs this lab and who has the right drug for Cobb's mission, is hired. During this scene, Cobb is given a taste of the drug to test it on himself for good measure, where he falls asleep so hard that it is difficult for him to come back to "reality" after it. In the same underground floor, there are several other men seen as they sleep on the beds. They question if these men go there every day to go to sleep. As a response they get a wise and haunting reply from whom could be inferred as the old housekeeper of this dorm room: "No. They come to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, son?" So, Nolan's film makes it very clear that to implant an idea within the dream is extremely difficult to convince a subject of its reality. Yet, the lab scene in Mombasa illustrates that the subjects enjoy spending time in the dream, or an alternate reality. And they do so to the point of compulsiveness, in spite of being informed that it is not the real life as the film illustrates their situation. The compulsive behaviour of those men who go to dream everyday could perhaps be seen, as an illustration by Nolan, almost as cynical as Baudrillard's reservations about the hyperreal.

The simulations in Nolan's film are portrayed as prisons where one would "become an old man" who is "filled with regret" and "waiting to die alone". This bears the question what would happen if one could escape one prison to flee into another world as though one was abandoning the levels of a dreaming mind, like in *Inception*? Would the new reality be satisfactory, because the former one was not? Or, would it compensate because it is simply new, and that some time is required for discovering and getting

used to this new setting until it becomes uninteresting? Possibly, Plato would frown upon such rhetorics in discontent. Plato's allegory of the cave from *The Republic* unfolds itself while establishing an order of discovery and adjustment, for the prisoner in the cave who only saw shadows of the objects for his entire life. After his prison break, the free subject, having just escaped a cave in which he has been since birth, would adjust to the sight of the upper world, to the shadows, then reflections of the objects and the men and then finally to the sunlight, and to "what are now called realities" (499). One should rather refrain themselves before making attempts at finding correlations between the prisons of Nolan and Plato, however between themselves, they do crystallize a point about "realities" – that they are relative. If one was stuck in a version of a reality their entire lives, how would one distinguish it from life itself?

5. INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

Distinctions come with defined borders. The vision which is limited by the sensory perceptions, as Plato's allegory of the cave also implies, is limited and bordered. Our sight is limited to what we are seeing momentarily, which then implies that our visions for realities would be limited in definition. Whenever the subject makes the mental exercise to envision a virtual reality, this vision will be confined to some conceptualization of a defined space. In simulations of VR, this seems to be the case as well – given that simulations in VR are pre-defined within some borders by their design. In Nolan's *Inception*, the architects build entire worlds in the dream space, because "they have to feel real" as Cobb says.

An architect is needed, because a simulation needs exactitude and immediacy with reality proper. In the films from *The Matrix Trilogy*, *The Matrix* (Wachowskies, 1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowskies, 2003), it is seen that the entire human race is trapped within a simulation that is run solely by softwares which are controlled by robots. The simulations inside the universe of the films also need an architect, and a character named “The Architect” appears in the latter two films. The Architect is portrayed as a software code which was written with the purpose of building the simulations of reality for the human subjects’ minds to roam virtually. In the scene from *The Matrix Reloaded* when Neo meets The Architect, Neo listens to the story of how a prior version of The Matrix was a failure because of its conception as a utopia, and that in return the humans rejected it. The idea here is that the humans feel more at home within a confined space such as a simulation, a representation of reality, and not because of its abstraction from the reality, but because of its exactitude. Films from the trilogy work in exemplification of the pre-defined design nature behind VR. In *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Michael Heim makes an assertion while speaking for representations in VR: “Any world needs constraints and finite structure” (1994, p.136). Heim questions which qualities, such as dimensions or ideological constructs, would be needed to create the same sensations as the “existential” world, yet maintaining enough space for imagination. The worlds outside of any boundaries, where dimensions are suspended, and there is total suspension of any constraint, do not register with our minds as the concept of infinity does not. The humans in the first version of The Matrix reject a utopia, and Plato’s caveman cannot stare into the sunlight for too long without being irritated, and the dreaming men in *Inception* are driven to sleep in order to wake up routinely because the real is frightening, and it becomes a

compulsion to take routine flights from it for other landing sites: simulations. Nolan's film makes significant points in their illustrations regarding the dream of "the ultimate display," a world designed for one to be immersed their fantasies, or their nightmares.

6. TEMET NOSCE³

Carne y Arena (2017), an installation in Virtual Reality by Alejandro González Iñárritu has a narrative which would scale as an experience within the work as a rather discomfoting nightmare. The title of Iñárritu's installation means Flesh and Sand in English, and its subtitle reads as "Virtually Present, Physically Invisible" which can be argued to make wordplay with an allusion to a the versatility of the spectatorial subject's position. Iñárritu, having made a career in cinema, is building on his experiences with the cinematic techniques throughout his vision of the VR experience. In the installation space in Fondazione Prada of Milan in Italy, following the first dark room with Iñárritu's introduction, the "player" enters a dimly lit room with grey walls in which the temperature is set to a freezing level. There are three benches with several pairs of shoes left beside them, and an instruction on the wall for the player to take their shoes and socks off, and wait for the entry signal to the next room. After the alarm is heard, the player enters a room full of stinging rocks barefoot to be guided by two attendants while wearing the goggles and the headphones. As soon as the experience starts, the player is immersed in a vision of a desert in nighttime. The 3D motion of the sound in the headphones supports the 360 degrees of vision inside the goggles. One can see the horizon, and the vastness of the desert. The narrative is built from the real stories of immigrants passing over to USA from Mexico along the border of Arizona. The player is able to freely walk around them, make his own choices about where to look,

³ Know thyself.-Lat.

who to follow, whether to turn back or not. A helicopter approaches the immigrants in the narrative, the police force arrive at the scene while the actors try to flee their country. The helicopter's wind can be felt with its full force on the body of the player. There are no cuts and no offscreen space as they would be expected of films in a cinema. It is 360 degrees of action, with one's involvement with their whole body performing in the scene. Yet, it can be argued that the experience is in its primitive days has a bulky feeling with two attendants, and a lot of gear required. After all, it is not possible in Iñárritu's installation for one to see themselves, or their body parts inside the goggles if they looked down at their hands. However, the vision for VR is clear: lifelike immersion with no limits, and the dissolution of the border between real and artificial. And more significantly, Iñárritu's work becomes a juxtaposition of form and content, with either being about escaping. Furthermore, it ends by playing with a convention from the history of film to the point of deconstructing it. The action ends as one of the police officers realize the player. They point their gun at him, while they say: "Get down!" And when he doesn't obey, he is shot to end the action. This play on the self-reflexivity from Iñárritu's installation makes an allusion not only to a played out convention in cinema, but also to the idea of the transcendental subject in film theory. Baudry, in "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" builds his thoughts on Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage", in which an infant perceives a unified body image in the mirror, Baudry applies the procedural principles laid out by Lacan to the cinematic processes. Even before doing so, he stresses for cinema that on a cinema screen, "the world is no longer only an open and unbounded horizon" (1975, p.43). As illustrated in the example of Iñárritu's work, the vision is set to become a borderless horizon, as far as the eyes can see and the dual relationship is set to become a

unification of the artificial and the real. Unlike the cinematic subject who interacts traditionally as the anonymous and immobile voyeur as a film spectator, the VR subject assumes the role of an actor by stepping into the action, an action which at all costs makes efforts to simulate a lifelike experience – even if the cost is the loss of magic, or the charm, of abstraction. As mentioned earlier, the abstraction is no longer possible within VR experiences like Iñárritu's because they are already defined abstractions in their form, and design. The vision that one sees is limited by the goggles, and the simulation is limited to the design of its creators. It is mimicking the abstraction mechanism, however not fully implementing it to the point of realizing it with the subjects' minds.

4. CONCLUSION

In simulations, one enjoys using their capacity to imagine under the charming spells of abstraction, whereas in VR, one enjoys the already abstracted world of the simulation. In the dark rooms of Berlin, a ritualistic simulation is what keeps the participants entertained. Meanwhile the crowds in these spaces enjoy taking a sexually playful flight from the humdrumness of everyday routines, it is superimposed by their attempt to escape from their own bodies by getting closer to others'. The darkness propels the imagination, because it is not only black, but blank. This blankness though, rather than being similar to the blankness of a canvas before painting, is more in resemblance with an open-ended film, which provides its viewer with the fullness through letting them envision the various ways it would end. The various imagined constructions provide a contentment with the viewer of such a film, as the ritual of the dark room's visitor would satisfy them by providing a virtual destination to their flight. In parallel to a simulation in Virtual Reality, the subjects enjoy their flights from the reality by assuming the role of an actor in a play, by performing with their bodies and their minds. However, as discussed earlier, the ultimate destination has yet to be arrived. The vision for Virtual Reality extends far beyond its contemporary capacities. A recurring subject matter of sci-fi films, which they examine in hauntingly captivating fashion, could very well be real one day in the future. When the VR experience has the capacity to provide sensations for all the senses, in complete neurological symbiosis of the body and mind within the simulation, clearly the discussion on the concept of the real will not be the same. However, it is in a way already happening, as Berlin lives its Weimar moment

once again, in localized points of simulations, proven by a symptom which is also the consequence, that there is at least the possibility of a cyclical virtual reality. Having said that, I must stress, the points which are made throughout this thesis, have also intended to make a clarification about the experiences of dark rooms and virtual realities. Dark rooms represent a symptomatic alternative to Disneyland where sexual play is the norm in terms of the Baudrillardian hyperreal, whereas VR only mimics the working mechanisms of the hyperreal. Yet, either VR or Berlin's dark rooms can be seen as symptoms of the compulsion to escape reality virtually. By suspending their disbelief, the VR subject enjoys playing in a simulation while Berlin simulates to create realities, thus ends up creating true believers.

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