The (oh-so-queerly-embodied) virtual

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Jean du Toit iD
School of Philosophy, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
jean.dutoit@nwu.ac.za

The virtual has become the latest rostrum for ideological heteronormativity; it increasingly plays host to an insidious rhetoric of unjustifiably fixed and oppositional gender binaries that exhort heterosexuality as a norm. Conservative political and religious groups, as well as consumerist advertising, utilise digital technology to reinforce cast-in-stone and adversarial social perspectives for manipulative and exploitative ends. Contrastingly, the virtual may be mobilised to support and facilitate queering in contemporary societies and may positively counter such fixed ideological heteronormative categories of social life. Crucial in this transformative account of the virtual is the body, which is for Merleau-Ponty the horizon of engagement with the world as a condition for perception and performativity. Queer perspectives may, in turn, overcome the oversight of Merleau-Ponty (as critically suggested by Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young) regarding the specific gendered characteristics of the body itself, and allows for an expanded embodied and queer conceptualisation of the virtual. A transformative vision of the virtual entails therefore a rethinking of our understanding of digital technology through (a) the phenomenology of the body-subject and (b) queer theory. I argue that the idea of the body as entirely discursive or performative (per queer theory) needs to be adjusted by explicating the foundational ontological characteristics of the body-subject's encounter of the virtual.

Introduction

Emergent digital technologies, such as pervasive computing and constant social media access, form the basis of an interplay between the individual and the virtual that brings the question of appearances to the fore – is one's encountering of virtual space merely an encountering of appearances?[1] Digital technologies seem to generate appearances on multiple fronts, every second of every day, in the contemporary age – through instant communication (words spoken or written by one person to another), through cell phones and screens, by means of global propaganda from our own and foreign governments, through advertising (targeted or otherwise), and by means of unremitting news and entertainment (through streaming of television and movie content). Such appearances increasingly become an intrinsic part of the experiential and behavioural paradigms of one's engagement with the world, and we find that these appearances fundamentally shape the way in which individuals interact with their world and with other individuals. It is the omnipresence and continuous promulgation of these appearances, seemingly as constitutive of the virtual as it is encountered in our everyday lives, that necessitates a philosophical investigation.

Robert Sokolowski (2000) formulates the problem of appearances that arise from technology in terms of three themes: 1) parts and wholes; 2) identity in manifolds; and 3) presence and absence. He argues that we are

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flooded by fragments without any wholes, by manifolds bereft of identities, and by multiple absences without any enduring real presence. We have *bricolage* and nothing else, and we think we can even invent ourselves at random by assembling convenient and pleasing but transient identities out of the bits and pieces we find around us. We pick up fragments to shore against our ruin (Sokolowski 2000, 3–4).

Sokolowski's statement is indicative of the idea that technologically generated appearances may present a very real threat to our conceptualisation of reality and could present a barrier to the formation of our identities.[2] For Sokolowski, technology generates only fragments, identity-less manifolds, and absences. There is no apparent unity and only confusion; there is only a negative and destructive fragmentation of traditional conceptualisations of the world and ourselves. Extrapolating Sokolowski's thinking on technological appearances in general to the realm of digital technology in particular, one finds that – per his argument – the virtual would similarly be constituted by appearances that are disjointed and discontinuous.

Rethinking the virtual

This article will present a phenomenological explication of the virtual to show that the idea of the virtual-as-appearance is a) ontologically untenable in describing the embodied encounter of the individual with virtual space and b) that the virtual may in fact be mobilised to support and facilitate non-binary thinking that could lead to increased consideration of social minorities.[3] Sokolowski's discussion of the seemingly fragmentary appearances generated by modern technology may, however unwittingly, serve to impede further philosophising on the virtual due to two critical though underemphasised reasons – the first related to phenomenology, and the second related to queer theory.

Firstly, Sokolowski does not account for the unity of the body in perception, that embodied unity which counters Cartesian dualism, as part of his central statement regarding appearances (what he calls fragments, identity-less manifolds, absences) that find their genesis in modern technologies. It is argued in this article that the body as unified horizon of engagement may serve to expand the phenomenological insights presented by Sokolowski, and may serve as an integrative basis for the individual's encounter with such fragmentary appearances. A phenomenological account of the body, as discussed especially by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* ([1962] 2002) but also in the works of Husserl, provides an alternative foundation from which to describe these apparent multitudinous appearances.[4] Such a theoretical framework reveals that the description of the virtual as merely a collection of appearances is untenable and unhelpful, because the virtual-as-appearance does not reflect the embodied individual's engagement with the virtual.

Secondly, Sokolowski does not introduce the concept of queerness as potential solution in his description of a technologically mediated, fragmentary reality.[5] While it may be argued that there

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2   It may even be suggested that the preponderance of virtual appearances may lead to a form of cognitive dissonance for the individual, where conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours may become prevalent in their psychological makeup due to the fragmentary vision of reality presented by the virtual.

3   It may be argued that suggesting the queer perspective in lieu of a heteronormative framework presents merely a new binary (that of a heterosexual versus a non-heterosexual approach). However, the main problem with heteronormative thinking as it figures contemporaneously in our society is its emphasis on binaries as an exclusionary mechanism (i.e. so-called normal gender identification versus so-called unnatural gender identification), where minority groups may be regarded as outside of the norm and thus worthy of prejudice. In questioning this problematic binary, it is suggested that the heteronormative binary represents a reductionist position that disregards the embodied experience of the other through its emphasis on binaries. This disregard of the other is addressed by the queer counter-voice. The queer perspective, on the other hand, must avoid emphasising and promulgating similar binary conceptualisations in order to successfully address problematic and discriminatory aspects of our society.

4   Cf. Taylor Carman's discussion of the differences of the body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in *The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty* (1999).

5   It would seem justified to say that the lack of discussion on gender and queerness is not merely a failing of Sokolowski, but rather reflects the broader lack of engagement with non-heterosexual ways of being in key phenomenological texts. A lack of the queer perspective in phenomenological investigation is thus not unexpected, as there are in many core works of phenomenology an inherent assumption of the heterosexual male perspective and of heteronormativity as norm (Burke 2020). In much phenomenological thinking, a predominance of heterosexuality as a normative sexual ideology is found. Cf. Judith Butler's uncovering of heterosexuality as a tacit norm in phenomenology

are indeed many philosophical questions that fall beyond the purview of the brief point made by Sokolowski, this article suggests that his framing analysis could be augmented through the introduction of queerness in dealing with the problem of technologically generated appearances. It will be argued in this article that, in trying to place the virtual, one is dealing with a manner of embodied being that is inherently queer, i.e. strange and disorientating of the everydayness of embodied being in the world. In this regard, the virtual is inherently and inescapably queer.[6]

These two perspectives are argued, in this article, to form a starting point for dealing sensibly with the problem of the fragmented nature of what we perceive to be real through technological mediation of the world – what Sokolowski identifies as technologically mediated appearances. As a continuing project of research, I argue that a recognition of both queer theory and the phenomenology of embodiment are necessary to map the virtual world of digital cyberspace onto our everyday framework of reality, to reconceptualise the virtual in a way that moves beyond the mere idea of virtual-as-appearance. The underlying question is thus how one may "place" the virtual world of digital cyberspace in order to more fully sketch its possibilities for communication, self-presentation and identity-formation with the goal of establishing new horizons of creation and safety for both historically marginalised queer individuals, as well as for the broader populace.[7] In this account of the virtual there is an awareness of gender and sexual orientation, recognising as a form of critical phenomenology the intersectionality of human existence – intersectionality being that overlap of various social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class that may contribute to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual.[8] A final goal of this investigation is to show how an embodied account of the virtual which engages seriously with queerness may serve to disrupt the problematic forms of heteronormative thinking that have become prominent in virtual spaces.

The development of a phenomenology of the virtual, based in Merleau-Ponty's early *Phenomenology of Perception*[9] and his later *The Visible and the Invisible*,[10] will be brought into conversation with the topics of queer performativity (as suggested by Judith Butler's 1990 text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and associated essays) and queer orientation (as most fully developed by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*). The body is the avenue through which phenomenology allows us to describe the world in which we live and "[i]t involves the transformation of the way we understand our world such that we can be astonished before it – the attempt to see our world as if for the first time, through unjaded eyes" (Davis 2020, 4). Phenomenologists such as Sara Ahmed therefore see the phenomenological method as "extremely useful" for engaging taken-for-granted values and norms, such as heteronormativity; and she writes that "it allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed" (Ahmed 2006, 37). These same philosophical tools, while challenging problematic heteronormativity and its underlying binary thinking in terms of gender, will be shown to be similarly useful in rethinking the virtual.[11]

Gender Trouble (1990) and Sara Ahmed's discussion of the phenomenology of heteronormativity in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006).

6 One could consider, in this regard, also the argument postulated by theologian James Alison (2020) that only a queer person could truly be a Christian in the sense of being properly disorientated. The non-queer Christian would have to impose a disorientation on themselves and sustain this disorientation. Concurrently, one may argue that it would be more difficult for the non-queer person to find themselves disorientated in the requisite fashion, and much easier for the queer person (compare Kierkegaard's ([1843] 2005) thought on disorientation).

7 Queerness is significant in this regard in that the fragmentary existence Sokolowski describes may serve to provide a space of creation and safety for non-heterosexual sexual practices and for other perspectives that may disorient a societal norm.

8 In a general sense, queerness here relates to gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals functioning in specific LGBTI communities. Judith Butler suggests that queer is only ever related to affiliation and collective contestation, "never fully owned but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (Butler 1993, 228). However, as Sara Ahmed suggests, queer in this regard also denotes both non-heterosexual sexual practices and relates more broadly to the disorientation of a norm (Ahmed 2006).

9 English edition first published in 1962. Throughout this article, the 2002 edition published by Routledge is used.

10 Posthumous. Published in English in 1968. Throughout this article, the 1968 edition is used.

11 Hereby, inherently, a new normativity is implied (the norm of challenging rather than not challenging the status quo) and a questioning of the relation between the real and the virtual. What is the normative structure of such a "challenging-being"? While a normative

The problems of heteronormativity

It is suggested that one must first take account of configurations of queerness in contemporary society as a prelude to the development of a phenomenologically embodied account of the virtual that engages seriously with queer theory. Crucially, one should engage with the challenges queer individuals and groups face in light of increasingly problematic political, religious and consumerist heteronormativities that infiltrate virtual spaces.[12] The problem of assumed heterosexuality is the potential marginalisation of certain groups, the silencing of alternative voices, the incitement of traumatic experiences, systematic discrimination, and the pretence of transformation without addressing underlying societal issues. Problematic heteronormative agendas are also highly influential in emphasising difference (such as the difference between heterosexual and homosexual, or male and female) for manipulative and exploitative ends, often serving to curtail the recognition of gender difference on both a large and small scale.[13]

While the virtual may provide a space to challenge heteronormative conceptualisations, it may also serve to emphasise and spread problematic heteronormative ideologies. Virtual space is increasingly becoming the battleground where gender difference is emphasised and militarised by political, religious and consumerist ideologies (Braidotti 2002; 2006).[14] The internet has become a fully-fledged public-opinion directing machine that is able to sway large swathes of societies through the use of targeted advertising (the Cambridge Analytica and Bell Pottinger scandals of the last decade highlight how influential the tailoring of messages in virtual space can be [Chutel et al. 2017]). Prominently, conservative political and church groups make use of virtual space to spread their own heteronormative view of "Family First" (this family of course having no place for the homosexual individual, the transgender individual, and so on). Similarly, entertainment mega-corporations have realised that inclusion may be given to queer individuals as long as a profit is to be made (the so-called Pink Dollar). Such acts of inclusion often present a veneer of queer awareness (and social responsibility), but it is no secret that such queering of popular media may only take place under the auspices of profitability and are often related to trends such as queerbaiting.[15] Underlying these movements in politics, religious groups, and popular media is

investigation falls beyond the scope of the current article, it may be briefly stated that the challenging of traditional hegemonic practices that (unwittingly or intentionally) cause harm to marginalised individuals in society should be critically engaged with on the basis of preventing further harm from occurring. Furthermore, the queer individual – in their mere existence – fulfils exactly such a role (of "challenging-being") in their encounter with others as a marginalised voice in society. However, the exact outlines of such a presumed normativity could be expanded upon quite expansively in a more dedicated study (which would be of particular interest for queer theorists).

12　The question of heteronormativity is embedded in a politics and a capitalism that is inherently founded on a normativity that is rooted in Enlightenment ideas of gender and sexuality. The idea of "problematic" heteronormativity here refers to those forms of heteronormativity that, with malicious intent or through lack of consideration, lead to or support marginalisation and discrimination in relation to queer individuals or groups.

13　An important question to note here is whether binaries are inherent in the human condition. If these binaries are merely a way of conceptualising the world, then there will always be more binaries that negate the possibility of non-binary thinking. Are these binaries therefore echoing Aristotle's own questioning, cultural or natural? In Merleau-Ponty's discussion of both the body and the flesh, he is striving for a non-binary way of engaging with the world (as a between). For him, binaries are merely found in the reflection upon our lived experience.

14　Queer theory serves to theorise the spaces between, and counter the mobilisation of, such oppositional binary categories through the queering of binaries (such as masculinity/femininity). Non-binary conceptualisations of the self are crucial to develop a sustained challenge to such political rhetoric, lest our theoretical perspectives serve to motivate these same forms of oppression and privilege that are being criticised.

15　Queerbaiting refers to the trend of subtly coding characters in fiction as being queer to generate interest from the queer audience, while never intending to follow through on such queer coding to the point of romantic or sexual relationships. An egregious example is found in the film *Star Wars – The Force Awakens* (2015). John Boyega and Oscar Isaac, two male leads of the film, are coded as queer – they share longing looks, and Boyega's character wears the jacket of Isaac's character for the latter half of the film. The effectiveness of queerbaiting is reliant on subtlety, and queerness is suggested only for individuals who are on the lookout for such hints due to a dearth of queer relationships in popular media. However, the final two films in the so-called sequel trilogy, *Star Wars – The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Star Wars – The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), see the characters in very obviously heterosexual relationships that have very little or no lead up, that have little to no influence on the plot, and which firmly close the door on the queer couple. This decision is supported by the director JJ Abrams' claiming that "[t]hat relationship to me is a far deeper one than a romantic one", which negates any queer connotation. Compare this statement with actor Oscar Isaac's reaction: "Personally, I kind of hoped and wished that maybe that would've been taken further in the other films, but I don't have control…It seemed like a natural progression, but sadly enough it's a time when people are too afraid, I think, of…I don't know what" (Vary 2019). In consolation, the final film in the trilogy has a blink-and-you'll-miss-it scene of a

not just a disregard of queerness, but rather a heteronormativity wherein the virtual becomes just one more stage for the reproduction of said normativity to support binary and hegemonic gender conceptualisations.

A historically marginalised group, queer individuals often have few images of being queer growing up – there are often very few role models for queer youth in their everyday lives. Here, the virtual may provide an avenue to exert a formative influence on queer individuals, allowing queer youth to come into contact both with queer ways of living and with other queer individuals. The considerable role that the virtual plays in the lives of queer individuals in repressive societies (such as China and Russia, but also in conservative southern African communities)[16] crucially informs my rethinking of the virtual. Importantly, in many cases the bricolage[17] of the virtual-as-appearance is all that victimised queer individuals may utilise to bolster their own queer identities, but even this apparent bricolage may be enriched through a fuller understanding of what one's embodied relation to the virtual entails.

The question of queerness is particularly important in South Africa today, not just in terms of the virtual but in terms of the effects that continued heteronormative thinking has on the lives of queer individuals. Many queer individuals continue to be isolated and rejected from the mainstream cisgendered and heterosexual majority (sometimes through intentional or unintentional discrimination, but often violently) in conservative communities in the country. Queerness was considered a deviance from societal norms to be cured during apartheid, and individuals with non-normative sexual orientations (particularly the white militarised population) were subjected to crude behavioural therapy, narcoanalysis, and chemical castration – aspects which mirror contemporary gay conversion camps in some ways (Kaplan 2004).[18] Recently, South Africa has also had a series of hate crimes and murders directed at queer individuals, such as the dismemberment of Thapelo Makutle in Kuruman (2012), the beating and mutilation of Motshidisi Pascalina in the township of Evaton (2016), the stabbing to death of Adnaan Davids in Hazendal (2020) and the murder of queer activist Kirvan Fortuin in Macassar (2020) – the latter killed by a 14-year-old teenager (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2012; Fletcher 2016; eNCA 2020; IOL reporter 2020).[19]

An important question, especially in light of these hate crimes and the threat of discrimination, violence, and murder faced by queer individuals, is whether a phenomenological account of the virtual, even when taking queer theory into account, may serve to benefit queer individuals and communities. Could phenomenology adequately address the question of justice in relation to the experiences of queer individuals? Without first asking the question of justice, it is highly likely that problematic heteronormativity will continue to be accepted, and that binary and hegemonic gender stereotypes will be retained. Even worse, without justice the violence of binary and hegemonic gender stereotypes may be promulgated and there would exist no impetus for societal change to be enacted. It is argued in this regard that the challenging and deconstruction of binary gender conceptualisations as societal norms present a moment wherein justice may begin, and that justice lies at the heart of acknowledging and recognising the embodiment of the individual (which phenomenology is suitably geared for).

Queer(y)ing a critical phenomenology
Phenomenology provides insight into the nature of our being, and fundamentally situates one's

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lesbian couple embracing and kissing, but this scene is so short and the impact on the film so minimal that removal of the scene by censors in Singapore had no impact on the narrative progression of the film and ensured that no queer content was presented to the wider audience of that country.

16   One should note here that being queer is a heterogenous phenomenon, with queer rights being curtailed in certain regions of the world while blossoming in other areas.

17   In the parlance of Sokolowski (2000).

18   Queer individuals were treated in the same inhuman ways as conscientious objectors to military conscription, political dissidents, and the seriously mentally ill (Kaplan 2004). Today we find more societal acceptance of queerness, but we also find that prominent religious leaders in Africa continue to proclaim that homosexuality is un-African (Wahab 2016).

19   These individuals are representative of a much longer list of victims of homophobia. It should be emphasised that black lesbians in townships more often become victims of queer-directed violence and corrective rape than their male counterparts or those queer individuals living in different socio-economic conditions.

being by means of the body within the intersectionality of human existence. While Husserl invokes a transcendental turn that is grounded in the reflective power of the transcendental ego, there is a need for phenomenology to involve matters-at-hand (Davis 2020), and critical phenomenology suggests that transcendental subjectivity may be enriched through re-describing it in terms of intersectionality. A critical phenomenology (or at least phenomenology in a critical tenor) may therefore serve to promote justice for queer individuals through the recognition of their differently embodied queer being.

Ahmed (2006, 2) argues that "[p]henomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds". Furthermore, phenomenology gives special privilege to "orientation" in that consciousness is always directed "toward" an object through the lived experience of inhabiting a body (what Edmund Husserl calls the "living body" or *Leib*, and Merleau-Ponty describes as the body-subject) (Ahmed 2006). Sexual orientation and gender hereby link directly to the phenomenology of the body.

However, before one may develop a phenomenology of the virtual, the inherent assumption of heterosexuality in phenomenological thinking on the body should be questioned. Much research has been done regarding the assumptions of heterosexuality in prominent works of phenomenology (as will be explored in the next sections), and a feminist critique of such assumptions opens up new avenues of investigation regarding the body and the virtual. It is important to take note of the feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's work regarding the body (for the body he describes cannot be presumed to be gender neutral, and he presents rather an account of embodiment through the universalisation of male embodiment). One must also take seriously Butler's consideration of Merleau-Ponty's "The Body in Its Sexual Being" from *Phenomenology of Perception* in her "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description" (1989), and the revisionist critiques of existential phenomenology by Iris Marion Young, who wrote essays such as "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality" (1980) that question gender in Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists' work. It is important to recognise that Merleau-Ponty presents his phenomenological description from a male heterosexual perspective, and that these arguments are circumscribed by his heterosexual maleness.[20] However, the incorporation of intersectionality into his account of the body, as a form of critical phenomenology, does much in the attempt to mitigate these heteronormative influences. Furthermore, the degree of such patriarchal elements in Merleau-Ponty's work is open to debate, for Merleau-Ponty himself argues for a conceptualisation of embodiment that, while acknowledging a philosopher's idiom as always being in one's non-private bodily being, opens up a space for considerations of other forms of being-in-the-body than his own.[21]

Theorist such as Butler and Ahmed do much to expand the phenomenological conception of the body in this direction. Butler (1988) presents an early account of gender performativity in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" by redeveloping Simone de Beauvoir's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and action. The body as historical idea, from Merleau-Ponty,[22] is influential for de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir 1973, 301) and for Ahmed's claim that "one is not born but becomes straight" (Ahmed 2006, 79). Gender identity and queerness is thus not merely related to the stable and unchanging ground of the self, but rather functions as a mode of becoming that arises from the space of the body as a function of the body's sensitivity and sensibility. Sara Ahmed contends that sexuality entails a different form of inhabiting the world for the queer individual; sexual orientation is not merely related to the object of one's desires, but rather how the displaying of such desires comports with the life world of the queer individual.

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20 Merleau-Ponty's considerations of sex and sexuality also take on the character of heterosexual sex and sexuality (Merleau-Ponty 2002).

21 Cf. Ahmed's (2002) feminist adoption of Merleau-Ponty in "The contingency of pain" as an illustration of how the feminist critique may overcome the shortcomings in Merleau-Ponty's work in a convincing manner.

22 As Merleau-Ponty contends, the body is not merely material. Rather, in the description of Butler (1988), the body forms a part of the historical process of constantly materialising possibilities and is thus closely associated with bodily action.

An account of a lived body is useful for describing how heterosexual individuals move through the world differently than their queer counterparts, who face obstacles to movement, desires and expression in the course of their daily lives. Some bodies can extend more easily in social spaces and situations, can be perceived to function more naturally than others. Others, those queer bodies, are often stopped and usually questioned – "how are you different? How does this difference shape your identity?" These questions often take on the role of a violent curiosity, reinforcing the worldview of the heterosexual person that the queer person is somehow perverse. In this sense, heterosexuality is dependent on the disavowal of homosexuality, wherein queering performances upset and unsettle the supposed naturalness of heterosexuality. Queering performances thus expose the vast discourses that reproduce heterosexuality (Guilmette 2020) and therefore the body is an essential resource for identifying the movement of both the heterosexual and homosexual individual moving through the world. This difference has specific implications for understanding the virtual through the phenomenology of embodiment.

Unity of bodily perception, reversibility of the flesh
The notion that the avenue to the world is the body (the body-subject) is key to helping us understand the virtual world accessed through digital technology. Embodiment is therefore a crucial starting point for a new phenomenological description of the virtual, and Merleau-Ponty par excellence provides a phenomenological description of embodiment. Four themes are important for Merleau-Ponty: (1) Perception is the individual's entire bodily inhabiting of its environment; (2) Perception is perspectival and finite from the body (Merleau-Ponty 2002); (3) Through perception, the individual is absorbed within and directed towards objects within the world, and "forgets" the essence of consciousness in perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964; 2002); and (4) This sensual, perceptual experience of the world extends to a perspectival structure of all human experience and understanding (as Merleau-Ponty describes in *The Visible and the Invisible*) (Carman 2008). Merleau-Ponty asserts that the *body as a whole (in relation to the world)* perceives and is foundational for perception (Olivier 2007; 2008) – perception is founded in one's primordial engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002).[23]

In Sokolowski's account of technological appearances as fragments, identity-less manifolds and absences, as stated earlier in this article, he does not recognise the body as an integrative basis for perception as a potential solution to the dilemma. However, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, the "real is a tightly woven fabric; it does not wait for our judgments in order to incorporate the most surprising of phenomena, nor to reject the most convincing of our imaginings (Merleau-Ponty 2002: lxxiv). The body as integrative framework for perception challenges the idea that the virtual leaves us with only bricolage (as Sokolowski suggests), because the entirety of our encounter with the world is subsumed in embodied perception – our entire perception of the world folds the virtual into embodiment to become unified within the horizon of bodily experience.[24]

To distinguish between the fragmentary "appearances" generated by technology and some other, more "real" world runs the risk of misunderstanding what the virtual is and how it relates to experience. Binary conceptualisations, such as appearance and reality, cannot get to the core of what constitutes the virtual because such conceptualisations rely on ideal and abstract thinking rather than experience. "Interior and exterior, mental and physical, subjective and objective – these notions are too crude and misleading to capture the phenomenon [of perception]" (Carman 2014, xiii). Heteronormativity, in replicating inhumane and destructive binaries, similarly disregards the unity wherewith the individual encounters a world in its entirety – it denies the lived experience of the other. Accounting for embodied being requires both that embodiment is recognised in virtual

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23   Contrast, for example, Kant's conceptualisation of the subject as integrating the manifold of sense-perception as a unity of apperception, which is much less convincing than the Merleau-Pontian account and represents merely an "as if" unity. The Kantian perspective also does not allow insight into the embodied individual's engagement with the virtual and furthers a conceptualisation of the virtual-as-appearance.

24   Categories of "mind", "body" and "external world" are found in theorisation *on* experience, rather than *in* experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that one should no longer live in the evidence of the sensory or scientific object, and instead "apperceive the radical subjectivity of all our experiences as inseparable from its truth value" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 93). Such a recognition acknowledges the situatedness of the embodied subject within the world – a recognition that while one's eyes allow one to see, we see *in* the world (Ströker 1987).

space (in contrast to assumed disembodied or abstract accounts of the virtual), but also that the queer character of this form of engagement is recognised as a means to overcome presumed binaries in conceptualising intersectionality.

This questioning of binaries extends to the Merleau-Pontian description of technology. We intuitively see certain artefacts as having a special symbiotic relation to the human body (telescopes, probes, hearing aids) and phenomenology allows us to view such technological artefacts anew. Merleau-Ponty describes embodiment in technology through the image of a blind man walking with a cane, where the blind man's body is extended not only in the active dimension (where the cane functions as sensory apparatus to observe the world around him), but also in the passive dimension (of his own objectivity or objectness – he is observed by others, they recognise him as blind and it affects their behaviour). This image describes key features of technological embodiment in Merleau-Ponty's proto-theory of technology but cannot describe the virtual wholesale. The walking stick, while not as intimately connected in proximity to the human body as a hearing aid, forms an altered surface of engagement for the embodied individual with her world. The stick is not experienced as an object in the environment, but as extended embodiment (as Merleau-Ponty describes early forms of technological engagement). Presence in the virtual functions in a somewhat similar manner, both allowing active perception of the virtual, while also passively allowing one to construct one's own virtual presence (and also to be recognised by means of this virtual presence). However, in describing the virtual, one must move beyond these initial conceptualisations of older forms of technology by not merely considering embodiment, but also Merleau-Ponty's description of the flesh as fundamental for perception.

The concept of *flesh* (French: *la chair*)[25] is developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and is particularly explicated in the chapter entitled *The Intertwining – The Crossing.*[26] *The flesh goes beyond perception as described in Phenomenology of Perception*, presenting an intertwining of chiasmically associated "dualisms" (such as world and consciousness, or sensing and sensible, or technological artefacts and the body) that are in fact interdependent. The flesh includes the faculty of sensing and the sensible thing.[27] In this regard, the flesh is therefore not a "space" of separation, but rather a "space" of connection, and the flesh is that layer of engagement with the world that envelops one's own embodiment, that surface with which one encounters the world, like a porous "skin".[28] The flesh refers to the entirety of sensed things with which the body forms a continuous surface, through the crossing of the body-subject to the world and the body-subject's intertwining with the world. Herewith, the flesh is described as "the underlying ontological foundation of sensory receptivity and motor spontaneity" (Carman 2008, 123). It is "on" or "through" this surface that the crossing to and from the world (in its fullest sense) takes place – rather than the individual just being *in* the world, the flesh positions the individual as *of* the world (Carman 2008).[29] There

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25   The word *la chair*, translated from French, here implies a "container", a "reservoir", as well as a "wagon" that carries (one's perception).

26   Chiasm or chiasma is an x-shape or overcrossing (of the body and the world, in Merleau-Ponty's metaphor). The notion of intertwining and crossing is an idea already introduced in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Compare "the body…will carry with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 83).

27   The idea that the world is not merely an object "does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 123).

28   If we follow Husserl on this point, embodiment is the key concept in describing the virtual. Making sense of the world entails for Husserl a double apprehension, a touching and being touched. The body serves as incomplete synthesis of two phenomena and as the organ of consciousness – the medium of consciousness and the object of consciousness. The body is at once a body among other bodies while also interacting with other bodies and the world through touch. Husserl recognises the centrality of touch in making sense of the world, but also postulates through the phenomenological reduction that the manifold of possibility stands more centrally in experience than actuality. Husserl does not present any distinction based in the senses between real appearance and illusionary appearance. Thus, to recognise the virtual as generated by the digital technology artefacts requires an investigation into the emergent characteristics of the virtual. Merleau-Ponty's postulation of the flesh allows further investigation into the virtual as founded upon digital technology artefacts.

29   Compare also Carman (2008). John Milbank (2003, 12), a prominent Merleau-Pontian scholar, describes the flesh as "[a]t the point of 'bodies', flesh somehow folds back on itself, becomes 'for itself' as well as 'in itself', and in being able to touch itself it is also able to touch the whole series of…things". As Milbank highlights, the "flesh", as Merleau-Ponty describes it, is as much physical as it is spiritual, and spiritual experiences may be included as constitutive of the world.

is a tight intertwined unity of consciousness and the physical in Merleau-Ponty's description of flesh, wherein consciousness is a characteristic of the lived world (it is not separated from it), and perception (through flesh) gives access to this unity of subject-object (the intertwined relation between consciousness and world).

The body, bodily perception, is the way we grasp, or hold onto, the world – the flesh expands on this idea to describe how the world could "reach back" (as an embodied touching and a being-touched double apprehension). Extrapolating from the postulation of the flesh, we recognise that when encountering the virtual, we do not encounter it as a bundle of discontinuous appearances that are generated by technological artefacts (as Sokolowski would suggest). Rather, the body crucially grounds our perception of both the virtual and the everyday in unitary contingent and temporal experience by means of a "space" of connection (the flesh).

A phenomenology of the virtual – embodied and queer

While technology may be thought of as an extension of the body (through examples such as hearing aids or a walking stick), the engagement of the individual with the world is much more interrelated and enmeshed in Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh and it is this concept of the flesh that allows insight regarding the virtual (while, concurrently, expanding Merleau-Ponty's proto-theory of technology). The real and virtual are not separate and distinct, and so the fragmentation and polarity of the virtual as presented in arguments such as Sokolowski's (virtual-as-appearance) are overcome.

If the genesis of the virtual is not found merely in appearance, then how does the virtual come to be according to a phenomenology of embodiment? The concept of the virtual is found in neither the digital technology artefact alone, nor in the individual as embodied being alone. We do not enter virtual space by plugging our minds into a computer which then suddenly places us part and parcel into a realm of 1990s CGI images of hyperlinks, icons and avatars that overcome our senses (as many science fiction films have led us to believe). Rather, virtual space arises as that "between" in the relationship between the digital technology artefact and the embodied individual. This "between" as constitutive of the virtual arises due to the fleshy, reversible intertwining of the chiasmically associated "dualisms" of the body-subject and the digital technology artefact. When encountering the virtual, we find a reversibility that is technologically constituted but which cannot be placed on either pole of the body-technology dualism.[30]

It is crucial to note that the virtual space accessed through bodily engagement is not "less real", it is not "appearance" rather than reality. An embodied account of the virtual reveals that the conventional distinction between appearance and reality is sublated – thus rendering the description of the virtual-as-appearance as found in Sokolowski's description untenable and unhelpful. Through this sublation, the virtual is revealed as a causal factor in the emergent alteration of the individual's perception and behaviour, foundationally affecting the individual's sense-making of the self, the world and the other. Such emergent alteration of the individual's perception and behaviour, rather than being tangential to virtual space, must essentially be accounted for to allow a foundational, encompassing and multimodal description of the embodied individual's functioning and situatedness in virtual space.

There is an inherent assumption in everyday perception that what is being experienced correlates with the world – for this is the individual's experience, prior to opinion and reflection, that one is inhabiting a world that is truthfully seen (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Underlying our perception is no longer originary knowledge or a more primary act of thinking; rather, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception only becomes possible against a *perceptual faith*. Virtual space, founded in the relation between the body-subject and the digital technology artefact, consistently and inherently challenges the assumptions of perceptual faith.[31] The virtual serves to technologically mediate perceptual faith,

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30   One should note here a possible dual understanding of the term virtual. In phenomenology, virtual also relates to the ways in which the individual can make sense of objects (the back of a chair that remains unseen, for example, but can be postulated as having a back by virtue of a virtual projection of the object in the experience of the individual). The virtual similarly relates to Merleau-Ponty's description of perceptual faith and imagination. This article deals specifically with the virtual as generated in the relation between the embodied individual and the digital technology artefact.

31   An alternative means of addressing the question of the real in this regard is provided by the perspective of *epoche*. Husserl would argue

and the perceptual cues we take on faith in our everyday perception become equal to the perceptual cues of the virtual.

How then do we make sense of the virtual if not through perceptual faith? Instead, sense-making in the virtual relies on the intentionality of consciousness[32] and bodily signification – a making sense of the virtual as it is presented to bodily frames of reference that may be intended towards this or that as allowed by the functioning of the digital technology artefact. There is both an encountering of virtual space and a reconstruction of this virtual space by bodily signification and intentionality. An embodied strategy of sense-making in virtual space leads inexorably to the recognition of certain emergent characteristics of the virtual.

One such emergent characteristic of the virtual may be seen in the ways that one's embodied being is stimulated, shielded, channelled, amplified, and attuned through engagement with the virtual. This virtual body may expand and contort, or shrink and reduce. It cannot hide, however; it is always there as the means of both being in the virtual, perceiving the virtual, and (more fundamentally) constituting the virtual. There is a measure of control over one's self-presentation and how one expresses one's orientation (queer or otherwise) through narrative construction as ontologically concretising the body in the virtual – but the embodied being lies at the heart of the virtual and the embodied act is an ontologically concretising act in the virtual, a making and a remaking. There is a performative element here. Whenever we engage in the virtual, we become in the virtual.

Our bodily "being seen" in the virtual here deserves consideration. One may express oneself along lines of symbolic association and expression that are allowed by the functioning of the digital technology artefact. For the queer individual, such symbols are draped in rainbow flags, wear leather, and inscribe bear tattoos onto the virtual body. However, it is also these symbols that may be commodified or attacked by conservative politics. Thus, while the integration of such symbols into the virtual body may strengthen the normalising power of queer individuals by attempting to exorcise shame and the questions of queer identity that are generated and legitimated by heteronormative society (compare Sedgwick's [1993] research of these same themes in terms of the discourses of LGBTI pride marches and parades), one must be aware that these forms of self-identification may become limited and commercialised (compare Butler's [1988] criticism of LGBTI pride discourse and its commercial orientation in pride marches and parades).

I argue that queerness must be disentangled in the virtual from such symbols to allow the recognition of a broader queerness in the relationship between the body-subject and the digital technological artefact, lest the transformative potential of the virtual be reduced to mere superficiality and easily commodified identifiers. Such a reduction to the easily commodifiable curtails the transformative potential of the virtual not only for queer individuals, but for all individuals. The investigation of the virtual through the critical phenomenological, queer and embodied methodologies presented in this article opens up a space to rethink from the start the virtual body as inherently and fundamentally queer, disrupting not just gender norms but ontological ones (of being embodied in a certain way) as well. While elements of performativity in the expression of queerness in the virtual must be acknowledged, virtual presence also already implies that the body and bodily expression are structured in a non-normative manner by the very functioning of the digital technology artefact.[33] In other words, the emergent characteristics of the virtual in the relation between body and digital technology reveal the virtual as an inherently and inescapably queer space – denoting both a space of queer sexual practices, but also the disorientation of societal norms of engagement and everyday embodiment (Ahmed 2006).

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for a suspension of judgement, rather than faith, in explicating the link between the real and perception. It might be argued that perceptual faith is a (potentially problematic) attempt to bridge the difference between the noumenon and phenomenon. The question of the virtual suggests not a distinction between the real and the virtual, however, but rather how the virtual and the real are sublated in the functioning of digital technology.

32 Phenomenology attempts to overcome the subject-object divide that has dominated modern thought, and which continues to inform our accounts of the virtual, by pointing out that one's consciousness is always a "consciousness of" something, and that it is misleading to take consciousness as one thing ("in here") and the world of objects ("out there") as another is imagined.

33 Cf. also Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977) with regard to how technology may structure the individual's ways of being through enframing.

While virtual space implies a flattening out and underemphasis of some of those aspects of the body that one encounters in everyday life (such as body language or everyday sensory ability)[34], there is in the enmeshment of oneself with others in the virtual, a creative space of communion and bodily engagement that stretches beyond the confines of traditional descriptions of sexuality and perception to a new form of sexual and sensual relationality. The virtual, through the enmeshment with the other, is a mode of becoming that is always a coming out,[35] always a revealing of oneself through specific embodied acts in a new milieu and form of human relationality and engagement. If queerness thus entails a different form of inhabiting the world for the queer individual, and sexual orientation relates to the movement of the queer individual through a world, then the virtual presents a broadly queer space that breaks down the ways in which not just queer individuals, but all individuals, may comport their embodied being in a way that overcomes many of the everyday obstacles to movement, desire and expression that are critically evaluated in queer and feminist theories.[36]

However, just as our bodies (and those of others) are imprinted in the flesh of the virtual, so too are digital technology artefacts imprinted in the flesh of the virtual. One encounters the digital technology artefact through a bodily sensitivity and sensibility, through a sensory receptivity and a spontaneity – this reciprocity is the basis of the virtual, as has been discussed. These artefacts are taken into one's own embodied being; one quivers at the manifold potentialities that such devices present to us – potentialities that extend beyond the mere physicality of a device. While the virtual body is fluid and we have a degree of choice over how we comport our bodily being in the virtual, such comportment takes place under the auspices of the digital technology artefact. A phenomenology of the virtual allows us to move beyond the cultural and even material expectations of what bodies ought or can do, but cannot remove itself completely from the constraints imposed by the digital technology artefact. The virtual is therefore always both embodied in the individual and at the same time structured upon the artefactual. The dual character of the virtual suggests that individuals, in the contemporary technologised era, are always engaged with both the virtual and the non-virtual simultaneously without distinction – in our modern societies, there is no clear distinction between the being "online" and "offline". To be a modern individual is to be enmeshed in the virtual across time and space because the one pole of the chiasmically linked virtual lies in (a) our digital technology artefacts, while the other pole of the virtual is founded in (b) our embodied being (in this way the virtual is always carried along with us, with our body, even if merely in expectation of a queer form of bodily potentiality once encountered). Were the virtual embedded only in the digital technology artefact (a), we could switch off our devices and be removed from the virtual entirely. Were the virtual founded only upon the embodied individual (b), we would refer to it as mere dreams or imaginings. The virtual is neither and both. We find in this relation with digital technology a means to open ourselves up to a queerness that extends beyond the sole individual into a space where an entire species is enmeshed. The virtual is sensuous, embodied, and distinctly disorientating; it is a space of shared queerness.

Conclusion

Queerness challenges heteronormative stereotypes. The queer individual reveals that there exists more than one way of being a body or a body-subject, and through the mere fact of their existence

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34   One may note here that the world-as-perceived through digital technology may be deemed a truncated world – there is no sense of smell, very little touch and limited hearing. However, the realms of the virtual open up avenues for sensation and perception many would consider unnatural or deficient – ways of embodied perception that have no correlates in our everyday experiences.

35   Coming out here denotes when a queer individual takes up the mantle of their non-normative sexuality in public spaces. Importantly, this is regarded as an important choice to be made by a queer individual (except when a queer individual is "outed" against their will). In the realm of the virtual, a coming out may denote the manner in which self-representation of oneself as embodied and receptive being takes place.

36   While it may be countered that "the possibility and the fluidity of gender discourse in the virtual world is constrained by the visceral, lived gender relations of the material world" (Wajcman 2010, 148), which is often a critique against Donna Haraway's post-humanist account of the cyborg, an embodied account of the virtual reveals that even – from the basis of a phenomenology of embodiment – the virtual inherently challenges the usefulness of making the initial distinction of a virtual world and a material world with regard to the question of the individual's embodied encounter with digital technology.

challenges an objective and fixed normative reality that exists as separate from the body-subject. Queerness interrogates that which is assumed and accepted to be "obviously" real or "obviously" normative.

Seen through the lens of queerness, the virtual may be considered expressive of the human capacity to create safe spaces where none exist and to more broadly shape reality through bodily engagement. There is therefore a mutual and complementary element between the virtual world and queerness. Through excavating the embodied character of the virtual, it is revealed that the invented self-presentations and ways of moving through the virtual world echo the self-presentations and ways of moving in the everyday world of the queer individual. Furthermore, the individual does not encounter the virtual as just another binary or heteronormativity, but is absorbed in her entire bodily being into the virtual. This recognition serves to counter the prejudices that have haunted the contemporary era under the dominance of heteronormativity, and that may invade virtual space. The awareness of the virtual as functioning beyond politically, religiously and capitalistically motivated binaries and heteronormativities may open the path for an expanded conceptualisation of virtual space that questions the everyday nature of embodiment in the world.

Accounts of the virtual often disregard the phenomenological status of the body, and do not see queerness as a crucial perspective for addressing the question of the virtual. However, this article has argued that the recognition of the body and the phenomenological method are crucial for mapping out the virtual in relation to the everyday lives of individuals – revealing the virtual to be a very queer place indeed.

ORCID

Jean du Toit http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5297-8241

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