Expert Seminar: Image, Imagination, and Virtual Reality: Abstracts & bio's

Lambert Wiesing (Universität Jena): Immersion and Virtual Reality

From a phenomenological point of view, picture objects - i. e. the things visible in pictures - occupy an intermediate position: on the one hand, they share with the objects of the imagination the property that they are for the beholder not present: The object visible in a picture, like an imaginary object, is not really present. But unlike fantasy objects, picture objects, on the other hand, are visible and public like objects of perception. This intermediate position is the reason to speak of an artificial presence of the image. The thesis of the lecture is that in the technical development of the image media, attempts can now be observed to phenomenally adapt the image object to the imaginary object as well as to the perceptual object. The alignment of the image object with the perceptual object leads to immersive images and the alignment of the image object with the imaginary object leads to virtual realities.

Lambert Wiesing is Professor of Comparative Picture Theory and Phenomenology at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena. He was president of the German Society for Aesthetics from 2005 to 2008. He was awarded the Aby Warburg Foundation Prize in 2015. His areas of specialisation are phenomenology, cognitive and image theory, and aesthetics. He is the author of numerous books, including *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory* (Stanford University Press, 2009), *The Philosophy of Perception: Phenomenology and Image Theory* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) and *The Visibility of Images: History and Perspectives of Formal Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

Geert Gooskens (Avans Hogeschool): Immersion. A Critical Retrospective View

My presentation consists of three parts. First, I will summarize my original take on immersion, i.e. the sense of being present in a represented environment. On this view, immersion is neither a (perceptual) illusion nor an instance of make-believe, but a special kind of pictorial experience. The main reason behind this claim is that immersion is brought about by special pictures, that represent both an environment and the viewer's presence in that environment. In the second part, I will argue that this original account has, at least, three major flaws: (a) immersion is not itself a (special kind of) mental state, but rather a property of mental states, (b) the original account smuggles in untested empirical hypotheses about how immersion is brought about, and (c) it is doubtful whether these hypotheses are true. I will conclude the talk with a reflection about what this means for a philosophical account of immersion.

Geert Gooskens wrote a PhD-thesis about pictorial experience. He has published about digital photography, the ethics of virtual reality, and immersion. Currently, he manages the department of Communication & Multimedia Design at the Avans University of Applied Sciences (NL).

Marco Arienti (University of Antwerp): What are immersive images?

Images deployed by videogames or VR installations are often regarded as providing a sense of *immersion* in a virtual environment. Insofar as this means that they make spectators feel like being part of the depicted scene, they appear to pose a challenge to common-ground ideas on images, which are usually assumed to display the visual appearances of actually absent objects. The impact of this intuition has led many to defend the thesis that immersive images are to be distinguished from non-immersive ones in terms of the psychological attitude undergone by their consumers, variously

identified as involving forms of illusion (Grau, 2003) or of imaginative self-projection (Tavinor, 2009). I claim that, although focusing on the experience elicited by virtual images can be in itself an interesting research program, it is a misleading approach to understand their immersive character. As it turns out, a feeling of being present within the depicted scene is a matter of which actions could be either undertaken or inhibited towards it. While different opportunities for action are available starting from what virtual images depict, they are not themselves depicted by these images as the represented subjects are; nevertheless, the range of possible actions to be performed remains remarkably constrained by the depicted features. Therefore, the main question for an account of the immersive character of virtual images should be how they can drive consumers to perform certain actions instead of others within an *artificial* environment. To address such an issue, it is not of help to determine which kind of psychological state underlies the encounter with these images, or which phenomenal character corresponds to such an experience: this point of view is unable to capture the fact that only *some particular actions* are afforded by certain immersive images. I thus suggest to construe the notion of "immersiveness" according to an idea of "being informative to a certain purpose", that is along similar lines as the notion of "realism" is developed by Abell (2007). While for Abell pictures are realistic insofar as they convey relevant information about what particular objects would look like, were they to actually appear before us, I will contend that immersive images convey relevant information about actions to be performed in a particular environment, were it the actual environment we were located within.

Marco Arienti obtained his MA degree in Philosophy at State University of Milan and he is currently a Phd student at the Center for European Philosophy of the University of Antwerp. His research mainly focuses on image representation, especially in connection with imagination and the experience of VR environments.

Nathan Wildman (University of Tilburg): The Puzzle of Virtual Theft

In 2012, the Dutch Supreme Court (Case No. 10/00101 J) ruled on a rather interesting case. The basics of the case are (sadly) all too mundane: two boys physically threated another boy, attempting to intimidate him into giving them his property. What was interesting is the nature of the relevant property: a magic amulet and an enchanted sword within the MMORPG *Runescape*. Under duress, the victim was forced to log into the game, "drop" the items, then watch while one of the perpetrators logged in, picked them up and ran off. The court ruled that the perpetrators had committed an act of 'genuine theft', and they were punished accordingly.

Relatedly, there is a growing debate concerning the ontology of virtual reality. The crux of this debate concerns the ontological status of virtual objects: are the virtual objects that we encounter when engaged with virtual environments just as real as those objects that we bump into in the everyday, non-virtual world? Virtual realists say they are, while *virtual irrealists* say they are not – rather, such "objects" are mere fictions, posits, or something similar.

The case seems to pose a significant difficulty for irrealism: how, assuming irrealism, is it possible to rob someone of a virtual object? After all, according to the irrealist, there is no magic amulet/enchanted swords to steal. But, if there was nothing that was taken, how is it that the perpetrators committed an act of robbery? Call this *the puzzle of virtual theft*.

The aim of this paper is to make the first steps towards solving this puzzle. Specifically, we do so by developing and extending a broadly fictionalist approach to virtual objects. The upshot is that virtual theft – and the Dutch Supreme Court – is not as threatening to virtual irrealism as first appears.

Nathan Wildman is an assistant professor at Tilburg University, and a member of TiLPS, the Tilburg Center for Logic, Ethics, and the Philosophy of Science. His research touches on topics in metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, and aesthetics. He is especially interested in the nature of fiction, the

logic of fictional truth, and the aesthetics of interactive fictions (e.g., video games and augmented/virtual reality). For more information, see his webpage: nwwildman.wordpress.com.

Nele Van de Mosselaer (University of Antwerp): Interacting with Fiction in Virtual Reality

Virtual media are often said to give us access to a new kind of fiction: *interactive* fiction (Tavinor 2009; Robson and Meskin 2016; Wildman and Woodward 2018). The notion of interactive fiction, however, contradicts with what Matravers calls the "consensus view" within the philosophy of fiction, which says that while non-fiction causes beliefs that can motivate actions, fiction prompts imaginings that are non-motivational (Matravers 2014). Indeed, the idea that actions towards imagined particulars are impossible has long been, and still is, assumed within discussions on fiction (Lamarque 1981; Walton 1990; Matravers 2014, 26-28; Stock 2017, 168; Friend 2017, 220). However, virtual media have challenged this assumption in the last years with games like *Pokémon Go*, in which people really chase and try to catch fictional monsters.

In this presentation, I discuss different ways to deal with the possibility of acting on fictional representations within virtual worlds. Espen Aarseth (2007) argues that the virtual is an ontological category besides the fictional and the real. He uses, however, a dated and unfortunate definition of fiction as that which is "invented". John Sageng (2012) argues that what we interact with in virtual realities are just real, graphical representations. Yet, this suggestion seems to work only in particular cases, as players of videogames often have emotional reactions towards represented, which proves that they treat them as the persons they, *fictionally*, represent. In the end, I will describe the virtual as a computer-rendered *medium* which represents content with inherent affordances for its user. Moreover, I argue that both Aarseth's idea that the virtual contains affordances and Sageng's idea that we actually interact with real graphical representations can be incorporated in a fictionalist treatment of virtual reality: following Kendall Walton's fiction theory, we can then say that virtual objects are a specific kind of props, which invite a specific kind of make-believe game.

Nele Van de Mosselaer is a PhD student at the Center for European Philosophy at the University of Antwerp. As a philosopher and video gamer, she wants to expand the research field of the philosophy of fiction, which traditionally focuses on literature, theatre, and film, and propose a new approach to imaginative participation in fiction in light of the video game experience. In her on-going thesis, titled "The Paradox of Interactive Fiction," she investigates what the video game experience can tell us about the relation between fiction, imagination, emotion, and action.

Zuzanna Rucinska (University of Antwerp): *Enactivism, Embodiment and Virtual Reality*

This talk will propose the perspective of embodied and enactive account of cognition for understanding virtual reality (VR). VR is understood as a form of engagement with computer-generated virtual environments. The thesis of the talk is that the enactive approach to imagination and pretend play can shed new light on our understanding of the virtual engagements. From the perspective of embodiment and enactivism, engagement in VR environments involves actual immersion in and interaction with the virtual environment, as well as bodily engagements, distinct phenomenology, seeing affordances for action, and proprioception. Hence, it stands sharply against fictionalism about VR.
The talk will include the following structure. First, I will compare the traditional view of VR (fictionalism) to the traditional view of pretense (representationalism) and introduce an alternative, enactive approach to pretense as an embodied and social engagement without the need to represent fictions (Rucińska, 2017). Then, I will show that this enactive approach extends to VR as well. I will compare and contrast the enactive view of pretense to Chalmers' (2017) *digital realism* about VR, which does not involve representing VR environments *as fictions* as well. Furthermore, I will include a discussion of embodiment in VR. The talk will reconsider the role of the physical body as necessary for skillful

engagement (Dreyfus, 2013) and a 'lived experience' (Hoffding, 2014) and suggest that one can fully immerse in the virtual environment in a genuinely bodily way, as in the case of E-Sports practices (Jenny, 2017). The talk concludes with insights we can gain about the nature of imagination involved in VR engagements, opening up the question if there is any role left for mental images to play in our engagements with VR.

Zuzanna Rucinska is a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) at the Centre for Philosophical Psychology, Department of Philosophy in University of Antwerp, Belgium. She was formerly a lecturer of philosophy of mind in Leiden University, the Netherlands, and an Early Stage Researcher of the Marie-Curie Initial Training Network 'TESIS' in the UK, working on the embodied and enactive account of pretending. Her research interests include pretend and imaginative play, forms of creativity, embodied and enacted cognition, dynamical systems theory, sensorimotor theory and theory of affordances, as well as application of those theories to the fields of sport, virtual reality and therapeutic play.