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Virtualization of the life-world

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Abstract

The diffusion of technological artifacts, in particular, devices of communication and the Internet have transformed the life-world of essentially everyone living in a modern society. In the past few years our everyday, including livelihoods, has seen a proliferation of activities within virtual worlds, such as games and virtual social networks. We can now live and experience actively in different virtual realms, as compared to being mere passive receivers in the era of television and radio. This has direct implications in what is inherently relevant for people and, in consequence, we have to take such transformation in account also in conceptual terms. The main implication to the conceptual palette of phenomenological sociology is that due to virtualization, we can no more equate the paramount reality as the zone of primary relevance. The paramount reality as conceived as the sensorily perceivable, physical world of concrete objects is increasingly far from being equated to the zone of primary relevance; that part of the world within our reach which we can immediately observe and also at least partially dominate. It is furthermore argued that the ongoing virtualization of societies urges us to conceive virtual worlds as transforming the sub-universe of the world of working instead of seeing virtual worlds merely as other finite provinces of meaning. Based on Alfred Schütz's work, this essay conceptually scrutinizes virtual worlds with an aim to clarify what is at stake with the virtualization of the modern society.

1. Introduction

There seems to be something going on in the late modernity; the very reality urges us to scrutinize the life-world due to its radical transformation in the recent years. Indeed, the main motivation for this essay is the observable fact that the point of departure of Alfred Schütz's analysis "the world of daily life which the wide-awake, grown-up man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-men experiences with the natural attitude as a reality" (Schutz 1962: 208) has been drastically impacted by the technological progress and the diffusion of technological artifacts in everyday life. Due to the massive increase of communicative technology in everyday life, it is not anymore simply true that "the world of everyday life, the common-sense world, has a paramount position among the various provinces of reality, since only within it does communication with our fellow-men become possible." (Schutz 1962: 294) To be more specific, this is so *in so far as* the world of everyday life is understood and conceptualized *qua* paramount reality, "the subuniverse of the sensorily perceivable, physical world." (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 5) Even though Schutz tended to picture the paramount reality as the concrete physical world (see e.g., Schutz 1962: 341) – *qua* paramount reality – he clearly stated that "it is the meaning of our experience, and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality" (Schutz 1962: 230). Instead of being outdated, Schutz's work, through the way it addresses symbols and relevance structures and how it characterizes different *finite provinces of meaning*, offers a fertile ground for understanding the relevance structures of the life-worlds in the age of the Internet.¹ The purpose of this essay is to conceptually clarify the nature of virtual worlds building on Alfred Schütz's phenomenological sociology, and theorize some of the implications of the ongoing virtualization on what is *relevant* for people. Rather than a conclusive essay, it attempts to point to dilemmas that new technologies have brought and opens conceptual avenues for further work.

Through – even a brief – empirical observation in a street, transport, bank, school or work, it ought to be secure to say that new technologies have imposed changes in the fabric of everyday life. Observing people watching, tapping and speaking to smartphones in different places – as well as claims such as "digital technologies ... are no longer just tools for individuals, but have become an integral part of their everyday lives" (Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast 2017: 2) – is

¹ Evidently, scholars have already begun to study the virtual realities. Shanyang Zhao, in particular, has theorized the transformation of everyday life through Schutzian framework (e.g., Zhao 2004, 2015). See others as well (e.g., Cerulo 1984, 1997; Kim 2001; Butnaru 2015).

mirrored in the statistics gathered in different places of the world. According to one study, Brazilians and Filipinos spend more than 5 hours per day online (World Bank 2016) and according to another, Americans spent in 2016 some 10 hours with media (Nielsen 2016). While these numbers are rapidly growing, today, more than half of the world population use the Internet (Internet World Statistics 2017) and there are claimed to be some 2.79 billion active social media users in the world (Stevens 2016). Concrete impacts of virtualization of the life-worlds are becoming manifest in, for instance, how people spend time (Nielsen 2016), moralize (Hopp, Parrot and Wang 2017), work (Villadsen 2016), participate politically (Choi, Lee and Metzgar 2017), and how children are being raised and educated (Kildare and Middlemiss 2017). Importantly, virtual worlds have also become a prominent form of addiction both in the form of games and social media (Andreassen et al. 2016) – “everyone is always on their phones” (Buck 2017),

I write about virtual worlds, realities or realms, and virtualization. I define the former three (that I use interchangeably) as such worlds that lack of what Schutz called *apperceptual order*: “the order of objects to which the immediately apperceived object belongs if experienced as a self, disregarding any appresentational references” (Schutz 1962: 299), as I will clarify later in this essay. It is important to note that while some scholars study the *mediatization* of societies, referring to “all the transformations of communicative and social processes, and the social and practical forms built from them, which follow from our increasing reliance on technologically and institutionally based processes of mediation” (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 27 emphasis in original), the term *virtualization* points to that it is not just a question of the mediation of human activity, but that these technologically and institutionally based processes have also created novel – virtual – realities into which people can gear. Against such backdrop, with virtualization I refer to the empirical observation that people in their everyday life gear increasingly into the *there and now* of the virtual realms (Zhao 2015) draining therefore the attentional interest on *here and now*. It is important to note that I use Schutz's verb *gear into* within this context in order to underscore that people are active within these virtual worlds instead of being passive receivers of news and other entertainment. The difference between active and passive attitude is crucial with regard to understanding the distinct character of the old mass media (e.g., television, radio) and the virtual realities, as will be clarified.

Virtualization takes place through the proliferation of technological devices through which people experience and act within virtual worlds (Seiler and Kidwell 2016) Such proliferation

presupposes "the material infrastructures *through which, and on the basis of which*" (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 33 emphasizes in original) such virtualization takes place. While the material sphere is certainly something not to neglect, my focus here will be on explicating how the experiences within the virtual realms that the technological infrastructure affords differ from the experiences here and now. What has this to do with the structures of the life-world? Zhao insists that not only the virtual realms have transformed the contact situations and the zones of operation (Zhao 2006), but that they also have induced a new realm, that of consociated contemporaries and a new zone, that of 'there and now' (Zhao 2015). Indeed, Seiler and Kidwell observe that "as mobile phones become normalized within personal relationships, people develop a sense of perpetual telecopresence with their significant others." (Seiler and Kidwell 2017: 208) One essential issue is that virtual worlds are 'habit-forming' (Oulasvirta et al. 2012) and habits create addictions – both games and social media have been observed to be addictive (Andreassen et al. 2016) – and as the addiction process advances, people come to be less interested in other realms, including the 'real' one.

What I aspire to argue in this essay is that one consequence of the massive transformation of the everyday life, the sensorily perceivable, physical world of concrete objects is increasingly far from being equated to the *zone of primary relevance*. Differently put, a sector beyond any here and now has been created and maintained through a massively complex material infrastructure and institutional setting (Couldry and Hepp 2016) "within which our projects can be materialized and brought forth," (Schutz 1976 [1964]: 124). Differently said, another *zone of primary relevance* that has been erected and has become a part of the life-world of normal person engaged in the world of daily life. Whereas Schutz's proto-sociological work aimed to provide adequate foundations to study transient, historical, culturally specific processes, in this study I examine one such particular process that necessitates and presupposes a massive infrastructure providing technological devices and contents within (Couldry and Hepp 2016). This process of virtualization has nevertheless prominent impacts on the life-worlds. The process through which people spend less time here and now and more time there and now, changes the life-world in objective terms (e.g., through changing how other people act and how people interact) as well as the subjective experiences within (e.g., through modifying relevance structures and providing new realms into which they can gear).

Below, I start by characterizing different realities as Alfred Schütz describes them. Then I discuss the qualitative issues of the virtualization of contemporary life-worlds, attempting to picture

virtual worlds not as sub-universes, but as phenomena that modify the very world of working. I conclude by discussing the implications virtualization has on the relevance structures and the life-worlds in general.

2. Sub-universes and their dimensions

2.1 The world of daily life

As written, Schutz begins his analysis of the reality of the world of daily life, which “the wide-awake, grown-up man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-men experiences within the natural attitude as a reality” (Schutz 1962: 208). This world of daily life is from the outset “not merely a physical but also a sociocultural one” (Schutz 1976: 229); it is “the intersubjective world which existed long before our birth, experienced and interpreted by Others, our predecessors, as an organized world”, which is given to our experience and interpretation (Schutz 1962: 7). All interpretation of this world, Schutz writes, “is based upon a stock of previous experiences of it, our own experiences and those handed down to us by our parents and teachers, which in the form of ‘knowledge at hand’ function as a scheme of reference.” (Schutz 1962: 208) Schutz underlines that we do not only interpret this world; “we have not a theoretical but an eminently practical interest” on this world, which “is the scene and also the object of our actions and interactions” (Schutz 1962: 208-209).

It is important to note here that for Schutz the objects of this world are rather physical: it is “a world of well circumscribed objects with definite qualities, objects among which we move, which resist us and upon which we may act.” (Schutz 1962: 208) These objects “offer resistance to our acts which we have either to overcome or to which we have to yield” as we through our “bodily movements – kinaesthetic, locomotive, operative – gear, so to speak, into the world, modifying or changing its objects and their mutual relationships.” (Schutz 1962: 208, 209) Physical objects also function as a reality tests: “Only experiences of physical things within the manipulatory area permit the basic test of all reality, namely resistance.” (Schutz 1962: 223). Individual, according to Schutz, experiences oneself as being within a certain situation that has two principal components: one that originates from the ontological structure of the pre-given world and other that originates from the actual biographical state of the individual (Schutz 1970a: 122) Even though Schutz describes the ontological structure referring mainly to concrete physical objects and activities of other people, by virtue of the general level of his conceptualizations they can be applied to virtual objects and realms as well.

2.2 The world of working as the paramount reality

The wide-awake person within the natural attitude is primarily interested in that sector of the world of one's daily life which is within one's reach. It is this sector starting from which one centers in space and time around oneself: "The place which my body occupies within the world, my actual Here, is the starting point from which I take my bearing in space" (Schutz 1962: 222). Following George Herbert Mead, Schutz discusses the manipulatory area, which includes "those objects which are both seen and handled" (Schutz 1962: 223) as the core of reality. Schutz, however, goes further by arguing that the kernel of reality, the *world within reach* "includes not only Mead's manipulatory area but also things within the scope of his [subject's] view and the range of his hearing, moreover not only the realm of the world open to his actual but also the adjacent ones of his potential working." (Schutz 1962: 224) Actually, for Schutz "the whole social world is a world within my attainable reach, having its specific chances of attainment." (1962: 226) Schutz predominantly pictures these worlds within restorable reach and attainable reach as ontologically real physical reality that can be touched and worked with somehow through direct bodily activities. For Schutz, the *world of working*

"stands out as paramount over against the many other sub-universes of reality. It is the world of physical things, including my body; it is the realm of my locomotions and bodily operations; it offers resistances which require effort to overcome; it places tasks before me, permits me to carry through my plans, and enables me to succeed or to fail in my attempt to attain my purposes." (Schutz 1962: 226-227)

This paramount reality is particularly important for our pragmatic motives: "this world is to our natural attitude in the first place not an object of our thought but a field of domination. We have an eminently practical interest in it, caused by the necessity of complying with the basic requirements of our life." (Schutz 1962: 227) Differently put, the world of daily life derives its paramount status (also) from the fact that our physical existence, our very biological survival, depends on it. For survival, people have to work (i.e., to act overtly upon the world) instead of merely thinking to work (i.e., covert performances). More specifically, work for Schutz "is action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs by bodily movements", and the world of "working is the most important one for the constitution of the reality of the world of daily life." (Schutz 1962: 227)

2.3 Subuniverses and everyday life

For Schutz, the world of working is only one reality within which people can and do live. While the world of working in daily life is the kernel of reality, Schutz identifies, following William James, different sub-universes of reality, such as those of dreams and fantasy, which Schutz calls “*finite provinces of meaning* upon each of which we may bestow the accent of reality.” (Schutz 1962: 230, emphasis in original) Each finite province of meaning has a particular cognitive style, which entails “a specific tension of consciousness and, consequently, also a specific epoché, a prevalent form of spontaneity, a specific form of self experience, a specific form of sociality, and a specific time perspective.” (Schutz 1962: 232) Schutz’s strategy to explain the reality leans strongly to keeping apart the distinct finite provinces of meaning:

“All these worlds – the world of dreams, of imageries and phantasms, especially the world of art, the world of religious experience, the world of scientific contemplation, the play world of the child, and the world of the insane – are finite provinces of meaning. This means that (a) all of them have a peculiar cognitive style (although not that of the world of working within the natural attitude); (b) all experiences within each of these worlds are, with respect to this cognitive style, consistent in themselves and compatible with one another (although not compatible with the meaning of everyday life); (c) each of these finite provinces of meaning may receive a specific accent of reality (although not the reality accent of the world of working).” (Schutz 1962: 232)

Rather than having any static connotations, Schutz writes that “even within a single hour our consciousness may run through most different tensions and adopt most different attentional attitudes to life.” (1962: 233) But “passing from one [finite province of meaning] to the other can only be performed by a ‘leap,’ ... which manifests itself in the subjective experience of a shock,” Schutz writes and continues that such a leap or shock is “nothing else than a radical modification in the tension of our consciousness, founded in a different *attention à la vie*.” (Schutz 1962: 232 emphasis in original) Schutz writes that there can also be “regions belonging to one province of meaning enclosed by another,” that is, “enclaves” (Schutz 1962: 233), which make that the frontiers between different finite provinces of meaning is not that clear-cut. For Schutz all the other provinces can be considered as modifications of the world of working in daily life, which “is the archetype of our experience of reality” (Schutz 1962: 233) It is argued here that Schutz’s

strategy to keep the different finite provinces of meanings apart from each other might be problematic due to the proliferation of different virtual worlds that Schutz, quite possibly, would conceptualize as yet another finite provinces of meaning. This conceptual problem arises because the virtual words partly, but clearly and increasingly, belong to the world of working as they have been infiltrated to the paramount reality, indeed “they have become a part of the everyday life itself” (Butnaru 2015: 70) and share, at least to certain extent, the cognitive style of world of working, as will be discussed.

2.4 Defining virtual worlds

Schutz’s treatment of symbols (Schutz 1962: 287–356) can be adequately used to explicate how virtual worlds could be defined with the concepts of phenomenological sociology. In terms of communication, the concept of appresentation, by which “we experience intuitively something as indicating or depicting significantly something else” (Schutz 1962: 296) is central for Schutz. It is important to note that, for Schutz, symbols, marks, indicators and such are needed when “an object, fact, or event is not experienced as a ‘self,’ but as standing for another object which is not given in immediacy to the experiencing subject.” (Schutz 1962: 297) Such a description allows for an ontological existence of physical objects, independent of our perception of them. Schutz saw that some finite provinces of meaning, “the world of religion, of art, and of science, ... can only be experienced in a particular form of appresentation for which we reserve the term symbol” (Schutz 1962: 294). Hence symbols can also be seen as the *texture* of virtual worlds.

Schutz argues that in any appresentational situation four orders are present: *the apperceptual scheme, appresentational scheme, referential scheme and interpretational scheme*. I define virtual worlds as realms in which there is an absence of “the order of objects to which the immediately apperceived object belongs if experienced as a self, disregarding any appresentational references”, as Schutz described the order of apperceptual scheme (Schutz 1962: 299). Note that such a definition does not rule out physicality from virtual worlds, but that what is appresented within them does not have such physical existence that is appresented. In virtual worlds, objects do not have corporeal existence in the form they are appresented; orchestrated pixels in an interface refer to something else: “we have a magical ability to construct a ‘thing-totality’ from a series of limited perceptions of a thing” (Kim 2001: 92). Even though we would engage with a ‘digital-being’ as it appears to us in the user interface, its appearance in ontological terms is not only those pixels that constitute its appearance, but constituted by a complex

orchestrated constellation of electric charges often physically scattered around the global material infrastructure underlying the Internet (Couldry and Hepp 2016).

2.5 The world of virtual realms

Even though Schutz's descriptions of the reality can be used to conceptualize different virtual worlds, virtual worlds are evidently distinct from the world of working in daily life *qua* paramount reality, as will be illustrated below. Accessing virtual worlds is typically done through a computer (or tablet, or smartphone) screen or interface that is operated with a mouse, track pad, joystick, touch or even mere gestures. Thus, while the elements in the paramount reality can be grouped into categories such as "right and left, before and behind, above and below, near and far, and so on" (Schutz 1962: 233), such categories now take a much reduced space for the ego at hand as – most often – everything takes place *before* the eyes of ego. While Scriven wrote that "the player interacts with the game environment both *as* the player and *through* the player character." (2015: 3 emphases in original), Hardesty (2016) argues that the player-character relationship depends on how much and through which means players come to know about and acquire their character. She describes that players can achieve three kind of virtual presences, between which the experiences of the player can vacillate: the player can experience an avatar as a bodily extension, *live-into* a character and experience a degree of oneness with it, or experience her character as personalistic other and *live-with* it (Hardesty 2016).

While it would be interesting to dwell into the relating between the player and the player character, what is essential here is that, similarly as in terms of the world of working *qua* paramount reality, we can also *gear into* the virtual worlds. Regardless whether we gear into virtual realms through some sort of an avatar or not and whether we live-into or live-with such an avatar, we are active within – we do things within virtual realms. Virtual worlds, however, offer *different* types of resistance which require *different* effort to overcome, they place *different* tasks, permit me to carry on through *different* plans than the 'real' world does. Virtual worlds can also be unplugged at any moment, distinctly from the 'real' world, as it suffices to have a power cut to end the (virtual) world and all the resistances within. They are all fundamentally dependent on the functioning of the material infrastructure presupposing the virtual realms. Furthermore, while the software is always and fundamentally dependent on the hardware, also the software is constituted by codes that can be modified and in that way transform the structure of a virtual world – without the typical user having any apparent reason for such changes.

Other contrasts between virtual worlds and the 'real' world are that many virtual worlds have *not* 'existed long before our birth' (or birth of anyone) *nor* are they 'experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, as an organized world', as the paramount reality has been and yet is. Instead, a virtual world might be a result of a relatively brief moment of work of a team of programmers and that is now (when a game is launched, for instance) 'given to our experience and interpretation'. Others in virtual worlds are only experienced through "heavily mediated, telecopresent nature" (Scriven 2015: 15) of interactions. Even though the world of a game might have 'well circumscribed objects with definite qualities, objects among which we move, which resist us and upon which we may act,' it is often the case that bugs and other problems in the software make that the objects do not necessarily have particular qualities or that our gearing into the game does not take place smoothly; the appearances in virtual realms entail more cracks than the appearances in the 'real' world.

Possibly the most crucial difference between the world of working in which we grow older and virtual worlds is that in the former "the whole system of relevances which governs us within the natural attitude is founded upon the basic experience of each of us: I know that I shall die and I fear to die." (Schutz 1962: 228) For Schutz, knowledge of one's own mortality is the most basic experience, which he calls the *fundamental anxiety*. Insofar as we attach an accent of reality to a virtual world and insofar as the death of an avatar remains just that, there is no such thing as the fundamental anxiety in the virtual worlds. This does not mean that we would not be afraid because of the threat of death of our avatar, but it means that such an experience might not be the foundation of our system of relevances in the virtual words. This is essential, because, as Schutz writes, the fundamental anxiety

"is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate. From the fundamental anxiety spring the many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, of wants and satisfactions, of chances and risks which incite man within the natural attitude to attempt the mastery of the world, to overcome obstacles, to draft projects, and to realize them." (Schutz 1962: 228)

One consequence of this lack of a similar primordial base for our activity in virtual worlds is that we have more liberty in terms of our activities in virtual worlds since we are not bound by the fundamental anxiety. To sum up, it seems secure to say that virtual worlds have different qualities than the world of working *qua* 'real' world. Rather than abandoning Schutz's work here,

it provides adequate tools to compare and analyze different finite provinces of meaning, which are useful also in terms of virtual worlds, as is discussed below.

2.6 Cognitive style of virtual worlds

According to Schutz, different the finite province of meanings can be analyzed through six items. He describes the basic characteristics of these items and their specific characteristics for the world of working as following:

“1) a specific tension of consciousness, namely wide-awakeness, originating in full attention to life; 2) a specific epoché, namely suspension of doubt; 3) a prevalent form of spontaneity, namely working (a meaningful spontaneity based upon a project and characterized by the intention of bringing about the projected state of affairs by bodily movements gearing into the outer world); 4) a specific form of experiencing one’s self (the working self as the total self); 5) a specific form of sociality (the common intersubjective world of communication and social action); 6) a specific time-perspective (the standard time originating in an intersection between *durée* and cosmic time as the universal temporal structure of the intersubjective world).”

(Schutz 1962: 230, emphases added)

Below, I briefly address each of these characteristics in terms of virtual worlds.

1) The consciousness in world of working is the “highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements” (Schutz 1962: 213). Obviously, the attitude of people within virtual worlds is not passive, even though the tension might be, in average, less than that of in the world of working. Yet, equally obviously virtual worlds can entail tasks and schemes that require the highest tension of consciousness. Hence, it is not evident that in virtual worlds the tension of our consciousness would diminish, which Schutz argues is indispensably the case when “turning away of our attention from everyday life” (Schutz 1962: 223). 2) It seems evident that in virtual worlds, the world is not similarly taken for granted as the world of working is. This is because any rupture in the continuation of the life in the virtual world, for instance, in terms of having to take care of physical necessities of the body or responding to social pressures in the ‘real’ world force people engaged in a virtual world to leap back to the ‘real’ world and such forced leaps should take place frequently. Yet, playing, in particular, can continue for hours and during that *durée* the mind might suspend, to a surprising extent, the doubt of the reality of the virtual world: “there is a concept called ‘flow’ in videogame playing ... it’s where a person will

be completely immersed and engaged in the task at hand and everything else just disappears.” (Brooker 2013: 34:05-34:20) As children internalize the world *tout court*, that is, as "the only existent and only conceivable world" whatever it may be (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 154), contemporary children ought to be seen to take virtual realities as more real than the older generations, who, in so far as they have experience of virtual worlds, may take them as pixels rather than a reality.

3) The prevalent form of spontaneity might not be that easily characterized as that in the world of working, which according to Schutz is “a meaningful spontaneity based upon a project and characterized by the intention of bringing about the projected state of affairs by bodily movements gearing into the outer world” (Schutz 1962: 230) that is founded on the fundamental anxiety. The virtual worlds lack to certain extent such type of spontaneity. Projects can be based on almost anything and the projected intentions are brought about without much bodily involvement. 4) While the form of experiencing one’s self in the working self is the total self, in virtual worlds such self acts typically through an avatar of some sort, either through a username or character. 5) While the specific form of the world of working is that of the common intersubjective world of communication and social action, in virtual worlds the use of language might be even more pervasive than in the face-to-face dominated world of working *qua* paramount reality. 6) For Schutz the time-perspective in the world of working is the standard time that originates in an intersection between *durée* and cosmic time as the universal temporal structure of the intersubjective world. In virtual worlds such standard time might exist, but in a different manner. As we are awake in the virtual realities, the internal *durée* of our ego yet exists, even though we might wake up from a game just to realize that too many hours have passed.

2.7 Virtual worlds as part of the world of working

The above schematically described cognitive style of virtual worlds shows that there are differences, but also similarities in each basic item that Schutz used to characterize the cognitive style of finite provinces of meaning. The fact that virtual worlds differ from the world of working *qua* 'real' world could imply that we should see virtual worlds as specific everyday transcendent finite provinces of meaning. Yet, there are other issues with the virtual worlds that make them to be taken seriously *not* as new finite provinces of meaning, but as phenomena that transform the everyday reality itself. The everyday life can be observed to have transformed so that people gear more into the world within *mediated* reach (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 44) rather than into the

world within reach, that is, the surrounding sensorily perceivable, physical world (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). What is more, to an increasing extent, our interaction takes place and remains within virtual realms. There are virtual groups, relationships, and even marriages that remain such, virtual, so that the parties might never meet in the ‘real’ world (Boellstorff 2008). Denisa Butnaru (2015) argues that due to the intrusion of virtual worlds in the life-worlds, instead of separation, virtual worlds and the paramount reality become connected and hence leaps between them lose their meaning.

Living in a world of fantasy, Schutz writes, “we have no longer to master the outer world and to overcome the resistance of its objects” (1962: 234). Yet, in virtual worlds, while the objects are in nature different, often we have to master them there and overcome the resistance they impose to our activity within. Also, Schutz writes that in the fantasy world we “are free from the pragmatic motive which governs our natural attitude toward the world of daily life, free also from the bondage of ‘interobjective’ space and intersubjective standard time” (Schutz 1962: 234-235), which is not so in virtual worlds; we often have a very pragmatic motive in the virtual worlds. We use our pragmatic motive in gearing into the games or other virtual worlds and the spaces and time there can be shared, as Zhao’s terms consociated contemporaries (Zhao 2004) and telecopresence (Zhao 2015) imply. Furthermore, differently from a phantasm world in which according to Schutz we do not have “intention to realize” a project (Schutz 1962: 211), in virtual worlds this is obviously not so. We have intentions to realize very different projects within virtual worlds spanning from completing tasks in games to earning money (e.g., Boellstorff 2008). Communication in virtual worlds takes place more pervasively through language than does communication in the ‘real’ world where facial expressions, bodily gestures and other non-verbal communication form a much more important part of the communication.

Virtual worlds involve distinct logic in terms of bodily activity, but especially in terms of the fundamental anxiety and hence, the relevance structures. The ‘center 0’ has a different character; we act through an interface. Also, what is restorable and what is attainable do not exist in the same sense within the virtual worlds as in the ‘real’ world. While in many intersubjective games, situations are never fully restorable, the restorability is different, for instance, in terms of death or injury. In the ‘real’ world, working is irrevocable: “My work has changed the outer world. At best, I may restore the initial situation by countermeasures but I cannot make undone what I have done. That is why – from the moral and legal point of view – I am responsible for my deeds but not for my thoughts.” (Schutz 1962: 217) While this is to a certain extent similar in the virtual

words, from the moral and legal point virtual deeds bear qualitatively different issues than ‘real’ deeds. As we have seen, in virtual words, however, what is said and ‘done’ is typically saved somewhere exactly in the form we did it, which evokes important questions in terms of control and surveillance (Christensen and Jansson 2014).

Nevertheless, possibly most importantly, virtual worlds gear into the ‘real’ world in that they entail changes in the *relevance structures* of the people and therefore in their activities within the paramount reality. Not only are virtual worlds important in individual terms, as in games played alone, but also the social aspects of the virtual worlds impose themselves on the sociability of the ‘real’ world. ‘Likes’ in Facebook and ‘tweets’ in Twitter have real implications, that is, implications in the world of working *qua* paramount reality, as does the already massively harnessed logic of games (Mantello 2016). Virtual worlds move increasing amounts of – virtual and real – money as well and increasing number of people work exclusively within virtual words, not to mention the proliferation of virtual worlds in the working life (Villadsen 2016). Digital technologies “are no longer just tools for individuals, but have become an integral part of their everyday lives” (Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast 2017: 2). Schutz proposes that a typology to analyze “the different finite provinces of meaning could start from an analysis of those factors of the world of daily life from which the accent of reality has been withdrawn because they do not stand any longer within the focus of our attentional interest in life” (Schutz 1962: 233). While such a proposal seems pertinent also in terms of virtual words, might it be more fruitful to analyze how virtual worlds have transformed the very world of working *qua* paramount reality? It seems that it is increasingly true that in order to understand what takes place – and why – in the world of working, we have to understand what takes place in virtual words. Do digitalized virtual worlds and the virtualization of the societies urge us to rethink our strategy in terms of analyzing the life-world through keeping finite provinces of meaning apart?

2.8 Relevance structures

If we want to understand what is relevant in the human behavior in age of the Internet, we should pay close attention to the experience of people within various types of virtual worlds. The concept of relevance was central to Schutz’s thought, it is “key conception which underlies all his works and connects them with one another,” according to Hisashi Nasu (2008: 91). For Schutz, the basic problem of relevance concerns “a selection from the totality of the world which is pregiven to life as well as to thinking” (Schutz 1927–1928/1929: 3–4 cited in Nasu 2008: 91).

According to Schutz, the “normal person is fully awake and this means fully attentive to life. His system of relevance is determined by the practical task before him. He pulls, so to speak, into his specious present the open possibilities of his typical expectations of typical events and occurrences.” (Schutz 1962: 284) For Schutz “it is relevance to an individual which shapes the selectivity of his experience, that is, which determines what arouses his attention, where his attention leads him and how far it leads him” (Straßheim 2010, 1418). What is relevant is not the same as *what is said* to be important. Of pivotal importance is that relevances are constituted within the social and physical worlds as part of the mesh of orders and practices (Schatzki 2002), and such a mesh of doings and sayings is increasingly mediated by technological devices and takes increasingly place within virtual realms.

Schutz distinguished relevance structures through various dimensions; he discussed types of relevances (motivational, topical and interpretive), zones of reach, origination and person types in terms of relevances (Schutz 1970b; Barber 2004; Straßheim 2010). The pragmatically motivated activities of people gearing into the 'real' qua physical reality entail intrinsic relevances, while others' experiences imposed to us through objectivation of some sort entail imposed relevances (Schutz 1970b), which are of different magnitude in terms of pragmatic activity. Another type of relevance structure for Schutz is the decreasing zones of relevance that are function of our domination and understanding of them and their capacity of establishing “the conditions upon which our planning itself or its execution depends” (Schutz 1976: 125). It seems that the virtual worlds in their current form already constitute such a pragmatic realm: a “sector of the world within which our projects can be materialized and brought forth” (Schutz 1976: 124). Indeed, a major implication of the virtualization of everyday life is that the virtual worlds should be seen now as a “part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us and also at least partially dominated by us” (Schutz 1976: 124), that is, the *zone of primary relevance*. The “zone of primary relevance requires an optimum of clear and distinct understanding of its structure” according to Schutz, and people possess the technique and the skill “and also the precise understanding of why, when, and where to use them” (Schutz 1976: 124). These requirements are certainly fulfilled by the swarm of gamers, for instance, who spend hundreds of hours sharpening their skills and exploring the structures of game worlds. Whereas virtual worlds also increasingly establish the conditions upon which our planning and execution of projects depends, already the radio and television forcefully impacted such conditions, which Schutz pictures as the next level in his concept of decreasing zones of relevance.

3. *Discussion and conclusions*

In the era that started in the turn of 20th century, radio and television became an effective part of the life-world of the man in the street, well-informed and expert alike – in the Global North, in particular. Through these machines few selected people transmitted audiovisual symbols – only audio in radio – through which objectivated knowledge of various types were imposed to people. The essence of such a system was that the circulation of such objectivated knowledge was imposed from elsewhere to the most of the people and these fields of objectivated knowledge were “not open to our domination but mediately connected with the zone of primary relevance” (Schutz 1976: 124). The ubiquitousness of radio and television made knowledge imposed by them relevant for the people, but as externally imposed rather than intrinsically originated in the various life-words (Schutz 1970b). The proliferation of mass broadcasting can be seen as a major item in the symbolization of societies, that is, in the process through which our reality has become increasingly dense with appresentations void of physical objects not given in immediacy to the experiencing subject. Virtualization for its part can be seen as a further process through which people become to gear increasingly into virtual worlds that lack Schutz’s apperceptual order.

There is a crucial difference between the earlier medias, such as television and radio, and more recent ones, such as the Internet in terms of *activity*. In passive attention we experience, for instance, “the surf of indiscernible small perceptions” that are, Schutz writes, “essentially actual experiences and not meaningful manifestations of spontaneity” (Schutz 1962: 213). By contrast, for Schutz the attention to life, the full awokeness is important in terms of activity:

“Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake. It lives within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, to executing its plan. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awokeness.” (Schutz 1962: 213).

This is essential, because within the “state of full awokeness of the working self traces out that segment of the world which is pragmatically relevant, and these relevances determine the form and content of our stream of thought” (Schutz 1962: 213). While the virtual worlds are increasingly relevant in intrinsic terms for the people because they can have own experiences within these worlds, these relevances are different from that of the paramount reality, for instance, in terms of their corporeality.

There are relevances that are constituted through own – and others’ – activities within virtual worlds, yet such relevances are symbolized to large extent, making that, even though the body is always used in some ways when experiencing in the virtual worlds through different operating systems and control tools, the body itself remains typically rather immobile. The bodily experiences – as the mind-body is a single experiencing unit – are hence mainly audiovisual; they take place in the symbolic sphere. Furthermore, the performing self is fully interested in life or activity in *virtual world*, rather than in the 'real' world. This is crucial because, it seems, that while the life in virtual worlds becomes increasingly relevant, it tends to reduce the facts that “are selected by thought from the totality of lived experience and regarded as relevant” (Schutz 1932: 285 cited in Nasu 2008: 91) in the paramount reality. That is because our attentional interest is limited; if one reality requires much energy and time, others will indispensably receive less. In the past humans used to conduct their lives in the paramount reality that was dominated by the pragmatic motive or at least pragmatically bound motives mediated through material artifacts. Even though symbolic worlds as epitomized and embodied in religious and magical spheres of life were important part of most of the archaic societies and more developed ones alike, there were much that was not symbolically orchestrated or mediated to people. In essence acquiring food and other basic necessities demanded pragmatic activity. While physical world was dominant as compared with the motivations imposed through such symbolic means that did not have some sort of connection with the immediate environment this is not to deny that humans from their very inception can be characterized as “animal symbolicus” (Schutz 1962: 356).

No doubt “the subuniverse of the sensorily perceivable, physical world” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 5) remains paramount for the most of the people for the most part of their time, but, as has been argued in this essay, it ought to be understood as transformed to entail virtual realms.

Virtual world, as various other technologies, to use Don Ihde’s words, “is a means of experience, not an object of experience in use” (2009: 42). The least we should do is to take seriously the virtual dimension of the primary zone of relevance and the primary experiences of the people within virtual worlds, as “the communicative common environment originates in the comprehension of fellowmen.” (Schutz 1962: 293) It seems secure to say that today we are bound to fail to understand the relevances in world of working if we ignore the various virtual worlds in which people not only spend their leisure time, but progressively play, work and socialize (e.g., Cerulo 1997; Villadsen 2016). But are the intrinsic relevances generated within the virtual worlds commensurate with the classically generated intrinsic relevances? What kind of implications the

proliferation of virtual worlds have to the social order, governance, democracy or to the natural environment?

An underlying conceptual question for phenomenological sociology is whether we should study the virtual worlds as finite provinces of meaning, as enclaves or whether we should conceive the paramount reality or the world of working as transformed, as suggested in this essay and elsewhere (Butnaru 2015). While all the other decreasing zones of relevances have been under symbolization for much longer time and imposed relevances to us from without (e.g., Cerulo 1984), in the last few years the very zone of primary relevance has begun to be symbolized – or virtualized. Remember that Schutz saw that symbols and such are needed when “an object, fact, or event is not experienced as a ‘self,’ but as standing for another object which is not given in immediacy to the experiencing subject.” (Schutz 1962: 297). This seems to be a common ground for all virtual realities, that is, virtual worlds essentially lack the apperceptual: “the order of objects to which the immediately apperceived object belongs if experienced as a self, disregarding any appresentational references” (Schutz 1962: 299). This, it is argued, should be seen as a fertile conceptual starting point for future work in social theory to address virtual words. I have argued in this essay is that one consequence of the virtualization of the everyday life, the sensorily perceivable, physical world of concrete objects is increasingly far from being equated to the *zone of primary relevance*. This essay paves the way to the phenomenological scrutiny of how virtual worlds are constituted according to the three other Schutz's communicative schemes: appresentational, referential and interpretational in which questions such as how the new virtual everyday realities transcend the subjective could be answered.

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