The Avatar's Nature and Its Modern Modifications

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Abstract—**Avatar is the phenomenon, which in its essence is the "representative" of the user the virtual environment. The avatar phenomenon contains the duality of its perception and its role in the sociocultural space. This ambivalence is clearly manifests in the positioning of the avatar in the visual arts and its "real" life in a virtual environment. In this article an attempt to understand the term "avatar" are taken. The historical insight allowed to outline the evolution of discourse and to draw conclusions about the fundamental difference between understanding the avatar features in the visual arts and in the sociocultural space. It was concluded that in a broad sense, an avatar realizes the need to "editing" the user's identity in the network and creates the illusion of superhuman, divine possibilities of influencing a character on a virtual network.**

Keywords—visual culture; avatar; virtual reality; social network; identification; physicality; embodyment

I. INTRODUCTION

The life of a virtual inside-screen environment is characterized by an increased dynamics of reusable transitions from split-screen to mono-screen and back. Split-screen structures can be set by moderators of computer resources or varied by users, combining the already defined possibilities of re-modeling the inside-screen reality. As a result of the symbiosis of the activities of professional and non-professional moderators of virtual reality, an image of an infinitely changeable, enhanced dynamic world (even more dynamic than modern society) emerges.

The World Wide Web has swept the whole world, giving rise to a discrete space, a separate world, and each segment of it is connected to others through hyperlinks. But we already found a similar structure in the texts of the ancient Egyptian "Book of the Dead". V.M. Rozin concludes that the ancient Egyptian images are the forerunners of the semiotics of the Internet. Similar to the structure of the afterlife, provided by images of the deceased (which were perceived as alive creature) and funeral activities (sacrifices and other sacral procedures that enliven the image), the Internet allows to create a new virtual environment and settle into it [1]. V.M. Rozin considers the Internet as an environment in which a person can realize both his individual and global existence through the creation of his own virtual embodiments [2].

The philosophical analysis of the concept of "virtual reality" is conducted by V.A. Emelin in his article "Virtual reality and simulacra" [3]. The researcher notes that according to Medieval Christian philosophy, "virtus" meant the actual acting force. Thomas Aquinas, based on the concept of virtuality, explained the coexistence of realities of different levels (the thinking soul, the animal soul, the vegetable soul). D. Scott tried to bridge the gap between conceptual expectations and different experiences. Thus, the term "virtual" was a conceptualization of phenomena that exist temporarily and in partial form, and explained the communication between the universal absolute essence and an individual object. Later the interest on a virtual was leveled off but was revived by physicists as a designation of imaginary elementary objects and the concept of "possible world" [4].

Possible worlds, according to M.N. Epstein, are a combine of possibilities (or possible existences) that can become consistently integrated not excluded each other. But the idea of 'possible worlds' belongs to G.V. Leibniz [5]. We see that a modern virtual environment corresponds own definition: it consists of "populated" infinite divisibility cells. Certainly conventional paradigms do not imply the understanding these "residents" as alive, but they have a certain degree of uniqueness at least from the point of view of a computer code.

In the modern sense, virtuality is actualized with a term "virtual reality" at the end of the 1970s. J. Lanier subsequently designated this way a computer product, "started" the term into the sphere of popular culture.

Today, the Internet and the virtual environment are the continued existence of other realities that exist in different guises throughout the history of culture. Also the "new" environment allows the user to experience the virtual worlds, which are characterized by varying degrees of interactivity and immersive.

Considering the influence of computerization on the hermeneutic discourse of everyday life, S. Zhizhek notes three important principles. First of all, the distinction between real life and its mechanical simulation is erased, the distinction between "true" reality and its similarity is removed in connection with the hyperrealism of images; and the concept of self-identification of subjects is eroded [6]. The latter principle is fundamental to the such phenomenon of a virtual environment, like an avatar.

For creating a personal page on the social network or online game portal user must fill out a profile and select an avatar. It can be a user's photo or any image, which the owner of the page associates with himself. At this moment we are confronted with the emerging effect of the split-screen, only this time not the environment, but the individual's identity is subject of fragmentation. The avatar's image can be any: from an individual's photo to abstract art canvases, from nature objects to pictures from favorite movies, cartoons, etc. Often, the set image does not always refer to "someone", but to "something". Thus, the avatar icon becomes a portal to one or another area of interest of the user, reflects facets of his personality.

So what are avatars in a virtual environment? First of all, they become a way of self-presentation of the user, his reflection, his digital copy [7] [8]. So, Yu.V. Chepel rightly connects the avatar and nickname with the level of self-esteem and self-sense of self as a personality and its features [9]. However, the specificity of the virtual environment is characterized by fragmentation and hypertextual structure. In this connection P.M. Daineko marks, "the status-role affiliation of communicants, including experts, is beginning to acquire a mobile and often conditional character" [10]. A number of authors consider the effects of user identification with an avatar [11] [12], mark the appearance of the Proteus effect [13] [14], which consists in an individual's adjustment of his behavior after the experience of managing a virtual embodiment. We believe that the avatar phenomenon lies in the field of game characteristics, the possibility of a partial transfer of one's personality and its subsequent editing. The closest to our view is the study of a group of authors convincingly arguing the advantages of non-anthropomorphic avatars compared to anthropomorphic [15] which indirectly affects the topic of non-human, or rather, superhuman embodiment. In our opinion, avatars have given such possibilities to its owner.

Thus, it can be noted that the avatar is a segment of the user's identity, but not permanent: the individual is free at any time to change information about himself according to the requirements of the environment or his own wish. This is a specific stratification-replacement of the individual with digital fragments in the space of Internet reality. This article attempts to understand what is meant by the term "avatar" in the modern socio-cultural environment. We believe that today this concept reveals a duality, which is not fixed in the scientific community.

Nevertheless, in order to clear our issues, let's look at the concept of "avatar" in more detail.

II. PREHISTORY OF AN AVATAR

The word "avatar" and its nature is rooted in Hindu religious beliefs. The Hindu tradition sees creation as a re-differentiation of unmanifested materiality into infinitely diverse forms that can be organized into many models [16]. That is, "avatar" literally means "descent," namely, the manifestation of a deity in a tangible form in the human world [17]. The gods projected themselves into one or another avatar. There were also cases when a deity took on the form of a bird or beast. For example, Zeus, in an attempt to hide from the jealous eye of Hera, took on the appearance of a bull or a swan in order to have a love affair with an earthly woman. It is curious that such avatars are quite popular today like a a second social network account or a fake page for advertising.

Here we also find the forerunners of modern Internet profiles. And today, an individual is free to choose his avatar using any image or editing his own photo. Unlike their ancient "predecessors", who disguised as elders or beggars, modern "deity" prefers posted bright images. That is, besides the history of understanding the phenomenon of avatarization, today there is the real life of the media environment. Empirical experience confirms that the term "avatar" is usually used in the Internet and in the cinema. But is it equally used and implied in the cinema and on any portals? To understand this, we'll paint the 'portrait' of the typical avatar's owner in the visual arts. First of all, these are all people with disabilities, whether it is the result of physical damage ("Avatar", J. Cameron, 2009) or a social restraint (the criminal record of the character Gerald Battler in the movie "Gamer", M. Neveldine, B. Taylor, 2009).

In his study D. Petridu writes the "portrait" of the deity as physical beauty, extraordinary stature, radiance, fragrance, exceptionally bright light, and above all, the power to perform and achieve beyond human measures" [18]. However, modern "gods", endowed with the ability to descend of their essence into another form, often look different.

In "Surrogates" (Surrogates, J. Mostow, 2009) modern technologies allowed people to stay at home and live their life using an android. As a rule, all surrogates have an attractive appearance, they are able to perform superhuman tasks and to transmit to the operator all emotions and experiences. Why is this not a sketch of a modern virtual environment? It is curious that the owners of the surrogates look not so pretentious: unkempt, in dressing gowns. The wife of the main character in reality has a big scar and she is in deep depression; the surrogate of the character Bruce Willis looks at least 10 years younger than his operator.

Digital projections of people who inhabit the Matrix in the cult film (The Matrix, L. Wachowski, L. Wachowski, 1999) look like ordinary city dwellers, which requires the film dramaturgy. However, after leaving the Matrix, we find ourselves in a completely different world: there is a war between man and machine, people are in cocoons, and their consciousness is loaded into the Matrix. But we can note that the virtual world lives on the rules familiar to everyone - work, friends, parties, loneliness in a crowd, etc.

Like Neo and other characters in the movie, modern residents of objective reality have the opportunity to dive into various virtual environments, whether it be video game space or the Internet community in an effort to feel like a god on the one hand, and on the other, to make a trip to other worlds without leaving a private space. But in its real existence in the user environment of the Internet, the avatar is not similar to it's presentation in the cinema. Any object that does not affect the user's physical or mental life can act as an avatar in the network. He can embody something

similar, correspond to a person completely, partially, or, on the contrary, not be anthropomorphic. Ornament, anime, picture, fragment of abstraction can fill of the avatar icon and have any configuration.

Moreover the obvious self-presentation, the avatar also performs the functions of "editing" the user's identity, in some way with its improved, expanded version. In this regard, Dutch researchers have noted that "historically, even before the advent of computers, people have demonstrated a consistent practice of extending their identities <...> computer offers us new opportunities as a medium that embodies our ideas and expresses our diversity" [19]. Such a motive for projecting personality, social order is most relevant for the deep historical layers of culture, namely, totemism.

T.N. Dmitrieva traces the historical development of the theories of totemism, [20], we will announce several important stages for our research. The term "totem" first appeared in Europe at the end of the 18th century in the book of the traveler John Long in "Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader" (1791), where he introduced the reader to the North American Ojibway tribe. The term introduced by J.F. McLennan ("The Worship of Animals and Plants" 1869-1870). And then an active study of the problems of totemism was began. Following McLennan, R. Smith finds traces of totemism among the Semitic peoples and notes that the totem animal is a clan's sacred image, its blood is symbolized by clan unity, and the ritual killing and eating of a totemic animal is the conclusion of the clan's blood union with its deity. The idea of a mutually beneficial agreement between the clan and its totem was also supported by F. Jevons (1896).

Of great importance for us is the classification of DD. Frazer in "The Golden Branch", 1890 [21]. He examined the origin of totemism from the standpoint of the "external soul". The external soul is one of the souls of man, stored in the object of the external world (it can be a plant, an animal, any object, etc.).

The transfer of the soul into a totem or into a human body was taken place in initiating rites and was closely associated with death and birth. So, I.V. Kalinina writes: "Death ("change of appearance" = transformation into animals) was thought of as "a departure" in bestial hypostasis. The deceased was "turned into a beast" and wrapped in the skin of a totem animal. At that, totemic dances and songs imitating movements, sounds made by animals were performed. In the figurative understanding of death as "transformation into animals", we see the fusion of image and function (unity of form-function) in consciousness again: with a change of appearance behavioral changes were expected. On the contrary, birth was thought of as "coming" – some type of "returning" to the genus in bestial incarnation and the subsequent changing of appearance. The totemic animal was murdered, regarded as a voluntary "come" of the beast for "a visit". The beasts were treated and asked (guessed) which of the dead relatives had returned to give his name to the newborn" [22].

V.V. Bocharov notes that in traditional culture the name, in which the properties necessary for an individual, had reflected the socio-political status of its owner [23]. Here we are directly confronted with the concept of a "nickname" in modern culture. Choosing the name of his avatar, the user, on the one hand, tries to give to it his definite qualities and abilities, on the other - seeks to conceal his true name. Confirmation of this we find in works by I.V. Kalinina: "At the stage of the addition of the tribal organization, the name of the totem is, accordingly, taboo, it is 'a secret'. On the contrary, publicity and social significance acquire with the development of the age and gender division of society 'the names' of social functions (group qualities, properties) of certain age categories" [24].

Let us return to the classification of totemism. K. Levi-Strauss distinguishes the following types of totemism: individual, social, religious (religious) and dream totemism (social or individual) [25]. Returning to today's picture of the world, the user's avatar is closest to individual totemism, which, according to C. Levi-Strauss, "implies a connection between the sorcerer and a particular animal (usually reptiles). The animal assists the sorcerer, on the one hand, as a beneficent or hostile factor, and on the other, as a messenger or spy <...> zoological species acts as a mediator between the soul of this species and the soul of the witch" [26].

III. THE AVATAR'S MODERN MODIFICATIONS

Despite the similarities with totemism, modern avatars have fundamentally opposite characteristics. First of all, it is about impermanence. If a tribal rally person was tied to his avatar forever [27], then today the user at any time can change it for something opposite and completely unrelated to the previous image. Totemism is a reflection of social order on nature, and the avatar is intended to denote the similarity of the depicted object with the user. Perhaps the most important distinction of the modern avatar is its belonging to the sociocultural space. According to Durkheim's definition, the totem is a part of the sacred sphere [28], while the avatar is a secular phenomenon, and only indirectly reflects the private space of the individual. But few individual confine himself with a common description for all portals. Thus, an army of digital copies of a real-life individual appear in the network, varying the description of his personality depending on the direction of the portal or his own desire. There is a replication of the individual appears; fantasies about the personality, its virtual variations, associative pictures associated with the personality, etc. appears too.

These conclusions are directly related to the user's avatars, presenting the facets of their personality through pictures or abstract images. However, a considerable number of individuals prefer to set into networks their own photo – various "looks" or "selfies". Let us consider this question in more detail in order to understand do the portality of this icon and its fragmenting characteristics change depending on the proximity of the avatar to the real portrait of the user.

V. Podoroga notes that the most ancient form of representation of the human body is an epic. In the epic texts of ancient cultures, "a body turns to a projection on the

outside world, this projection, in turn, project its organs and harmonies" [29]. With the development of human civilization and culture, the separation of the body occurs. In the period of antiquity the "active formation of the bodily or physical "I" begins, which, as noted by O.V. Stroyeva, expressed "in the development of sculpture and in general in the physical character of ancient Greek aesthetics" [30].

According to J. Lacan, a person, starting from the age of six months, enters the "mirror stage", is able to look at himself in the mirror and fix his image, identify it [31]. In this point, a curious view of the selfie - "lift-look", when a person captures his image in the lift mirror. Thereby, the atmosphere of the space in which the individual arrives, his expectations from upcoming events, is also preserved. It seems rather intriguing to us that such a "replication" of a personality does not lose its aura, a copy, in fact, is the original, a virtual imprint of the personality. If we consider a person as a work of art (in this question, "authorship" is not important: it can be both God and nature equally), then "lift-look", being only a copy of the personality, may claim to be the original. V. Benjamin noted that "one thing is missing from the most perfect reproduction: here and now works of art are its unique existence in the place where it is located". [32]. The reality in which the mirror image of a person is involved is unique, and the photograph reveals the specifics of the existence of the "copy" at one time or another.

For example, "lift-look" is quite popular before coming to work, and subscribers of the user expect a phot- report by the evening - did the presented image influence at the events of the day. Thus, the imprint of a person, made in the morning, is also a kind of avatar, which virtually lives one day of individual in the sociocultural space. On the other hand, photo reports are a means of exaggerating the theme of the "reality" of the user's existence in the space of objective world and the "evidence" of such existence on the Web. Thus, as A. Giddens rightly notes, "In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance" [33].

It is obvious that in the network space the user not only presents different fragments of his personality, but also carries about some type of "montage" of his life. Subscribers can get acquainted only with the most vivid events of the individual's day, who deliberately does not publish the routine side of his life in a virtual environment. Thus, separate "split-screen" portals do not lead to the formation of a single form of existence and personality of an individual. In this connection, N.E. Vakuev concludes that, under the cover of anonymity, the Web user is free to express himself and to experiment with his own identity, and the gap with the actual "I" is expressed in the creation of nicknames and avatars [34]. E.V. Dukov also states the fundamental differences between a person at a computer and in real life,

and "playing in the faces of individualities is very much like a masquerade" [35].

Revealing the essence of masquerade and carnival, Bakhtin noted the important detail of any disguise - the mask. "The mask is associated with the joy of shifts and reincarnations, with cheerful relativity, with a cheerful denial of identity and uniqueness, with the denial of a blunt coincidence with itself; the mask is associated with transitions, metamorphoses, violations of natural boundaries, with ridicule, with a nickname (instead of a name); the mask embodies the beginning of the game life" [36]. In this connection, the therapeutic role of avatars for its users can be noted in some way. So, J. Suler writes that "avatars enable people to maintain partial anonymity – which allows them to loosen up a bit. It's like going to a masquerade party…Wearing a costume at a real-life party does indeed filter out many of the physical features of your identity. You are somewhat 'anonymous'. But the costume also symbolically high- lights aspects of who you are. It amplifies one of your interests, some facet of your personality or lifestyle, or something you wish for" [37]. G.M. Andreeva considers as an important aspect of the so-called narrative identity in the network is two characteristics: the emphasis "on the position of the subject in the social world and reflection on the changes around him, as well as the need to structure and meter information about oneself from the point of view of public morality" [38].

However, the avatar's game character does not imply a frivolous attitude to this phenomenon. The themes of projection management, the ethical side of the issue is repeatedly raised in contemporary works of visual arts. Thus, in the television series "Alteres Carbon" (U. Briesewitz, A. Graves, P. Hoar and other, 2018), the technologies allow an individual to "save" to an external medium — the stack. This stack, according to the visual reality, can be embedded in any shell that is in storage. A particularly affluent segment of the population has its own clones, in which data is loaded if necessary to change the shell. A rather intriguing theme takes place on the periphery of the main plot: the problem of creating twins, which is considered a flagrant violation of the law. In this case we are dealing with a similarity of the prohibition on owning an avatar.

The motive of controlling of the real body as an avatar by someone is reflexed in the film "Gamer" (M. Neveldine, B. Taylor, 2009). A rich teenager operates the Cable Sim in the Assassin game; only virtual reality is absent, avatars are die in real, but this game is the most popular reality show. The same situation is going with other project – the "City", where the wife of the main hero is controlled like a sim by an unpleasant gamer. There is clearly a motive of "divine" control of a man, only the reins of this rule are in the hands of the same mortals.

In the movie "Assassin's Creed" (J. Kurzel, 2016) we see the opposite situation: "connecting" to the consciousness of his ancestor M. Fassbender's hero, on the contrary, becomes some type of "avatar". He climbs on walls, fights and makes incredible jumps without fear. It is curious that the Templar antagonists are upset that such an experiment will strengthen

and train the assassin. Thus, in contrast to the typical situation of "pump up" an avatar's skills in a computer game, the subject of a positive, training factor for a gamer is also affected. In connection with this continuity, the conclusion of American scientists that "avatars are vehicles, transmission of user's genetic information" seems correct [39]. And this conclusion does not contradict the previous interpretations of the phenomenon under consideration. Beginning in the Hindu religious tradition, reflected in the principles of totemism, the motive of worshiping the gods, appeasing and transferring the soul is preserved and remained relevant throughout the history of culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

Today, user's avatars are poly-version. The image installed in the icon is a portal to the inner world of the individual, in the sphere of his interests and sympathies. It can also characterize the social status, social activity and other facets of individual's virtual and real life. In a broader sense, an avatar realizes a person's need for a simplified way of "editing" his own personality, choosing a way of self-identification. At a deeper level, an avatar allows its user to feel like a super-man, a deity, to whom the fate of the character is belong to, although it exists in a virtual environment. An avatar can partially influence the user's image, his or her self-perception, but does not have a significant impact on real life. In the visual arts, avatars are focused on the possibilities of expanding human capabilities: replacing oneself with another "shell" in dangerous situations, moving the body into a renewed, strengthened or adapted body for a particular environment — that is, directly affects the life of its owner. And most importantly, it gives individuals the opportunity to realize the importance of real, not virtual existence. Thus, in visual arts an avatar is a form for identity, in virtual environment it is some type of simulacrum because such avatars aren't complete 'version' of its owner.

With avatars, modern individuals are able to partially populate separate segments of the Internet environment, to project the facets of their personality. Unlike society, an individual user gets in virtual reality much more illusions of controlling the world and his vision, regulating his perception modes, adjusting virtuality to his individual needs. Split-screen symbolizes the complexity and at the same time the orderliness of the various elements of the universe, the ability of a person to manage many things, to adapt it to their needs - but never to keep in sight the whole multi-level reality, which is boundless, infinite, incomprehensible. Thus, virtual split-screen and avatars are poses as compromise between a rational and irrational understanding of existence.

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