

THE WAY FOR WARD

Infinite adventure is within our reach – and with no travel required – thanks to the rapidly developing technology sector devoted to the expansion of virtual reality. As the tech improves, even the concept of VR is being expanded way beyond its recent boundaries. Early adopters and entrepreneurs are exploring the therapeutic impact of virtually delivered experiences which will provoke the mind and stimulate the soul. As a new platform for existence comes to fruition, our ontological code becomes available for expansion.

By Raffaele Panizza

For some time now, the conversation surrounding virtual reality has been shifting towards virtual “embodiment”. With this technology, people enter a virtual space where their physical presence is mediated by a VR headset. Once immersed in this environment, the mind has boundless potential for reception and little chance of evading the unfamiliar place into which it has been thrust. “Experiences like these can be transformative,” says Michael Madary, a philosopher of the mind and author of the first code of ethics for VR experiments. A member of the VERE (Virtual Embodiment and Robotic Re-Embodiment) programme financed by the European Commission, he points out that such “experiences can influence us in ways we still barely understand, redefining our relationship with our minds and our world”.

Neurologists and users agree that the experience has an immediate effect on the calibration of the senses, even when the headset is removed. The texture of reality

appears sharper, the colours are brighter, and everything stands out in a deeply three-dimensional way, as if in an image by Maurits Cornelis Escher.

This is the more advanced and finally controllable version of the so-called out-of-body experience (OBE), which one in ten people will experience in their lifetimes. Traditionally explained in mystical and spiritual terms, in reality OBEs are the effect of fluctuations within our psyche, the mental framework we have of the world. Virtual embodiment offers more: a journey where the consciousness remains earthbound and our own, along with a clear awareness of our body as it touches, ducks, dodges, feels and trembles.

In his *Flesh and Sand* project, Alejandro González Iñárritu took this technique (which many see as a new medium) to an even higher level of popular engagement. Presented at the 2017 Cannes Festival and then repeated for months at the Fon-