

“WITH MY WHOLE BEING” THE EXPERIENCE OF IGNATIAN JOURNEY. A PROVOCATION FOR SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION

DEBORA TONELLI

ABSTRACT: Technological development seems to be projecting the human being into a new dimension: the speed of progress and the realness of technologies (digital, virtual, immersive) allow the human being to experience even what is located “elsewhere” than us or even not existing in the reality of concrete objects. This raises numerous questions with respect to the concept of embodiment and disembodiment, but also of reality, truth, and experience. How is an experience real when carried out in a virtual or immersive context? Can such an experience be said to be less “real” or less “authentic”? Are these experiences really entirely new? In this paper I explore the role of spiritual imagination in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, in analogy to immersive experience. The ignatian imagination is activated within a form of reflective meditation with the aim of transforming the person through better self-knowledge and encourage her/his encounter with God. Being devoid of technological mediation, the ability to activate and deactivate one’s imagination depends solely on the individual and by the gift of God.

Lo sviluppo tecnologico sembra proiettare l’essere umano in una nuova dimensione: la velocità del progresso e la concretezza delle tecnologie (digitali, virtuali, immersive) permettono all’essere umano di sperimentare anche ciò che si trova “altrove” rispetto a noi o addirittura non esiste nella realtà degli oggetti concreti. Questo solleva numerosi interrogativi rispetto al concetto di *embodiment* e *disembodiment*, ma anche di realtà, verità ed esperienza. In che modo un’esperienza è reale quando si svolge in un contesto virtuale o immersivo? Si può dire che un’esperienza del genere sia meno “reale” o meno “autentica”? Queste esperienze sono davvero del tutto nuove? In questo articolo esploro il ruolo dell’immaginazione spirituale negli Esercizi Spirituali di Sant’Ignazio, in analogia con l’esperienza immersiva. L’immaginazione ignaziana è attivata all’interno di una forma di meditazione riflessiva con l’obiettivo di trasformare la persona attraverso una migliore

conoscenza di sé e favorire il suo incontro con Dio. Essendo priva di mediazione tecnologica, la capacità di attivare e disattivare la propria immaginazione dipende unicamente dall'individuo e dal dono di Dio.

KEYWORDS: Spiritual exercises, Ignatian imagination, Immersive experience, Technology, Discernment, Images, Pilgrim

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esercizi spirituali, Immaginazione ignaziana, Esperienza immersiva, Tecnologia, Discernimento, Immagini, Pellegrino

The impact of technology on the contemporary world is a much-debated topic, both because of the speed with which technological progress proceeds and because of the variety of areas in which it can be employed: from warfare to industry, from educational to entertainment, from medical to religious. No sphere of human life seems excluded from the new technologies, the digital, the virtual and the immersive. In particular, the possibility of experiencing something located “elsewhere” than us or even not existing in the reality of concrete objects raises numerous questions with respect to the concept of embodiment and disembodiment, but also of reality, truth, and experience. How is an experience real when carried out in a virtual or immersive context? Can such an experience be said to be less “real” or less “authentic”? Is driving a car through a simulator the same thing as driving it on the road? Probably not, because our mistakes would not have an impact on the world around us, yet simulation has effects on our minds and in fact in driver training, for example, it is used to gain ease in gestures and procedures that must be done automatically, quickly and safely in the real world. Recent case that ended up in court of a girl who reported being abused in the Metaverse⁽¹⁾: although it was a virtual experience, it caused symptoms in the girl that were identical to those of an experience made in the real world. The technology used for simulation and immersion is thus able to deceive the mind of the user to the point of triggering on it a physiological and psychological process *as if* the experience were taking place in the real world, that is, the world inhabited by the body (Sherman 2003). Technology can thus trigger or foster effects on the mind that are identical to those of a real experience.

(1) Other cases have been reported in the past that occurred on the platform Horizons World <https://www.wired.it/article/stupro-metaverso-polizia/> last access on February 27, 2024.

This can potentially occur in all areas of human life, including religion (Campbell 2021).

Digital instrumentation is already in use to reproduce places of worship, reconstruct a religious setting, and encourage recollection and prayer both individually and communally. In this, the use of new technologies is in continuity with the need to foster spiritual experience. In the Christian context, for example, the architecture of churches, the way light is filtered and directed, silence or, conversely, musical styles have always played a very important role. The posture of the praying person has also always played a role: standing, kneeling or supine, it can be an expression of recollection, adoration, penance, as well as the dress worn, whether or not one has eaten, the use of incense. Last but not least, the use of sacred text itself: scripture has been the most revolutionary communication technology so far, but it is so much a part of us that we do not perceive it as ancillary. In sum, spirituality has always been a multisensory experience that is nourished (also) by instruments external to the soul. Then there are occasions when the individual — in solitude or together with others — is particularly predisposed to this recollection and then wherever he or she is, he or she is able to immerse himself or herself in his or her own interiority and have a spiritual experience. Certainly the habit of devoting oneself to one's spirituality also enhances this capacity.

New technologies seem to have opened up a dimension, namely the possibility of having an immersive experience without moving in time and space (Sherman 2003, ch. 2)⁽²⁾. A type of experience that can perhaps be likened to that of children, who are able to transform reality and themselves with their imagination, creating *a whole other world*

(2) "Virtual worlds are not a new concept. Since its beginning, humankind has sought to shape its environment. In addition to manipulating the world in which they live, people have created their own concepts of alternate worlds. These alternate worlds are subject only to the rules of their human creators. The creator has total dominion. Such a virtual world might exist solely in the mind of its originator or be manifested through a medium whereby it can be shared with others. Of course, the real world influences the virtual world. While virtual worlds are imaginary spaces, it can sometimes be unclear where the real world ends and the virtual begins. This is especially true when the virtual world is a model of some place or experience intended to mimic a specific real-world counterpart. A virtual world is a real *representation* of some world that may or may not exist in the physical world. Even in the physical world, it is not always obvious whether something encountered is real or a representation."

with their eyes open. And yet it is precisely through play and the use of imagination that children confront reality, transform it or process it, and their immersion “elsewhere” can also be a way of learning to truly be “here and now”.

As in the use of technology, a healthy use of imagination should also allow them to enter and exit the imagined experience (Rasmussen and Parnas 2015; Jansen 2018)⁽³⁾.

Spiritual life can also be enhanced by imagination and in this paper I want to share some reflections on the use of spiritual imagination — as ability to form a mental image of something not present to the senses⁽⁴⁾ — that, it seems to me, make it something akin to immersive experience. This is a virtual environment that submerges the perceptual system of the user in computer-generated stimuli, contemporary blocking out stimuli from the physical world (Bailey and Bailenson 2017; Slater and Saches-Vives 2016; Jang and Huang 2013). An investigation of immersive experience would actually require an in-depth study of virtual reality, but (1) this paper remains rooted in spiritual imagination; (2) it is an initial exploration of the possibility of comparing spiritual imagination and immersive experience, which I am approaching with much curiosity and interest. This also explains why there will be more issues in the conclusions that remain open and open questions than a definitive stance. Here I limit my self in saying that virtual reality becomes possible with the use of technology capable of extending the mental and bodily experience (Biocca and Delaney 1995), while the spiritual imagination I will examine is that of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (henceforth *SE*, Ignatio 2012; Rotsaert 2015). This is a type of imagination activated within a form of reflective meditation with the aim of transforming the person through better self-knowledge

(3) Recalling that, for Husserl, is “phantasy”, the Authors define “imagination” “as an experience of ‘inner’ mental visual images with a pre-reflective awareness of their unreality” Jansen 2018, p. 318

(4) Aristotele (2001, III, 3, 428a) defined imagination as an active and passive faculty, in that humans can both produce and receive images. See also Lynch 1973 and Marty 1984. For a philosophical analysis of imagination see Ferreyrolles 1995, pp. 17, 124–125, 139. Tracy 1981, however, is disappointing, since the author, in fact, does not define imagination and deals with it only in a few points of the work. In fact, there is no knowledge without imagination. It is a way of perceiving but also of shaping, experiencing and understanding: Didi-Huberman 2003. For the post-modern imagination, see: Kearny 1988 and 1998.

and encourage her/his encounter with God. Being devoid of technological mediation, the ability to activate and deactivate one's imagination depends solely on the individual and by the gift of God.

The objective of a reflection on the immersive dimension of the *SE* is the centrality of imagination in adult spirituality as a tool for deepening and growth. Unlike practices in which technological tools are used, the use of imagination is an exercise in the Ignatian *Exercise* which is succeeded, in a second moment, by intellectual reflection, that is, the attempt to understand rationally the experience just lived. The goal of this immersion is not entertainment or even the training of some skill, but a way to encounter Jesus: imagination is, therefore, an instrument of knowledge the mystery of faith⁽⁵⁾.

After briefly describing how and why Ignatius conceived of the Spiritual Exercises, I will focus on the concept of imagination circumscribed to this specific area and its role in the practice of the *SE*. Next, I will focus on the involvement of the body and physicality in spiritual experience and formulate some concluding thoughts regarding the possibility of considering the Spiritual Exercises an "immersive" practice.

1. From Experience to the Spiritual Exercise

Ignatius was born in 1491 in the city of Loyola in the Basque Country to a wealthy family. According to the customs of the time, he was educated in the arts of chivalry and the Christian faith⁽⁶⁾. Until the age of 26 his life unfolded according to those ideals, only to experience a radical and profound change during a long convalescence following a wound suffered in battle. It is May 1521 and Ignatius is taken to his father's house for treatment. The severity of the wound will cause him to fear for his life several times. It will be during the long period of hospitalization that the valiant knight will begin a completely new

(5) The theme of imagination and its relationship with reason runs through the history of Western thought. For an effective summary I refer to N. Steeves SJ, *Grazie all'immaginazione. Integrare l'immaginazione in teologia fondamentale*, Queriniana, Brescia 2018.

(6) For Ignatius's biography see <https://web.archive.org/web/20131114004630/http://www.jesuitascastilla.es/pages/ser-jesuita/san-ignacio-de-loyola.php> last access on February 27, 2024.

path of discernment, as he himself tells his friend Ludovico González da Câmara, who will transcribe his biography, known as *Pilgrim's Tale* (Ignazio 1988).

After two years of requests, in 1553 Ignatius agreed to tell González about the journey of his conversion and the development of the *SE*, which, to this day, are the centerpiece of the spiritual formation of members of the Society of Jesus. With the support of the Pontiffs, the spread of the *Exercises* among religious but also among the laity, men and women, was such that it required the specific training of those who could give the *SE*, that is, accompany someone in the practice of the *SE*.

Returning to the biography of Ignatius, González argues that Ignatius allowed himself to be persuaded to recount the elaboration of the Exercises when he reassured him regarding the fact that even if he did not fulfill their request, they would continue to act with full trust in God (Ignazio 1988, p. 50). In sum, Ignatius' experience would never replace the faith in God that animated their request. Rather, they were asking the founder of the Company to share the experience that had guided him to the creation of a useful tool to nurture their faith. The goal of the members of the Company was, therefore, not to satisfy a curiosity, but all internal to their own faith journey.

The occasion for the story is a meeting between Gonzáles and Ignatius, in which the former confides to the latter boastful thoughts and the latter helps him process them. Then, after a few hours of solitary meditation, Ignatius decides to tell Gonzáles how he came to process the Spiritual Exercises.

In recounting this, Gonzáles says that he had the impression that Ignatius was encouraged to this change by God himself. In the biography in fact there are numerous places where Ignatius entertains himself directly with God, without any kind of mediation other than the ability to collect himself, to meditate, to pray, to discern. Some characteristics emerge in Ignatius' attitude that we also find in the *Exercises*: the direct relationship with God, the ability not to make hasty decisions, sincerity, awareness of choice. Every decision is the result of a process of discernment that takes place through inner dialogue with God. Choice and action follow the acquisition of awareness: they have affective and rational significance.

Ignatius' biography is a short composition in which only the essentials are narrated without any literary embellishment, without any attempt at persuasion, and without any further judgment or commentary. Gonzáles transcribes it without adding or taking away anything and without asking for anything because Ignatius was very precise in his narrative: "Father's manner of telling is his usual one, in all things, that is, so clear, that he seems to make present all the past. Therefore there was no need to ask him anything, because everything that was needed to understand well, Father remembered to tell." It resembles more an account than a novel, and yet it is precisely this simplicity and bareness that highlight the path that enabled the founder of the Society to elaborate the *SE*.

The account of Ignatius' biography begins with a timeline: there is a before and there is an after. Until the age of 26 he was devoted to the vanities of the world and does not describe himself as a saint, nor does his listener decide to sugarcoat the tale. What causes young Ignatius to change his path and goals is a gunshot wound that forces him to take a long rest at his brother's house. As soon as he gains some strength, he turns to reading chivalric poems that feed his boastful fantasies, until he finds more such books in the house where he is staying and begins to read the *Vita Christi* (Abbott Conway 1976) of Ludolphus of Saxony, known as the Carthusian, dating from 1374.

This work allows us to contextualize Ignatius' conversion in the devotion of his time and to anticipate some features of the *Exercises*. Indeed, it exerted considerable influence in Europe, being translated into several languages and acquired by numerous libraries. In it, the author urged the reader to contemplate the Gospel scenes by imagining himself within them, following the meditative strategy elaborated by Aelred of Rievalaux (d. 1167) in *De Institutione Inclusarum*, that is, exhorting the reader to *immerse* and project himself into the biblical scene. The immersive strategy also influenced the writing of Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae*, but it was Ludolphus' work that profoundly affected modern Christian devotion and Ignatius' conversion.

Through the reading, the believer can exercise contemplation of the biblical scenes and experience them, to come to an affective understanding of them, *as if* he or she were *really* there, *as if* he or she were

really having that experience. At a later stage, the exerciser should transcribe in a notebook his or her experience, the moods that accompanied it, and reflect on it. The experience of Gospel reading thus does not consist of a pouring over of content and precepts, but involves a totalizing experience of the reader, in which the eyes of the mind and heart replace those of the body, rational reflection is enhanced by affective involvement, and the story becomes real through imagination (something similar to what happens in the entertainment industry that makes use of advanced technology, see Dodsworth Jr 1997). The immersive experience is totalizing⁽⁷⁾. The reading of the *Vita Christi* does not take place as mere pastime and reverie, but an exercise of devotion⁽⁸⁾. From this moment on, his thoughts oscillated between desires for vain glory and questions prompted by the ability to wonder what would happen if he himself behaved like some of those saints:

(7) In describing the immersive experience, Slater and Sanchez-Vives (2016) explain: “Consciousness of our immediate surroundings necessarily depends on the data picked up by our sensory systems – vision, sound, touch, force, taste, and smell. This is not to say that we simply reproduce the sensory inputs in our brains – far from it, perception is an active process that combines bottom–up processing of the sensory inputs with top–down processing (including prior experience, expectations, and beliefs) based on our previously existing model of the world. After a few seconds of walking into a room we think that we “know” it. In reality, eye scanning data show that we have foveated on a very small number of key points in the room, and then our eye scan paths tend to follow repeated patterns between them (Noton and Stark, 1971). The key points are determined by our prior model of what a room is. We have “seen” a small proportion of what there is to see; yet, our perceptual system has inferred a full model of the room in which we are located. In fact it has been argued that our model of the scene around us tends to drive our eye movements rather than eye movements leading to our perceptual model of the scene (Chernyak and Stark, 2001). It was argued by Stark (1995) that this is the reason why VR works, even in spite of relatively simplistic or even poor rendering of the surroundings. VR offers enough cues for our perceptual system to hypothesize “this is a room” and then based on an existing internal model infer a model of this particular room using a perceptual fill–in mechanism. Recall the quote from Sutherland above how people accommodated to and remarked on the realism of the wire frame rendered scene displayed in the “Sword of Damocles” HMD. The technical goal of VR is to replace real sense perceptions by the computer–generated ones derived from a mathematical database describing a 3D scene, animations of objects within the scene — represented as transformations over sets of mathematical objects — including changes caused by the intervention of the participant. If sensory perceptions are indeed effectively substituted then the brain has no alternative but to infer its perceptual model from its actual stream of sensory data — i.e., the VR. Hence, consciousness is transformed to consciousness of the virtual scenario rather than the real one — in spite of the participant’s sure knowledge that this is not real”.

(8) Not all interpreters agree on the role played by *Vita Christi* on Ignatius’ spirituality, see Foss 1969, p. 92. However, the work is mentioned in almost all of his biographies and he himself recalls its importance in Ignazio 1988, p. 62.

His reasoning consisted of repeating to himself: St. Dominic did this, I must do it too; St. Francis did this, I must do it too. These thoughts also lasted for a long time. But when he became distracted, the worldly thoughts already remembered would resurface, and in these too he lingered much. The succession of such different thoughts lasted him a long time (Ignazio 1988, 63).

The change is by no means sudden, but slow, gradual, and Ignatius becomes aware of his own desires and the characteristics of his soul. From the beginning he shows himself to be imperfect and distracted, yet he slowly discerns some differences between his states of mind:

There was, however, this difference: when he thought of those things of the world, he took great pleasure in them, but if, tired, he left them alone, he found himself dry and discontented; whereas going barefoot to Jerusalem, eating only herbs, practicing all the austerities, which he saw were done by the saints, not only consoled him when he dwelt on them, but were thoughts that, even after he had left them, left him satisfied and cheerful. (Ignazio 1988, p. 63).

Immersion in the Gospel scenes accompanies Ignatius toward a greater awareness of himself and his deepest desires. It becomes a tool not to escape from the world, but to immerse oneself in it with a new awareness. Ignatius devotes his time to reading and prayer, but it is the ability to question himself, along with a strong imagination that characterizes his personality and the *SE*: in fact, they propose a method of discernment without offering a content, much less a model, to which to conform. Each pilgrim engages in a very personal dialogue with God, starting from what he is and not from what he should or thinks he is. During his long and painful convalescence, his past life suddenly becomes no longer viable, but young Ignatius finds the resources to set out elsewhere. Reading is transformed from a delight that fuels fantasies of grandeur, into reflection and meditation. The vain Ignatius is always at the center of his own thoughts, but in a new way: he begins to measure himself against the Gospel figures and the saints "what if I also did like that saint?" Ignatius is potentially at a crossroads: build an ideal image of himself, or look at himself as he is and try to respond. He opts for the latter path and begins a journey of seeking God and

doing penance. As soon as his health permits, his inner journey will also become physical through numerous journeys and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but also through penances, fasting, and suffering of the body. His whole being is involved in this quest, and imagination has an impact on real life.

The *SE* arise in this experience, that is, while Ignatius is engaged in improving himself and grasping the signs of God's will in his life. He has no mediators, but practices the sacrament of confession, entertains himself with spiritual people who encourage him, engages in evangelization, and studies to complete his theological and literary formation⁽⁹⁾: discernment and apostolate are at the origin of the *Exercises*. The search implies humility, listening, the capacity for dialogue, but also for analysis and verification: the pilgrim seeks not only the answers, but the criteria for finding them. In the next section I will discuss an essential aspect of this search, imagination, which most assimilates *SE* to immersive experience.

2. Thank to the Imagination

In quickly reviewing Ignatius' life, some important elements emerged: the perseverance in the search, the participation of the body through penances and mortifications, the need to physically travel to Jerusalem, the coupling of the spiritual dimension with rational reflection, the immersion in the Gospel stories, the need to find criteria to understand the signs of God in his life, and the personalization of his spiritual journey. Ignatius' spirituality is not limited to and, above all, does not focus on the observance of certain precepts and devotional rules of the time, but on the search for the best way to encounter God: the pilgrimage to God is on a pilgrim's scale. This pilgrimage is characterized by the intense use of imagination, which allows immersion in the Gospel scenes and the lives of the saints. Through imagination⁽¹⁰⁾, the text ceases to be

(9) His attitude was judged too intimate during the Inquisition and suspected of being *alumbrado* (mystic). For this he was put in jail and released after careful examination of his doctrine. Ignatius also suffered arrest and imprisonment on other occasions, including the first printing of the *SE* (1548) but was always released, Ignazio 1988, p. 107.

(10) The reference here is to the valuable study by Steeves 2018.

narrative and becomes experience: "Not much knowledge satiates and satisfies the soul — writes Ignatius — but feeling and tasting things internally". (Ignazio 2012, p. 69).

The text of the *SE* is, therefore, not a theological treatise expressing truths of faith, nor a book of spirituality to be meditated upon, but a book of exercises to be done addressed to those who give the exercises to those who intend to walk this path. In the first Annotation to the Exercises Ignatius explains that:

By the term "Spiritual Exercises" is meant any way of examining the conscience, meditating, contemplating, praying vocally and mentally, and other spiritual activities, as will be seen later. For just as walking, strolling and running are bodily exercises, so all ways of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself from all disordered affections and, once it has freed itself from them, to seek and find the divine will in organizing one's life for the salvation of the soul, are called spiritual exercises. (Ignazio 2012, 1st Annotation, p. 65).

The dry and not at all appealing style of the text is motivated by the fact that it is addressed to those who accompany those doing the exercises and not to the exercitant. It is more like a math exercise manual than a spirituality book: the list of exercises to be done is not interesting and all the flavor and value of this list is in doing them, that is, the itinerary that leads to inner transformation:

He who gives the *Exercises* should not urge those who receive them to poverty or to promise more than to their contraries, nor to one state or way of life rather than another [...] in these spiritual exercises it is more convenient and much better in seeking the divine will, that the Creator Himself should communicate Himself to his devoted soul by embracing it in His love and praise and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve Him in the future. So that he who gives them does not incline or lean toward one side or the other; but, standing in the middle, like a balance, lets the Creator immediately work with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (Ignazio 2012, p. 83–83)

The one who gives the Exercises merely gives a few pointers and adapts the Exercises to the specific case, somewhat like when you show

someone the way because you know the map. The limited intervention of the one giving the Exercises encourages autonomous living; no one can tell the exercitant how he or she should feel or what he or she should think in immersing himself or herself in a Gospel passage. The uniqueness of each pilgrim makes this path of transformation unique: from meditation, from prayer, from immersion in the Gospel scenes, each will emerge new and always different from all others. Each will make his own experience of the Gospel scenes, each will discover something new about himself through immersion in those scenes, each will know his own desolation and find his own way forward. Imagination plays a key role here, for it is the faculty that allows the Gospel story to become real and the pilgrim to have otherwise impossible experiences.

The ancients distinguished *fānstasma* that forms itself in our mind (dreams) from *fantasía* that was the imprint of something in our soul. In Ignatius' case, the imagination is part of contemplation, that is, silent meditation that listens to the life of Jesus. It is a new instrument of prayer, since in the first millennium of the Christian era any form of imagination in the act of praying was considered contrary to the prohibition of images imposed by the Decalogue and also because, in continuity with the Greek tradition, it was considered a degraded form of knowledge⁽¹¹⁾. In the years when various religious orders (Franciscans, Benedictines, Dominicans) encouraged solitary prayer, built hermitages and places of prayer, Aelred of Rievalaux, Ludolphus of Saxony and then Ignatius introduced and developed the use of imagination in prayer. Through it Ignatius has intellectual and spiritual visions that enable him to better understand the mystery of God (Ignazio 1988, pp. 82–84). These are not hallucinations or extemporaneous experiences, but the knowledge that comes from visualizing oneself within the Gospel scenes, transforming them from stories into experience.

In the Preamble to Contemplation on the Nativity Ignatius describes the way to immerse oneself in the Gospel scene:

here it will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, considering its length and width, whether such a way is level or whether it crosses valleys or heights. In the same

(11) Ex 20, 4–6 and Dt 5, 8–10; Platone 1994, VI–VII; Blasucci 1970.

way, looking at the place or grotto of the Nativity, seeing how large or small, low or high, and how it is adorned [...] seeing the people; that is, seeing Our Lady, Joseph and the handmaid, and the infant Jesus, newly born. I will make myself like a poor and unworthy slave, looking at them, contemplating them and serving them in their needs, as if I were there present, with all possible respect and reverence; [...] watching, noticing and contemplating what they say, [...] watching and considering and what they do, for example, walking and working (Ignazio 2012, pp 195–199).

Following the directions given by the *SEs*, the exercitant will reconstruct the scene of the Gospel story with his mind's eye, place himself within it and experience it. At a later time, he or she will note down feelings, moods, and thoughts he or she had during the experience. The practitioner does not merely witness the scene, but participates in it, somewhat as happens during the performance of a musical score: it is through it, thanks to the musician, that the score truly becomes music and the personality of the performer realizes that music in a unique way. The musical score is not, therefore, something objective, nor is the author the repository of its ultimate meaning. Setting music is not just reading a score or trying to understand what the author intended to express, but entering into it and appropriating it through performance. Imagination allows us to experience facts that are not physically real and yet are no less true. Jesuit Nicolas Steeves defines imagination as follows:

it is what receives and forms images of things and people in us; its task is to imagine the real. It's a simple thing that we all have more or less: it receives and forms images. It is not a special thing reserved for a higher caste, for an elite. We Christians then add that his task is to imagine reality. Why? Because *there is an imagination* that takes you out of reality, which leads you towards ghosts, towards the false unreal, and ultimately towards death. *But there is another imagination that leads you* to know the real and the surreal, that is to know what lies 'behind appearances', which makes you discover things (heuristics), which makes you interpret them (hermeneutics), which also makes you act concretely, imagining good things to do (ethics). It is the imagination that makes you perceive God in all things (mystical) (Steeves 2016, p. 62; Lynch 1965, 1973, p. 18; Marty 1984).

Imagination practiced during *SE* is a form of immersiveness, deeply related to prayer, that is, to that bilateral action in which God and the believer meet: “Imagination is in fact a *locus* of spiritual experience. Ignatius is not satisfied with receiving raw mental images; he reflects within himself — with an imaginative intuition (the “yes that open”) — on what the spirits give to the imagination” (Steeves 2016, p. 64). Imagination is therefore a formative tool aimed at promoting self-knowledge and an encounter with God. In fact, the only criterion for distinguishing a good image from a bad one is whether or not it produces joy and brings or not God:

It is not important to imagine in itself: what matters is to let oneself be informed, conformed, configured to Christ the Incarnate Word who chose poverty. God communicates himself in the imagination and makes people act well even without images (Steeves 2016, p. 65).

Images and imagination are and remain a means and not the end of the *SE*⁽¹²⁾.

Gradually the journey is enriched with sensory, physical, especially visual and tactile experiences. The passages on which to meditate are often inhabited by Jesus and the characters of the parables, but also people in one’s life. The experience lived in another dimension involves sensitivity (including physical) and bodily perception. Scripture becomes imagination embodied in the body of the practitioner. Thanks to the involvement of the senses, the imagination reflects the glory of the Lord (von Balthasar 1975, pp. 386–387).

3. Concluding Notes

The purpose of this paper was to explore the possibility of considering Ignatius’ *SE* a form of immersive experience, such as that produced by the use of a viewer or technology capable of immersing the user in a place other than their own, while remaining comfortably seated in your

(12) Spadaro (2024) explains it well, regarding the usefulness of *SEs* in creative writing, in which he (also) talks about the way in which literature is capable of modifying the world.

own home. I therefore traced the genesis of the *Exercises* and highlighted some characteristics.

This technology makes use of visual and sensorial instruments, favoring the immersion of the user who, for the duration of the experience, deludes himself into thinking he is elsewhere. Looking at a painting hanging on a wall is different from being able to enter inside it. Stargazing is different from swimming in space. Immersiveness therefore allows the increased experience of a context. So far, we can say that *SE* are something similar to these experiences mediated by technology and that the latter, like the Ignatian imagination, are only tools to allow such experiences. However, there are some differences that I would like to briefly highlight: the first is the use or otherwise of technology: in *SE* reading (and thus the "technology of writing") serves only to initiate the imaginative process, which then continues without further tools until the exerciser re-emerges from the imaginative experience to reflect rationally on what he has experienced. Reading marks the beginning; writing is the distancing technology, so to speak, that allows the exercitant to take a further step. In the case of the technologically mediated immersive experience "technological tools" are indispensable to the realization of the experience itself⁽¹³⁾. In the *SE* the setting is that of the evangelical scenes, reconstructed by the imagination of the practitioner and enriched, if desired, by other elements (places, characters, objects etc.): the imagination is not only that produced by the practitioner, but also a place of reception of divine revelation, a place of unfolding of the mystery. Therefore the images and the imaginative process itself are not limited, but part of a dynamic of prayer, that is, of an encounter between the practitioner and God.

Immersive technology offers pre-determined images and scenes, which can be explored and modified to the extent that the game allows. These limits cannot be overcome by the user, who enters a virtual world previously organized by someone else. Physical involvement occurs through sensors and there can be a physiological and psychological

(13) In the *Diary* Ignazio reveals that he no longer receives the visions he expects. After the disappointment, he understands that the poverty of images fully corresponds to the material poverty that he has chosen and experiences this void of imagination as confirmation of correct discernment. Images, or their absence, are first and foremost a gift and always and only a means (Ignazio 1991, p. 315).

impact, but the user does not follow a path of transformation. In the *SE* the practitioner has a companion, with whom he shares his reflections on a weekly basis and objectifies the imaginative experience outside of himself. On the basis of these he receives scant instructions for continuing the journey. They consist of other evangelical verses to be read and meditated on in a disciplined way, a few minutes a day, every day.

Regarding the use of the body, the imagination produced during the *Exercises* uses the mind's eyes and there is a distancing from physical eye perception. In the case of technologically mediated imaginative experience, vision is physical in practice, mental in the process of recognizing the environment in which one is virtually immersed as Slater and Saches-Vives explain in their article (see note 16).

The cognitive dimension is also interesting: in *SEs* imagination is a vehicle of knowledge and encounter with God, while the type and quality of knowledge of immersive technology depends on the type of virtual environment and the purposes of the experience itself.

The technologically mediated immersive experience does not require discipline nor does it produce an internal path towards greater self-understanding or a spiritual experience. In some respects, the fact that the images are given to the player — rather than the player producing them in his own mind — inhibits the latter's participation and limits its effects to amazement (Saliers 2001). The immersive experience, with or without gaming companions, projects us into a virtual world and does not enhance our relationships — neither with ourselves nor with others. Its purpose is in the practice of technology, in the improvement of some skills or mere entertainment.

The immersive experience mediated by technology and *SE* are similar, but they do not coincide in terms of the tools used to produce it nor the purposes they set. However, they draw attention to the fact that human beings seek in different ways and with different purposes how to enhance their experience, whether limited to the here and now or projected towards a gradual transformation. In both cases, the enhancement of images, produced by technology or imagination, amplifies the individual's possibility of enjoying their experience, be it gaming or spiritual.

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