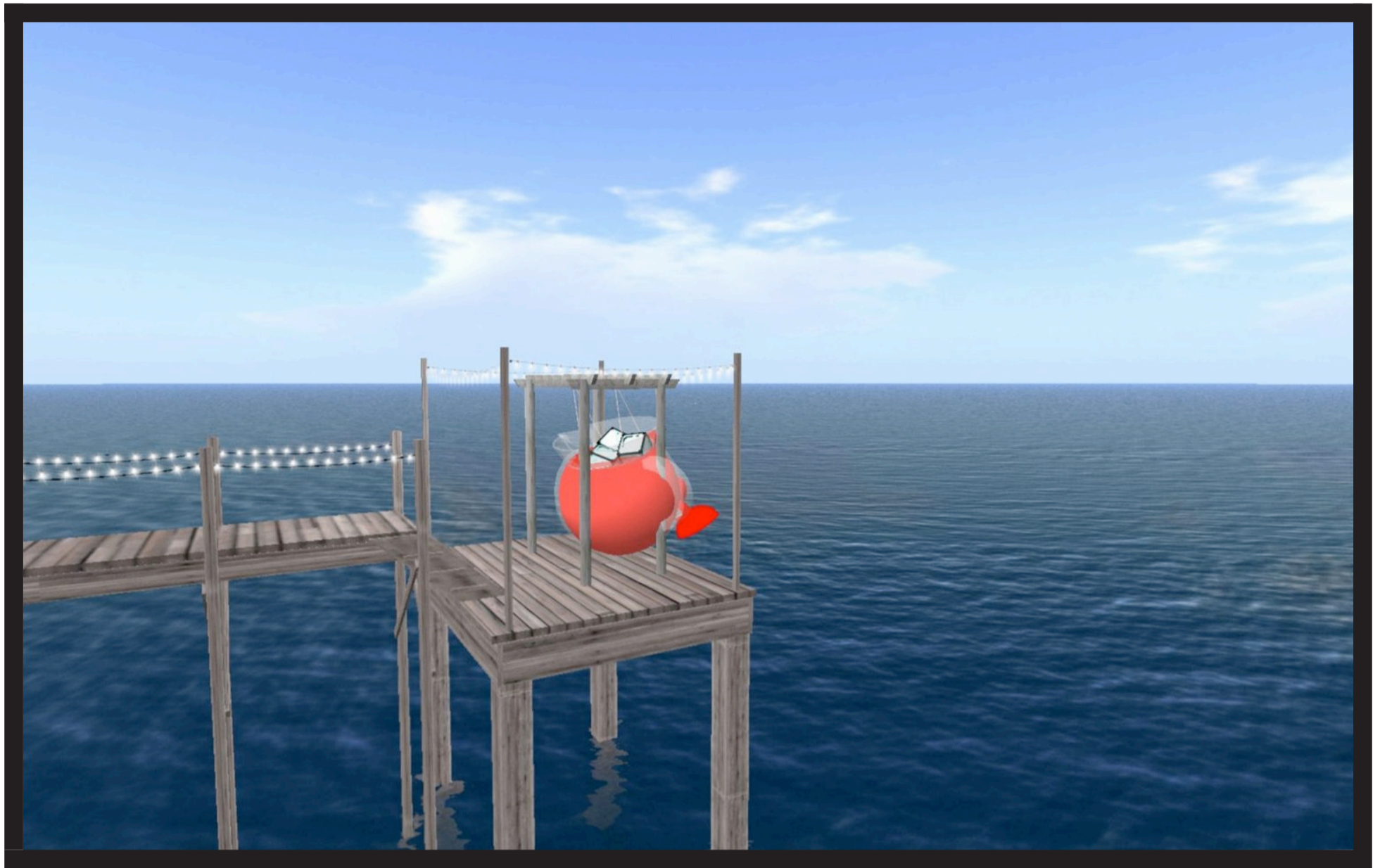


Gregarious Loneliness: On Virtual Crowds



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In the eyes of the modernist thinkers, film, the emblematic artistic and cultural form of the XXth century, offered itself as the medium of the crowd, experienced by a mass public that could gaze back at its own image. In contrast, VR does not appear to 'naturally' foster an experience of being as part of a multitude. Once we start wearing an Oculus we are effectively separated from whoever might be in the room, an erasure of the "audience effect" (Julian Hanich) that might explain why, so far, the crowd plays a relatively limited role in Virtual Reality: we might encounter a few other avatars, lead a small team and fight hordes of enemies, or hide in a crowd, but we rarely belong to a crowd. Yet as a frame-free visual environment, that relies less on watching than on experiencing, might VR not be construed as the perfect medium for the practice not merely of watching, but of being in a crowd? Concepts of milieu (Simondon), and becoming (Gilles Deleuze), as well as Judith Butler's re-reading of Hanna Arendt might help us assessing whether or not, the crowd, as a changeable phenomenon, signals one of the limits of what avatars may stand for.

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