

18 (VIRTUAL) REALITY

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It is possible to recount the history of electronic media in the last century as a history of naïve viewers mistaking televisual worlds for reality. Films and TV shows themselves have often dramatized this issue. The 1902 silent film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*, a paradigmatic example, depicts a man who thinks that what he sees on the screen is real. In the film's first scene, a dancing woman does the can-can and Uncle Josh jumps out of his seat to join her on the stage. He dances next to the projection screen. In the second scene a train approaches and Uncle Josh panics, leaping from the stage to avoid it. (This scene is clearly indebted to the Lumiere brothers' 1895 *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, which evidently aroused panic in audience members.) In the third and final scene, a couple pumps water at a local well while the pump handle repeatedly hits the man in the head, something Uncle Josh finds hilarious. He watches and laughs. Then the couple embrace and kiss, however, and Uncle Josh becomes agitated. Out of jealousy or anger—it is hard to tell—he attempts to grab the man but ends up instead with the projection screen in his arms. Everything had been a projection, an illusion. The film is comedy because audience members see a country rube who has mistaken a novel technology for something real. Audience members laugh because only a simpleminded naïf would get worked up over a moving picture show.

The trope of the naïve viewer may be funny, but today we are all naïve viewers. Though we have certainly adjusted to the initial shock of moving pictures, new media technologies, from television to video games and virtual reality, have forced upon us ongoing perceptual and cognitive adjustments. It is not just that these technologies produce representations that look and feel real, though this is important. It is also that they have

insinuated themselves into our social world and personal space in new ways—and have therefore shifted the boundaries of our embodied experience. So we might discern a progression from seeing and hearing a television, to seeing, hearing and touching a computer, to seeing, hearing, touching, and wearing a more or less permanently pocketed phone or strapped-on augmented reality (or virtual reality) apparatus. As media technologies have changed during the last century, they have delivered higher and higher levels of what I am calling *sensational credibility*—that is, they have produced increasingly believable and realistic representations and incorporated more and more of our senses.

They therefore generate what we might call (following Walter Benjamin) “shock effects” that recalibrate our sensational apparatus and open us up to new experiences and imaginative world-building. In 1935 Benjamin pointed out that films replaced contemplative viewing (of, for example, a painting) with an uninterrupted sequence of moving images that shocked audience members and generated a kind of absent-minded viewership (1969, 238). Benjamin was not the only one to discuss these and other shock effects (*Chockwirkung*) of technological media on our sensibilities. Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, and others have commented at length on the media, reality, and ontology, examining how media have reorganized our ways of thinking about and sensing things. The philosopher and phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, who was a contemporary of Benjamin, offered a detailed analysis of what it felt like to move into and out of imaginative experiences, including those generated by electronic media. “The epoché of the natural attitude which suspends doubt in its existence is replaced by other epochés which suspend belief in more and more layers of the reality of daily life, putting them in brackets,” Schutz wrote (1972, 233). I want to suggest that media-generated shock experiences do not just transport us temporarily into different bracketed experiences, however, but rather trouble our understanding of what is real and expand the range of things that seem real. This has important implications for how we think about things that used to seem imaginary and impossible—entities such as ghosts, gods, guardian angels, and holy spirits. It also has important implications for how we might reassess religious practices in lived contexts that are electronic and mediated.

I:

Commentators have already documented the ontological confusion and existential shock that telegraphy, radio, and then television induced. TV

in particular generated some arresting examples. As Leo Bogart has written, people generally were aware of how films and even books were edited, reworked, and revised, but televisual stories and events had a liveness and immediacy to them that made them seem real. But it was not just that broadcast television seemed to be happening now or that it seemed more (a)live; it was also that television brought things that were remote and difficult to see into the intimate spaces of the home (Bogart 1958, 28, 30–31). For these reasons, the invention of the TV was accompanied by new conversations about the nature of real versus electrical space. Genre television in the 1950s and 1960s pointed to this issue with characters who moved magically between television studios and “real” life, as for example in *The Twilight Zone*’s “World of Difference” and *Lights Out*’s “Something in the Wind.” In “Something in the Wind,” for example, a director who cuts characters from a script is confronted by these characters when they come to life and demand their lines back. In other genre TV from this era, characters see future events, spectral presences, or their own thoughts miraculously appear on the screen. Sometimes they try to get into (or out of) the screens they watch. Films during the last fifty years have also pondered the reality of the diegetic worlds on the small screen. Films have featured TVs coming alive (*The Twonky*) or controlling, kidnapping (*Poltergeist*), and killing people (*The Ring*). An anxious psychological literature has accompanied these self-reflexive fictional narratives, probing why TV seemed to create confusion and psychopathology. The American activist and writer Jerry Mander rehearsed these concerns in his *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978), in which he commented on cases in the psychological literature where patients felt lost in the television or controlled and confused by it (Mander 1978, 86–87, 108–12).¹

Philosophers and media theorists also have examined how televisions have generated perceptual shocks and ontological confusion. “It has long struck me,” Samuel Weber once argued, that “the self-evident quality of this experience of visual perception is increasingly being shaken, but also exploited, by a medium such as television” (in De Vries and Weber 2001, 94). We have always trusted our experience of audiovisual perception, but with the television we can no longer believe unquestioningly what we see and hear. What is the status of the things we see and hear on television? Are they real? What is the real? “As a visual medium,” Jenny Slatman has

1. See also White 2018, 255–58.

written, touching upon the same problems, “television asks us to believe in something that we have not seen with our own eyes. Thus, it obscures the apparently clear-cut distinction between faith and seeing, a distinction that has thoroughly dominated our tradition.” Slatman also argued that tele-vision was structurally similar to seeing the transcendent, for everything on TV always existed in a location that was *beyond*—in other words, it was always “tele” (remote) vision. “The tele-visible is the transcendent being” (Slatman 2001, 216, 221). Maurice Merleau-Ponty put this in a slightly different way, saying that on television there was a “crystallization of the impossible” (Slatman 2001, 218). There is therefore a kind of perceptual play that television creates, because it forces viewers to doubt whether they see things truly and causes us to wonder about the possibility of seeing transcendentally.

Those pondering this latter possibility, that televisions could help us see transcendent things, produced shows and other narratives that framed televisions as portals to a realm of the really real. One of the first television broadcast shows ever produced, the New York-based broadcast *The Television Ghost* (1931–33), used fifteen-minute episodes that featured the departed spirits of murder victims who materialized on-screen to describe how they were killed. In other cases, families reported ghosts that materialized in TV static and would not be tuned out. In December 1953 the *New York Times* reported the case of Jerome Travers, who was watching *Ding Dong School* with his three children when a woman’s face appeared on the screen and would not go away—even after the set was turned off. (The only solution was to turn the TV toward the wall.) In another case, it was the image of an Indianapolis housewife’s dead grandfather that appeared on the screen—not a metaphorical ghost lost in static but a literal one haunting the set. After two days of trying to get rid of the image, Mrs. Mackey worried she was “going crazy” and took the TV to the police. At the police station the set was activated and Mackey’s grandfather again appeared in the suit he was buried in months before (Sconce 2000, 1–2, 124). Were TVs somehow able to tune in to the really real? These events point to ways that the American public, a group mostly ignorant about how electromagnetic waves and cathode tubes worked, wondered about the reality of the things they saw on TV (figure 19.1). Televisions mysteriously received invisible transmissions from far-off places; could they also detect spiritual transmissions from heavenly places?

It is important to point out that this kind of thinking is common today

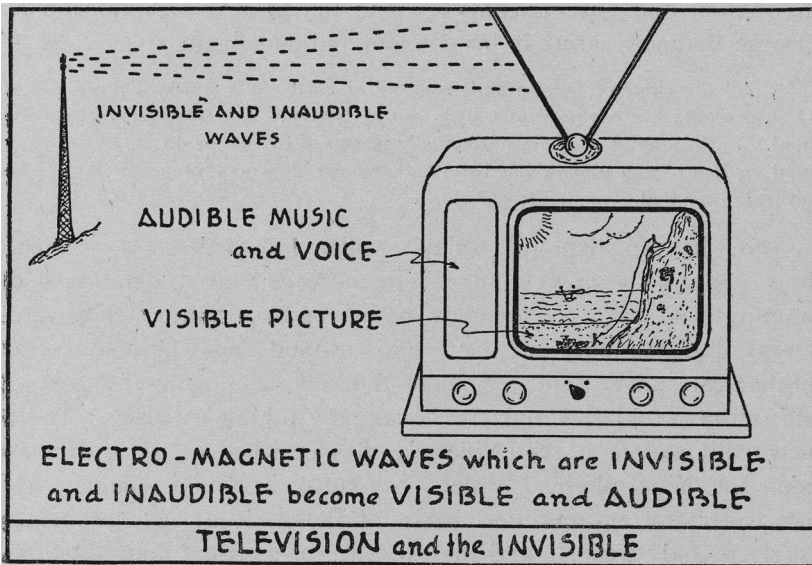


FIG. 19.1 Televisions fired the imagination with new metaphors of transmission and reception. Reminding us that modern physicists have proved that reality is not solid but closer to “thoughts” or energies, the theosophical writer E. Norman Pearson wrote that the human mind is a lot like a “receiving set” for these energies (Pearson 1957, 22–23).

around the world. Religious studies scholars and media anthropologists working in different contexts have revealed what would have seemed an unlikely reality fifty years ago—that gods and other supernatural things commonly appear on electronic devices (see for example Apolito 2005; Beliso-De Jesús 2015; Meyer 2009; Van de Port 2006; Pype 2012; De Witte 2005, 314–35). This fact presents challenges and opportunities. How do we find ways of understanding the aesthetics and the materiality of electronic media? How do we think about mediation as a set of practices and actions? How do we think about how media devices are restructuring religious and spiritual experiences around the world? When people use personal computers or mobile phones every day, how are their relationships with angels, gods, or ancestors reimagined, how are rhythms of their daily devotional practices altered? As Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari have written, we need to consider anew “how the ubiquitous presence of (social) media in people’s daily lives influences their lived experience of religion and spirituality” (2020, 168). The result would be not only new ways of un-

derstanding what religious people are thinking and doing today, but also new theoretical insights about mediation, representation, embodiment, and technology.

II.

Theorists working in different fields have already begun considering these questions. For instance, probably the most influential thinker examining the culture of moving images and how they trouble the real was the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard, who staged Western history in terms of epochs of media representations. He wrote that in the pre-modern period, people understood that images were clear counterfeits or placeholders for real things. Representations pointed to their referents. This epoch gave way to representation in the industrial revolution, during which the distinction between image and reality began to break down because of the mass production of copies. Mass-produced objects threatened to occlude underlying reality by imitating it so well. The postmodern order of representation, finally, has confronted us with an endlessly proliferating set of media-generated images that entirely obfuscate the real.

Baudrillard provided different examples of how the postmodern media environment worked. He often focused on consumer culture and advertising: we no longer purchase things because of real needs, he said, but because commercialized images stimulate desires in us. These commercialized images keep us “one step removed from the reality of our bodies or of the world around us” (Felluga 2003, 80). The rise of the Internet in the 1990s accelerated this process. Thus we have the emergence of what he called the hyperreal, defined as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality,” a dystopian situation in which consumer society and media images colonize all of life. Our hypermediated world was a new lived reality that had no clear origin point in what we used to call the “real world.” “The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation” (Baudrillard 1994, 1, 31). Media representations seemed so real that the real was abolished.

While Baudrillard worried that this new separation from the real generated confusion, melancholy, and a kind of unfulfilled longing for authenticity, it is possible to argue that our moving-image culture did not destroy the real but rather refigured it, revealing the “objective” world of matter

and facts to be *more mediatic* in nature—more dynamic, imaginative, illusory, elastic, and even what we might call “spiritual.” Could our ongoing participation in the simulated worlds of electronic media point the way to a revised notion of the real?

Reflections on the nature of cyberspace and the simulated worlds of video games have led in precisely this direction. “When my family got an Atari video game console,” the game designer and entrepreneur Rizwan Virk recalled in the introduction to his book *The Simulation Hypothesis*, “I became intrigued not just by the gameplay itself but by the ‘illusion’ that there was a self-contained world ‘in there.’” “What happened when no one was playing the video game? Did the characters and the buildings still exist, or did they simply cease to exist?” In the 1990s and 2000s, as Virk designed and sold games that were more and more realistic and were played by many people simultaneously, his questions lingered. “If multiple users were playing the same game online, did it mean they were part of a shared world that existed independent of their computers? If so, where was it—was it on a server, or was it in some other metaphysical landscape in ‘cyberspace’? Or did the world only exist when it was rendered on someone’s local computer?” Moreover, was the world “in there” similar in certain ways to the world “out here” (Virk 2019, 2–4)? Could reality either be similar to the simulated world of video games or, more radically, have been constituted as some kind of simulated world by another form of intelligence? Virk came to believe the latter—that reality was a simulation being run on a cosmic supercomputer.

III.

Of course, Virk was not the only one who found that electronic media led to novel metaphysical reflections on the real. In a truly remarkable development, the widespread adoption and use of personal computers has made many things seem computational—theological ideas, the human mind, even the deep structures of the cosmos. Some theologians have reimagined concepts such as *God*, *incarnation*, and *the Church* in response to a universe that suddenly seems networked, (hyper)linked, informational, and dynamic (Campbell and Garner 2016; Davies and Gregersen 2010; Friesen 2009; Han 2016; Hutchings 2017; Spadaro 2014). Other religious folks, such as the many metaphysical and “spiritual but not religious” practitioners in America, also have reshaped beliefs and practices using terms and cat-

egories such as networks, frequencies, transmissions, and the virtual. If we cast our net still wider, we see how the culture of ubiquitous computing has influenced aesthetic trends in art, music, and architecture. James Bridle has offered examples of the irruption of the computational in the material world—pointing to consumer products with blocky, digital patterns, art or music structured around technical glitches (e.g., “glitch art” and “glitch music”), pixilated stained glass church windows, and advertising campaigns that render real-world objects as something one might see in Minecraft (Bridle n.d.). Regarding theories of mind, there likewise has been an explosion of computational theories and models. Psychology textbooks and pop psychology trade books commonly talk about the mind as a layered set of computer programs running on the hardware of the brain, as Daniel Dennett does in his 1991 bestseller *Consciousness Explained*. The idea that the mind is a computational system has become an important idea in cognitive science, computer science, AI, and other fields.²

Finally, computational and virtual theories of the cosmos have not only fired the imagination of designers like Rizwan Virk, but also appear in cosmological debates staged by sober-minded scientists who used to eschew this kind of speculation. In the last twenty years, physicists and cosmologists have asserted that the universe resembles a mathematical code and that it might be a simulation of some kind. Max Tegmark at MIT and James Gates at the University of Maryland, for example, have argued that the laws that govern quarks, electrons, and other particles resemble error-correcting codes that make browsers work (Moskowitz 2016). Neil Degrasse Tyson has argued that it is “very likely” that we are living in a simulation akin to the simulations we run on computers; the Nobel Prize-winning physicist George Smoot gave a popular TED Talk with the playful title “You Are a Simulation and Physics Can Prove It.”³ (He did not actually prove it.) “Anyone who’s seen *The Matrix* has contemplated the possibility that the world around us might be an illusion,” the Columbia

2. See Michael Rescorla, “The Computational Theory of Mind,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, February 21, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/computational-mind/>. “Today’s embrace of the computational metaphor in the cognitive and neural sciences is so widespread and automatic that it begins to appear less like an innovative leap than like a bandwagon phenomenon” (Daugman 2001, 32).

3. Smoot argues that “human beings are not good at figuring out if they are real.” He displays optical illusions and other images to show that we do not perceive things properly. The reason, he says, is that we “lack computing power” and have to rely on “compromise algorithms” (see Smoot 2014).

University physicist Brian Greene pointed out in 2017. “What might be going on is we’re just some elaborate computer simulation. All our thoughts are nothing but electrons flowing through very sophisticated circuitry.” Increasingly powerful computers had led to these new speculations. “As we look at the capacity of computers—VR, AR—to recreate with ever greater reality the world around us,” Greene thought, “you can at least imagine the possibility that we will be able to create consciousness inside of a simulated world.” In fact, he thought, there was a “high probability” that we were a simulation (Greene 2017).

Thinking about the cosmos as computational and simulated has led some scientists to metaphysical reflections on the real that sound—well—religious. Could we be a simulation created by some kind of physicist-hacker God? “We have, as a species, for a very long time, struggled with deep questions. . . . Did some divine being bring us into existence?” Brian Greene said. “If indeed we are a simulation, we would have a creator and that creator would not stand outside the laws of science. So, strangely, from this point of view, you can be led to admit the possibility of a creator, but one that is not supernatural. So it’s a weird situation where individuals like me, who never really considered the realistic possibility that there’s a divine being behind it all, all of a sudden were led to the same set of thoughts and ideas that have been around for thousands of years of human civilization” (Greene 2017). “If the simulation hypothesis is valid,” the physicist James Gates argued, echoing Greene, “then we open the door to eternal life and resurrection and things that formally have been discussed in the realm of religion.” The reason was quite simple: “If we’re programs in the computer, then as long as I have a computer that’s not damaged, I can always re-run the program” (Moskowitz 2016). The Stanford physicist Andrei Linde has gone as far as to wonder why this “physicist hacker” God would create a universe and how he might have communicated with his simulation via revelatory messages coded into nature. If he had, who would be able to read such revelations? Physicists, of course (Linde n.d.).

The important point here is that this kind of novel metaphysical thinking was generated in the shocking encounter with computers and computer-generated realities, an encounter that is still ongoing. It is worth underscoring an obvious point: if computers and video games had never been invented, the cosmos and the mind would not today look like computers or computer simulations. These models of reality, these ways of thinking, have been entirely created by media technologies.

IV.

Computers may provide a particularly dramatic example of the kind of technological shock and cognitive readjustment I am identifying, for they bring with them a remarkable level of *sensational credibility*. I use this term to point to two things: (1) computer-generated virtual worlds seem more and more realistic and believable; and (2) our encounters with computers and their virtual worlds incorporate more and more of our senses. On the latter point, computers and digital devices are different from film and television because they have insinuated themselves into our social world and everyday perceptions: We touch, hold, carry, and speak into laptops and mobile phones all day long. So there is a kind of progression in the sensational credibility of media during the last century, from seeing and hearing a television, to seeing, hearing, and touching a computer, to seeing, hearing, touching, and wearing or carrying a phone or strapped-on VR or AR apparatus.⁴

How should we think about the sensational and perceptual aspects of our encounters with technology—the ways we see, hear, touch, and interact with these devices? When discussing computers, other digital devices, and our understanding of the real, we certainly have to think about *touch*. How do these devices put us “in touch” with reality in new ways? The sociologist Mark Paterson has argued in an influential book on technology and touch that we associate touching with sensations of “feeling-with,” a bringing near of distant things, and contact and proximity (Paterson 2007, 147). Touch brings distant things near and creates both a physical point of contact and an empathetic link to things in our environment. We recognize the power of touch to create emotional and epistemological points of contact in metaphorical phrases such as “her words touched me”; “let’s stay in touch”; and “he lost touch with reality.” “When I see a stone, it is ‘out there’ and does not see me, but when I touch that stone, it is ‘right here’ and touches me,” the media theorist Mika Elo has written. “This sense of concreteness and immediacy lends the sense of touch certain credibility. A seen stone can be made of plastic even if it looks just like a stone, but when I touch it I can feel the material. It is due to this fullness of touching that the tactile metaphor of ‘grasping’ can stand for ‘fully understanding

4. McLuhan focused on how media technologies extended the human sensorium, calling this “discarnation” and discussing how our faculties were extruded into a pervasive electronic environment.

something’” (Elo 2012b). *Touching is grasping and knowing something*. The point is as old as the Bible’s doubting Thomas, who did not trust his senses until he had touched the risen Jesus. Seeing was not enough. “Thus reality,” Elo has averred in another essay, “has been understood as being in touch with something real” (Elo 2012a).

The question then becomes how being constantly in touch with computers and other digital devices is changing how we register things as real. How do we in-corporate into experience new kinds of touching that are now quite routine—touching keyboards, mice, touchscreens, app icons, joysticks, and other technological interfaces? The philosopher Hubert Dreyfus has pointed out that the engaged body and its ability to interact with and alter things is crucial to our understanding of the real—“what gives our sense of being in direct touch with reality is that we bring about changes in the world and get perceptual feedback concerning what we have done” (Dreyfus 2000, 57). There are differences, of course, between virtual handshakes (mediated by haptic interfaces), joystick-controlled computer game interactions, and using a mouse to stop and start YouTube videos, but in each situation a novel experience of touch changes our relationship to the world. We might consider one example—our interaction with ghost videos online. We point at, click on, grasp, start and stop, move and control them. We do not touch ghosts directly, but we touch the thing that touches the ghost—and we do this in our lived space all day long. So daily computing leads to a recalibrated sensorium that is attuned to keys, trackpads, buttons, and interactive screens, all of which somehow deliver (among other things) ghosts that we can see, hear, (sort of) touch, and therefore “grasp.” Our multisensory interactions with computers mean that the realities they reveal to us seem closer because they literally come within our grasp. Thus, if we have reformatted media devices to be touched, media devices have reformatted us so that we touch and thus grasp/know things in new ways.⁵

The reorientation forced upon us by shocking technological devices, then, goes beyond the realm of new ideas and beliefs. These changes encourage us to consider mediation as practice, embodiment, and action. They require bringing new approaches to our lived religious lives that examine how religious subjectivities are constituted by new media. And they

5. Elo has a nice phrase for how our new haptic environment alters our sense of the real, saying that “these taps, pushes and sweeps challenge the familiar concretia of the world” (see Elo 2012b).

require that we understand how our relationships with other souls and supernatural gods are now structured by electronic devices.

Conclusion

Some technology entrepreneurs are embracing all of these changes, pressing ahead with media devices that generate shock experiences, metaphysical insights, and electronic practices. In 2016 the American spiritual icon Deepak Chopra teamed up with Wevr, a California VR firm, to create a meditation virtual reality app called “Finding Your True Self.” Chopra’s son, Gotham, a filmmaker in Los Angeles, came upon the idea after listening to his dad talk about the illusory nature of reality for many years. Could VR be harnessed to teach this lesson in a particularly immersive way? “I’m a big fan of how technology can shift consciousness,” Chopra has written. “I have also been focused on the idea of shifting people’s experience of life through deeper meditation or visualization or experiences in nature or through music. And when they have a life altering experience, their biology changes. When VR came around I thought it was a perfect way to amplify and make more powerful what I have been doing for the last thirty years” (Chopra n.d.). The father-son team developed a beta version with Wevr, and one day Chopra arrived at Wevr’s headquarters to test the system. He had his own shock experience. “I’ll never forget Deepak’s response when he first tried on the goggles,” Anthony Batt, Wevr’s co-founder, said. “He said, ‘This is going to change the world, and it’s going to help me explain to everybody what I’ve been saying for the last 30 years: We’re all living in a simulation’” (in Dean 2016).

What did this new technology reveal? The app is a guided meditation that begins gameplay on an open plain underneath the wide-spreading branches of a Bodhi tree. To the right is the Bodhi tree’s gnarled trunk, which at times pulses with light energy. Deepak narrates the experience, calling attention to the breath in the style of a typical mindfulness meditation. As he does, luminous objects appear on the horizon, including Hindu gods surrounded by garlands and light. “Mentally ask yourself, who am I?” he says about four minutes into the meditation, signaling that this technology might help uncover an unknown truth about the self. He then asks players to focus either on his voice or on aspects of the gameplay environment as it changes, pointing out that regardless of one’s momentary sensations and thoughts, there is always an “I am” behind the perception of these things. That enduring “I am” is an eternal self—it senses different

things, experiences different memories or emotions, or withdraws into silence, but it exists independent of these states of awareness.⁶ As the eighteen-minute meditation ends, the tree and the open plain disappear, replaced by a dark screen that foregrounds a giant floating Buddha, with beams of light radiating from his third eye.

Though commentators often question the realness and authenticity of virtual experiences, including online religious experiences, the fascinating aspect of this VR meditation is that it claims to reveal the really real: it is the shock experience that uncovers the true self. “When you don a virtual reality (VR) headset,” Chopra wrote in his 2019 book *Metahuman*, “the simulation you are plunged into is like a wrap-around, three-dimensional movie of such vividness that it overwhelms the senses and causes a dislocation from what we deem as everyday reality” (2019, 36–37). This odd experience of another reality does not fool us into thinking that the virtual environment is real; it helps us realize that the real environment is virtual. We realize our everyday world is one that we also experience via a headset—that is, via a set of limited and sometimes unreliable senses that cannot in any event yield the whole truth. “Getting real is a process that begins by confronting your misplaced trust in illusions every day,” Chopra writes in the same book (2019, 36–37). VR forces us to confront this truth.

Thus Chopra’s VR represents a different kind of shock experience from that felt by naïve audience members watching early films such as *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*. Uncle Josh was fooled into thinking the virtual was the real, but more sophisticated onlookers knew the truth. Chopra’s “Finding Your True Self,” however, points the way to a new mediated practice. This media technology neither obscures the real nor introduces a counterfeit real; by bringing a high level of sensational credibility to an electronically mediated experience, it shows us that experiences that seem real can be faked and that we might therefore trust our everyday perceptions of the real a bit less. Though religious people might embrace the illusory nature of material things with alacrity, all people immersed in electronic media are forced to confront not just a set of unexpected sensations and perceptions but an additional possibility once understood only by mystics: that all things we perceive are merely projections in a world that is fundamentally mediatic and simulated.

6. Gameplay video is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItCYA8I32B8>.

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