

### **Riding tools for spiritual excursion :**

Spiritual incarnation and bodily presence felt through the tools of Virtual Reality and religious ritual.

Firstly I want to thank our panel convenors for this opportunity to present my thoughts on a gripping subject, the mode of 'presence' as fundamental to human experience. Connecting to my subject, I discuss how we accept an environment as « reality » through various modes of presence mediated by tools, and how this process changes and frames our notion of reality and what is real. My interest starts from human desire for immaterial emancipation, in material culture particularly where the physical body and bodily experiences are emphasised as an axis or absolute standard of our existence. Confronted with digital technologies such as Virtual Reality, we should recall that human cultures have always tried to push back the boundaries of our finite physical world by giving form to immaterial worlds that exteriorise human interiority, such as imagination, belief and mind, etc.

[Slide p.2] In other words, backing away from « physical reality » as conceptual driver of tradition, the idea of a spiritual world as a part of cosmology may be one of the oldest stereotypes of immaterial worlds ever known. When I consider this stereotypic model in parallel with « virtual reality », sometimes dismissed as mere illusion made by artefact, we notice that they both imply awareness of self-presence in « reality » of another dimension. Indeed they both suggest a transformation focused on the cognitive function, that humans describe as spirit or consciousness.

What then does this have in common with tools? Before discussing, I will show you a short video presenting two sample uses of both ritual object and VR technology (video).

[Slide p.3] The first ritual object, the Korean *Jack-dou*, traditionally used in agriculture to chop straw, is made of two sharp blades on which a shaman possessed of ancestral spirits walks and dances without incurring any injuries. That means his body standing on the blades, is no longer subject to merely physical laws. Symbolically protected by spirits, he navigates in a spiritual world. On the other hand, we saw a Samsung VR play store, where people wear VR headgear, and stand or move on a VR treadmill. The video also shows the religious usage of VR technology by church congregations, and briefly tells the story of a Christian VR developer.

In a broad perspective, these footsteps show us a thought-provoking liminal contrast, in Korean society's range of reality spread between two antagonistic facets : the marginalised

traditions of ancestral shamanic culture versus technology-oriented modernity. However, beyond this symbolic confrontation between irrationality and rationality, we can detect similarities and deduce metaphorical analogies.

[Slide p.4] For example, as you see on the slide, both ritual object and VR tool designate semantic « other worlds ». As you saw, VR tools are adopted for spiritual growth, to enhance worshipping God in a Christian congregation. That VR technology is used as modern « ritual tool » allows us to compare spirituality and virtuality on the same plane and in terms of symmetry.

[Slide p.5] This diagram configures the geolocation of physical, spiritual and virtual worlds in combination with Korean society's conceptual range. The metaphoric *locus* of the spiritual world in both shamanic and Christian cosmologies, covers mainly three levels : above, in parallel and beneath the physical world. However, while traditional shamanism focuses more on the earthly level, universal religions of salvation (I use Karl Jaspers' definition) such as Christianity, tend to promote transcendence in the upward perspective. In a semantic sense, ritual objects like *Jack-dou* and VR tools function as path-makers to access and break passages through each frontier between material and immaterial worlds or even between the virtual and spiritual worlds.

[Slide p.6] What, then, would be the technical means of path-making? As you see in this diagram, both ritual objects and VR tools can be divided into two categories, either headgear such as mask and VR goggle, or body-engaging tools such as *Jack-dou* and VR treadmill indicated below. However, what distinguishes the ritual and VR tools, either headgear or body equipment from other physical objects, is that both aim equally at « transportation », provoking effects on our brain, whether referred to as « incarnation of spirit » or « embodiment of consciousness ». Considered principal organ by which to experience each immaterial world, the body stays in a secondary position, to fully receive the « feeling of presence », which « sensation as real » will occasionally turn into a firm belief in its realness.

When we observed our Korean interviewees, we could see how these tools bear effect on the range of individual life-worlds and what was our own body's position in relation to those immaterial experiences. First of all, to be a part of a « real world » in our own mind, those two immaterial worlds establish a relation of cause and effect with the physical world. In other word, such tools are engaged with the « production of belief » at a very personal level.

For example, the shaman we interviewed confessed to « feeling the presence » of spirits in his body, fully incarnated in himself, which become intrinsically real for him. Through his experiences, he believed firmly not only in the realness of the spiritual world, but also in his duty to live out the shaman's destiny, which literally explains the framing of his real-world outlook.

But just like VR body equipment, the *Jack-dou* itself is no actor of this phenomenon, but remains as proof-maker, authenticifier or catalyst. Its sharpened blades don't cut the soles of his feet, and seeing them intact, makes the shaman himself consider his experience as real. Going further, he becomes a living tool who undertakes to make the audiences evaluate such phenomena as real. Thus is produced a new plausibility for spiritual phenomena, contrary to reasonableness and rationality, verging even on the unreasonable and the irrational, therefore to be interpreted as transcending the laws of physics. Conceptually, lifeworld ranges are reshaped when such irrational applications of the « cause and effect » principle are accepted by an individual or shared in community.

Similar « productions of belief » concern also VR tools. In the story of Mr. Choi, his son and those subject to the VR rehabilitation program, are brain stroke patients who could not move their limbs due to hemiparesis. While playing VR games with visual immersive effect, they experienced psychological embodiment through the avatar's « body ». This process creates in our subconsciousness a momentary « factual belief », which stimulates neuroplasticity, ultimately regenerating damaged brain nerves. With the personal interface of VR goggles, individual users become ritual performers and the only audience to enact their technological creed, where human beings play God himself, or connect to the spiritual world, as in Mr. Choi's belief in the miraculous recovery of his son.

To conclude, it is certain that our complex « modes of presence » are represented by these tools, not only to Koreans but all those physically bounded by material productions of scientific rationality, such as skyscrapers, technological gadgets of all sorts, yet mentally struggling with inexplicable productions of the mind. As our body complies with our mind, these tools, constructed by human rationality willingly accommodate our irrationality, at the most generous negotiation point of association between mind and body in our modern era.

Link to slides & video :  
<https://jyeon.com/?p=2283>

