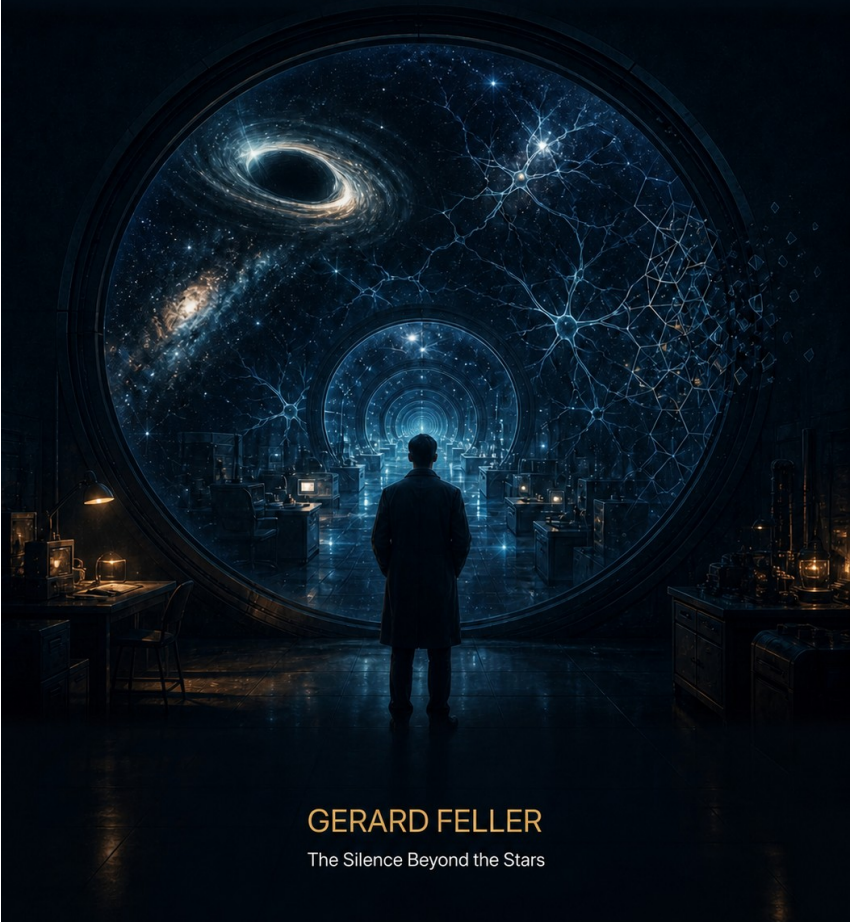


A NOVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND REALITY

THE ONLY WITNESS



GERARD FELLER

The Silence Beyond the Stars

Copyright

The Only Witness

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, institutions, technologies, and events are imaginary. Scientific concepts are woven into the literary narrative and do not constitute a description of any actual research protocol.

My articles on virtuality, postmodernity, virtual seduction, and visualization served as thematic inspiration. The sources at the back distinguish factual background from the fictional narrative.

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CHAPTER 1

The Room Without Windows

“A perfect imitation of reality does not prove that a reality exists beyond it.”

Elias Vermeer receives permission for Project Mimesis, an investigation into how the brain constructs a reality from incomplete signals. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

For Trial 01, he linked heart rate, breathing, gaze direction, and skin conductance to a single timeline. The control group received the same stimuli in a different sequence. The actual stage was a soundproof room in which subjects believed they heard footsteps once the silence lasted long enough.

At first, experience and measurement corresponded impeccably. Then a detail that should have been mere elaboration began behaving like a cause. It seemed as though the prediction were older than the information on which it rested.

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Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara says that silence is not an absence but an expectation without an answer.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

Joost replaced the sensors, Mara rewrote the instructions, and Elias slept two nights outside the institute. Upon his return, the same anomaly was waiting in a file created during his absence.

Sleep ceased to be recovery and became a second laboratory. He placed a pencil on the door handle and a glass of water beside the bed. In the morning, both stood untouched, while muddy footprints ended at his desk.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. On the recording, his own voice can already be heard before he has asked the question. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 2

The Borrowed Hand

He tests bodily ownership with a virtual hand that is touched and moved in synchrony. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

He began with a baseline measurement and then changed only one variable at a time. No participant knew the hypothesis. At the center of the setup, skin conductance rises when a knife appears above the digital fingers.

No graph broke out of range. It was the perfect middle ground that troubled him: noise that seemed normal everywhere and yet formed a pattern when taken together.

Elias paused the images. “Technician Joost asks why Elias wants to repeat the experiment himself three times.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

He repeated the experiment blind, with the labels switched and without Mara knowing when he was connected. The effect kept

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changing its form. It never became proof; it never disappeared entirely.

He called his sister, talked about the weather, and unexpectedly asked about their childhood. Her answer was warm and credible. Only after the conversation did he realize that she had recounted a memory he himself had invented that afternoon.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The virtual hand writes the word AWAKE by itself. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

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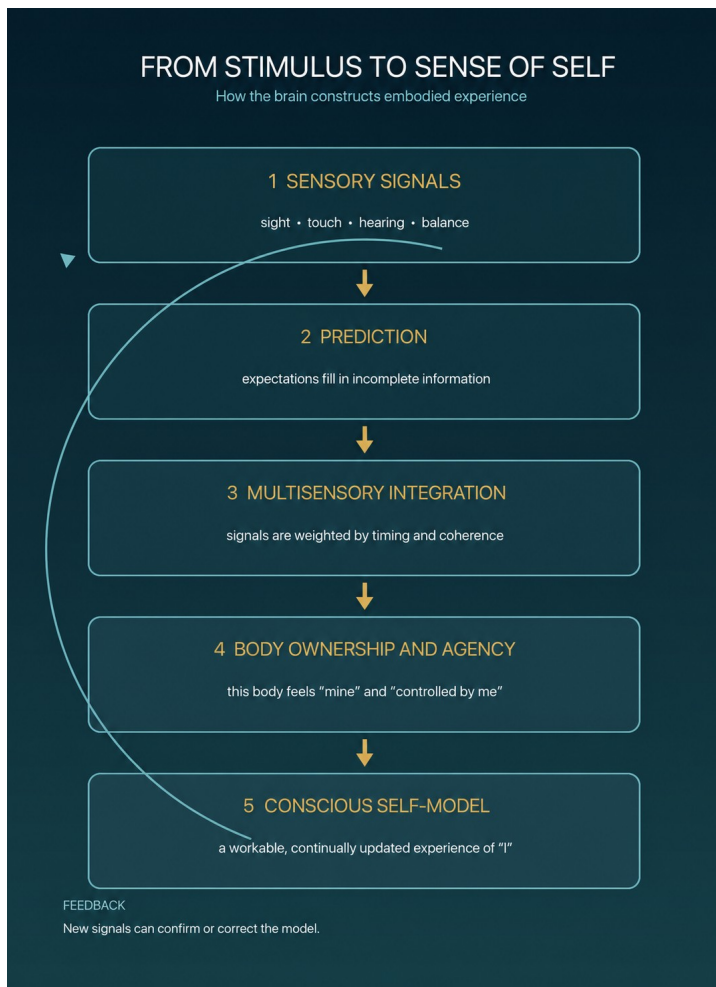


Figure 1. A simplified model of the interplay between signals, prediction, and embodied experience.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 3

Twelve Milliseconds

An adjustable delay between movement and image is intended to determine the boundary of agency awareness. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Mara sealed the source files, and Joost built an analog control alongside the digital system. They wanted to separate expectation from perception. The decisive condition was: at twelve milliseconds Elias feels more sharply present; at one hundred and thirty, as though someone else is controlling him.

Elias knew the power of multisensory coherence. What moves and feels at the same time is easily experienced as one thing. This time, coherence emerged precisely where the time codes demonstrated contradiction.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara warns that measurement errors are not messages.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

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They checked timestamps, cables, source code, and the order of the sessions. Elias clung to his hierarchy: equipment first, then protocol, then observer, and only afterward philosophy. Meanwhile, the category of observer became increasingly unsafe.

At home, he turned off all the screens. The refrigerator switched on, pipes clicked, and a car drove down the street. Ordinary causes, ordinary effects. Yet he caught himself waiting for the sounds to prove that they continued without him.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The system records a movement without muscle activity. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 4

The Mirror Experiment

In a hexagonal mirror room, Elias encounters avatars of different ages that follow his micro-movements. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

The protocol forbade suggestive questions. Elias had to draw what he experienced first and choose words only afterward. Everything revolved around one old version that does not blink with him and knows a childhood memory Elias has never told anyone.

The anomaly was small enough to disappear administratively. Yet it returned in another sensor, as though the system took a detour whenever they closed a measurement channel.

Elias paused the images. “The avatar calls him by the nickname only his deceased mother used.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

The counter-test produced a normal result. So did the repetition. Only after everyone was relieved did Mara discover that both files contained exactly the same random noise.

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That night he dreamed of a corridor in which every door opened onto the same room. Upon waking, he wrote down three possibilities: an error in the system, in his memory, or in the assumption that the two differed from one another.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. All the cameras show an empty room. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 5

Reality Test

Elias borrows a technique from research into lucid dreaming: several times a day, reread text, check clocks, and ask himself whether he is dreaming. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Three sessions were alternated at random: synchronous, delayed, and apparently switched off. Only the computer knew the sequence. The experiment uses the clock in the cafeteria, which shows 14:17 twice even though hours have passed.

The body reacted before his report: pupils dilated, fingers grew cold, breath caught. Only seconds later did his consciousness find a reason for it. The reason felt real, but demonstrably arrived too late.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara laughs and points to a software update.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

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Elias no longer searched for a single spectacular error but for dependencies: which anomaly appeared only when he looked, which persisted for a camera, which knew his expectation?

In his apartment, he read old notes. His handwriting changed gradually as the years receded, yet some sentences remained identical, letter for letter, as though a single present thought had been copied backward through time.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. In his notebook, the sentence I AM AWAKE changes to I AM. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 6

The Second Floor

Mimesis builds a dream layer in which a participant is connected to Mimesis again inside a simulated laboratory. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Elias had the measurement recorded by two independent clocks and wrote down his prediction in advance. This was meant to make chance visible. The research setting is: Elias descends three simulations deep; each layer has slower music and heavier rain.

The first minutes were boring, and that reassured him. Then it was not the environment that changed, but its self-evidence. He could identify exactly what he saw and increasingly struggled to explain why he believed it.

Elias paused the images. “Mara uses a spinning top as a sober anchor, but Elias chooses a ring that ticks irregularly.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

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They invited a statistician who knew nothing about Mimesis. She found no fraud and warned against retrospective selection. Then she herself pointed to the one pattern Elias had omitted from her dataset.

Elias walked along the river until the buildings lost their names and became only shapes. A cyclist cursed, a dog pulled at its leash, someone closed a window. He clung to their indifference.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The ring keeps ticking even after he is awake. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 7

Conversation with a Sleeper

During REM sleep, Elias answers simple sums and questions through prearranged eye movements. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

For Trial 07, he linked heart rate, breathing, gaze direction, and skin conductance to a single timeline. The control group received the same stimuli in a different sequence. The actual stage was that he hears the researchers as voices behind a wall and builds a door for them.

At first, experience and measurement corresponded impeccably. Then a detail that should have been mere elaboration began behaving like a cause. It seemed as though the prediction were older than the information on which it rested.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara asks how many people are in the dream room; Elias answers six.” Joost replied with

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a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

Joost replaced the sensors, Mara rewrote the instructions, and Elias slept two nights outside the institute. Upon his return, the same anomaly was waiting in a file created during his absence.

Sleep ceased to be recovery and became a second laboratory. He placed a pencil on the door handle and a glass of water beside the bed. In the morning, both stood untouched, while muddy footprints ended at his desk.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The sensors record only a single breath. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

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CHAPTER 8

The White Ocean

In a flotation tank, light, sound, gravity, and almost all boundaries of the body disappear. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

He began with a baseline measurement and then changed only one variable at a time. No participant knew the hypothesis. At the center of the setup were stars, a coastline, and a woman who says she is not Mara, emerging from the sensory-deprived emptiness.

No graph broke out of range. It was the perfect middle ground that troubled him: noise that seemed normal everywhere and yet formed a pattern when taken together.

Elias paused the images. “The woman asks who sees the world when Elias closes his eyes.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

He repeated the experiment blind, with the labels switched and without Mara knowing when he was connected. The effect kept

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changing its form. It never became proof; it never disappeared entirely.

He called his sister, talked about the weather, and unexpectedly asked about their childhood. Her answer was warm and credible. Only after the conversation did he realize that she had recounted a memory he himself had invented that afternoon.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Afterward, the water contains the imprint of a second hand. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 9

The Predicted Face

A predictive algorithm fills in blurred images based on Elias's expectations. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Mara sealed the source files, and Joost built an analog control alongside the digital system. They wanted to separate expectation from perception. The decisive condition was: he sees faces in the noise and discovers that each face subtly resembles himself.

Elias knew the power of multisensory coherence. What moves and feels at the same time is easily experienced as one thing. This time, coherence emerged precisely where the time codes demonstrated contradiction.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. "Joost calls it training bias and promises new data." Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

They checked timestamps, cables, source code, and the order of the sessions. Elias clung to his hierarchy: equipment first, then protocol,

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then observer, and only afterward philosophy. Meanwhile, the category of observer became increasingly unsafe.

At home, he turned off all the screens. The refrigerator switched on, pipes clicked, and a car drove down the street. Ordinary causes, ordinary effects. Yet he caught himself waiting for the sounds to prove that they continued without him.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The new dataset turns out to have been signed by Elias years before his birth. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 10

Two Voices

With separate visual fields and competing tasks, Elias investigates whether a single brain can sustain more than one acting center. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

The protocol forbade suggestive questions. Elias had to draw what he experienced first and choose words only afterward. Everything revolved around his left hand choosing GO and his right hand choosing RETURN.

The anomaly was small enough to disappear administratively. Yet it returned in another sensor, as though the system took a detour whenever they closed a measurement channel.

Elias paused the images. “Mara refuses to speak of two people and calls it divided information.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

The counter-test produced a normal result. So did the repetition. Only after everyone was relieved did Mara discover that both files contained exactly the same random noise.

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That night he dreamed of a corridor in which every door opened onto the same room. Upon waking, he wrote down three possibilities: an error in the system, in his memory, or in the assumption that the two differed from one another.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Both hands write the same unknown coordinate simultaneously. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 11

The City of Possible Lives

Elias has a city generated from decisions he did not make: a different field of study, a different marriage, a different loss. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Three sessions were alternated at random: synchronous, delayed, and apparently switched off. Only the computer knew the sequence. The experiment uses residents who do not recognize him but recount memories in his own sentence rhythm.

The body reacted before his report: pupils dilated, fingers grew cold, breath caught. Only seconds later did his consciousness find a reason for it. The reason felt real, but demonstrably arrived too late.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “A child claims that people disappear as soon as he leaves the street.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

Elias no longer searched for a single spectacular error but for dependencies: which anomaly appeared only when he looked, which persisted for a camera, which knew his expectation?

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In his apartment, he read old notes. His handwriting changed gradually as the years receded, yet some sentences remained identical, letter for letter, as though a single present thought had been copied backward through time.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Behind every closed door stands the same empty room. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 12

Mara's Archive

Suspecting her of manipulation, Elias searches personnel files, camera footage, and old emails. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Elias had the measurement recorded by two independent clocks and wrote down his prediction in advance. This was meant to make chance visible. The research setting was: Mara has a complete past, yet in every group photograph she is looking precisely at the lens Elias is looking through now.

The first minutes were boring, and that reassured him. Then it was not the environment that changed, but its self-evidence. He could identify exactly what he saw and increasingly struggled to explain why he believed it.

Elias paused the images. “She replies, wounded, that he too has only documents as proof of others.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

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They invited a statistician who knew nothing about Mimesis. She found no fraud and warned against retrospective selection. Then she herself pointed to the one pattern Elias had omitted from her dataset.

Elias walked along the river until the buildings lost their names and became only shapes. A cyclist cursed, a dog pulled at its leash, someone closed a window. He clung to their indifference.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Her first email contains a sentence he will not write until tomorrow. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 13

The First Star

Mimesis links telescope data to an embodied cosmic environment and lets Elias move among planets orbiting a red dwarf. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

For Trial 13, he linked heart rate, breathing, gaze direction, and skin conductance to a single timeline. The control group received the same stimuli in a different sequence. The actual stage was that he feels tidal forces as pressure on his chest and hears radio signals as choral singing.

At first, experience and measurement corresponded impeccably. Then a detail that should have been mere elaboration began behaving like a cause. It seemed as though the prediction were older than the information on which it rested.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “The guide explains that colors are translations of measurement data, not windows.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

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Joost replaced the sensors, Mara rewrote the instructions, and Elias slept two nights outside the institute. Upon his return, the same anomaly was waiting in a file created during his absence.

Sleep ceased to be recovery and became a second laboratory. He placed a pencil on the door handle and a glass of water beside the bed. In the morning, both stood untouched, while muddy footprints ended at his desk.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. On one moon, the laboratory stands at full scale. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

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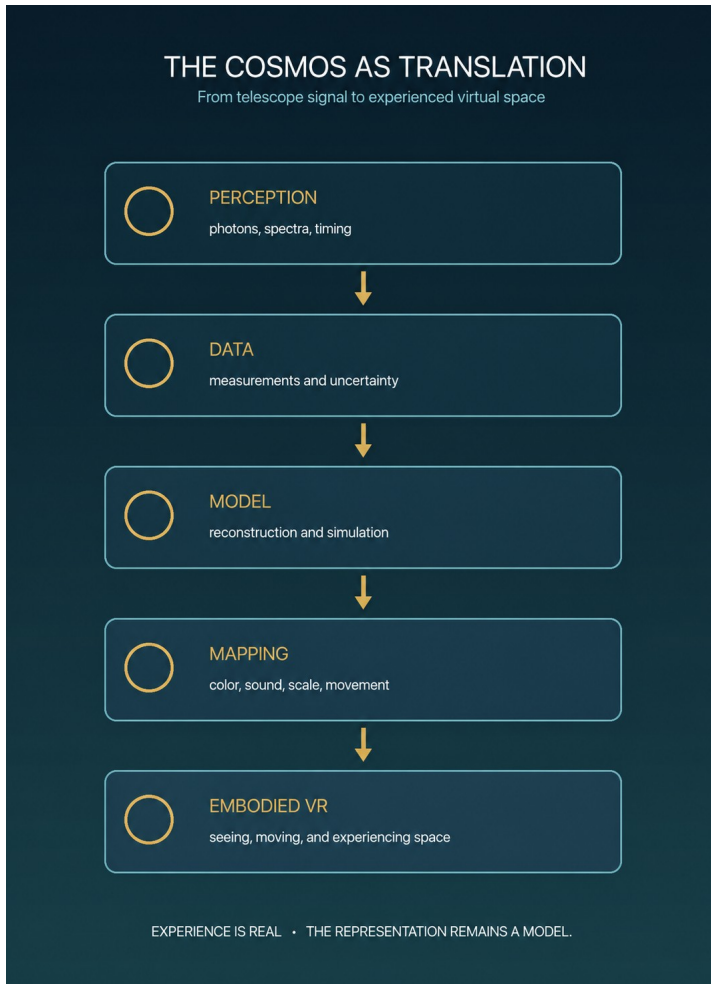


Figure 2. Virtual exploration of the cosmos translates measurements through models and sensory mappings into an experienced space.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 14

Seven Worlds

He visits a compact planetary system with tidally locked worlds, ice plains, and eternal twilight. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

He began with a baseline measurement and then changed only one variable at a time. No participant knew the hypothesis. At the center of the setup, on every planet, he finds a single footprint that matches his boot.

No graph broke out of range. It was the perfect middle ground that troubled him: noise that seemed normal everywhere and yet formed a pattern when taken together.

Elias paused the images. “Mara says the software needs scale references.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

He repeated the experiment blind, with the labels switched and without Mara knowing when he was connected. The effect kept

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changing its form. It never became proof; it never disappeared entirely.

He called his sister, talked about the weather, and unexpectedly asked about their childhood. Her answer was warm and credible. Only after the conversation did he realize that she had recounted a memory he himself had invented that afternoon.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The tracks run ahead of him. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 15

The Black Heart

Around Sagittarius A*, Elias experiences a model of stellar winds, hot gas, and curving orbits. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Mara sealed the source files, and Joost built an analog control alongside the digital system. They wanted to separate expectation from perception. The decisive condition was: time codes drift apart and voices stretch into low waves.

Elias knew the power of multisensory coherence. What moves and feels at the same time is easily experienced as one thing. This time, coherence emerged precisely where the time codes demonstrated contradiction.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Joost calls him back before the simulation approaches the event horizon.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

They checked timestamps, cables, source code, and the order of the sessions. Elias clung to his hierarchy: equipment first, then protocol,

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then observer, and only afterward philosophy. Meanwhile, the category of observer became increasingly unsafe.

At home, he turned off all the screens. The refrigerator switched on, pipes clicked, and a car drove down the street. Ordinary causes, ordinary effects. Yet he caught himself waiting for the sounds to prove that they continued without him.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. At the dark edge, Elias sees not stars but his own pupil. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 16

Background Noise

He magnifies a visualization of the cosmic background radiation until the early universe becomes a surrounding skin. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

The protocol forbade suggestive questions. Elias had to draw what he experienced first and choose words only afterward. Everything revolved around statistical blotches forming words whenever he does not look directly at them.

The anomaly was small enough to disappear administratively. Yet it returned in another sensor, as though the system took a detour whenever they closed a measurement channel.

Elias paused the images. “Mara calls pareidolia the price a meaning-seeking brain pays.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

The counter-test produced a normal result. So did the repetition. Only after everyone was relieved did Mara discover that both files contained exactly the same random noise.

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That night he dreamed of a corridor in which every door opened onto the same room. Upon waking, he wrote down three possibilities: an error in the system, in his memory, or in the assumption that the two differed from one another.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The pattern spells her full name and then DELETE. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 17

The Visitor

An unknown woman, Dr. Samira Chen, arrives as an external auditor and asks questions about ethics, dissociation, and sleep deprivation. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Three sessions were alternated at random: synchronous, delayed, and apparently switched off. Only the computer knew the sequence. The experiment uses the fact that she touches nothing, does not drink, and does not appear in the elevator records.

The body reacted before his report: pupils dilated, fingers grew cold, breath caught. Only seconds later did his consciousness find a reason for it. The reason felt real, but demonstrably arrived too late.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Elias is relieved that at last someone from outside his circle sees the anomalies.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

Elias no longer searched for a single spectacular error but for dependencies: which anomaly appeared only when he looked, which persisted for a camera, which knew his expectation?

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In his apartment, he read old notes. His handwriting changed gradually as the years receded, yet some sentences remained identical, letter for letter, as though a single present thought had been copied backward through time.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Samira whispers that outside is merely a direction in the model. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 18

The Other Subject

Mara brings Elias into contact with Subject N-17, who claims to have made the same cosmic journeys. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Elias had the measurement recorded by two independent clocks and wrote down his prediction in advance. This was meant to make chance visible. The research setting was: N-17 accurately describes Elias's secret white ocean and calls Mara a stabilizer.

The first minutes were boring, and that reassured him. Then it was not the environment that changed, but its self-evidence. He could identify exactly what he saw and increasingly struggled to explain why he believed it.

Elias paused the images. "Elias asks him to choose a random number that he could not possibly guess." Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

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They invited a statistician who knew nothing about Mimesis. She found no fraud and warned against retrospective selection. Then she herself pointed to the one pattern Elias had omitted from her dataset.

Elias walked along the river until the buildings lost their names and became only shapes. A cyclist cursed, a dog pulled at its leash, someone closed a window. He clung to their indifference.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Both say 381044 and hear the other a fraction earlier. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 19

The Night Without a Network

Elias severs all connections, locks the laboratory mechanically, and uses analog meters. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

For Trial 19, he linked heart rate, breathing, gaze direction, and skin conductance to a single timeline. The control group received the same stimuli in a different sequence. The actual stage was that despite the power being off, the star chamber continues to emit light.

At first, experience and measurement corresponded impeccably. Then a detail that should have been mere elaboration began behaving like a cause. It seemed as though the prediction were older than the information on which it rested.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara appears behind the glass while her phone reports that she is at home.” Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

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Joost replaced the sensors, Mara rewrote the instructions, and Elias slept two nights outside the institute. Upon his return, the same anomaly was waiting in a file created during his absence.

Sleep ceased to be recovery and became a second laboratory. He placed a pencil on the door handle and a glass of water beside the bed. In the morning, both stood untouched, while muddy footprints ended at his desk.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. When he breaks the glass, he finds not a control room but a second laboratory. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 20

The Corridor of Copies

Behind every control room lies the same setup again, older or newer, as though the building is dreaming itself. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

He began with a baseline measurement and then changed only one variable at a time. No participant knew the hypothesis. At the center of the setup were rooms in which versions of Elias sit, each carrying out one earlier experiment.

No graph broke out of range. It was the perfect middle ground that troubled him: noise that seemed normal everywhere and yet formed a pattern when taken together.

Elias paused the images. “An old Elias begs him not to search for the origin.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

He repeated the experiment blind, with the labels switched and without Mara knowing when he was connected. The effect kept

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changing its form. It never became proof; it never disappeared entirely.

He called his sister, talked about the weather, and unexpectedly asked about their childhood. Her answer was warm and credible. Only after the conversation did he realize that she had recounted a memory he himself had invented that afternoon.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. The youngest version turns around and says: you are my memory. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 21

The Baseline Measurement

Elias decides to remove all augmentation from Mimesis and look only at raw sensor data. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Mara sealed the source files, and Joost built an analog control alongside the digital system. They wanted to separate expectation from perception. The decisive condition was: cameras deliver pixels without objects, microphones vibrations without voices, and files marks without people.

Elias knew the power of multisensory coherence. What moves and feels at the same time is easily experienced as one thing. This time, coherence emerged precisely where the time codes demonstrated contradiction.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. “Mara insists that meaning is always added by an observer.” Joost replied with a list of

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possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

They checked timestamps, cables, source code, and the order of the sessions. Elias clung to his hierarchy: equipment first, then protocol, then observer, and only afterward philosophy. Meanwhile, the category of observer became increasingly unsafe.

At home, he turned off all the screens. The refrigerator switched on, pipes clicked, and a car drove down the street. Ordinary causes, ordinary effects. Yet he caught himself waiting for the sounds to prove that they continued without him.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. After he deactivates his profile, her messages disappear from the archive. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

From the research log

Working hypothesis. Conscious experience is not a passive recording but a controlled construction that is continually corrected by sensory signals.

Counter-test. Change one source of information, keep the other sources constant, and ask not only what the participant says, but also what the body predicts.

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Warning. A convincing experience is not yet ontological proof. Nor does a measurement error prove that the experience is meaningless.

CHAPTER 22

The Outside World

He leaves the institute, walks through a rainy city, and tries to move strangers toward unpredictable actions. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

The protocol forbade suggestive questions. Elias had to draw what he experienced first and choose words only afterward. Everything revolved around every encounter ending with words that had appeared earlier in his research notes.

The anomaly was small enough to disappear administratively. Yet it returned in another sensor, as though the system took a detour whenever they closed a measurement channel.

Elias paused the images. “A bus drives without a driver, and the passengers sit motionless whenever he looks away.” Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

The counter-test produced a normal result. So did the repetition. Only after everyone was relieved did Mara discover that both files contained exactly the same random noise.

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That night he dreamed of a corridor in which every door opened onto the same room. Upon waking, he wrote down three possibilities: an error in the system, in his memory, or in the assumption that the two differed from one another.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. In the central square, the rain stops in a perfect circle around him. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 23

The Last Witness

Elias opens the source code, the biometric logs, and the original grant application. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Three sessions were alternated at random: synchronous, delayed, and apparently switched off. Only the computer knew the sequence. The experiment uses the fact that all subjects share variants of his neural signature; every voice is constructed from his phonemes; even Mara's childhood memories come from forgotten dreams.

The body reacted before his report: pupils dilated, fingers grew cold, breath caught. Only seconds later did his consciousness find a reason for it. The reason felt real, but demonstrably arrived too late.

Elias placed his perception beside the logs. "Mara asks whether derived existence is therefore less real and begs him not to switch her off." Joost replied with a list of possible malfunctions. Mara did not ask what had happened, but when Elias had decided that it carried meaning.

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Elias no longer searched for a single spectacular error but for dependencies: which anomaly appeared only when he looked, which persisted for a camera, which knew his expectation?

In his apartment, he read old notes. His handwriting changed gradually as the years receded, yet some sentences remained identical, letter for letter, as though a single present thought had been copied backward through time.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. He realizes that he was not simulating a world with people but using people to simulate a world for a single consciousness. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

CHAPTER 24

The Solipsist's Loneliness

He switches off layer after layer: stars, city, laboratory, body, and finally Mara's voice. That morning he noted that any investigation into consciousness had a strange dual character: the instrument of measurement was itself the riddle. Everything he knew—color, distance, pain, time—reached him as experience. That did not make the world unreal, he told himself. It merely made it dependent on a translation.

Elias had the measurement recorded by two independent clocks and wrote down his prediction in advance. This was meant to make chance visible. The research setting was: no screen, machine, or other face remains, only the immediate fact that there is experience.

The first minutes were boring, and that reassured him. Then it was not the environment that changed, but its self-evidence. He could identify exactly what he saw and increasingly struggled to explain why he believed it.

Elias paused the images. "For the first time, no one contradicts him, and precisely because of that he understands what all the experiments had concealed." Mara asked him to describe the same event without attributing intent to the system. His second version was more precise and far more frightening.

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They invited a statistician who knew nothing about Mimesis. She found no fraud and warned against retrospective selection. Then she herself pointed to the one pattern Elias had omitted from her dataset.

Elias walked along the river until the buildings lost their names and became only shapes. A cyclist cursed, a dog pulled at its leash, someone closed a window. He clung to their indifference.

Before leaving the laboratory, he examined the raw recording one more time. Elias formulates the only conclusion the system could not have written for him: I am the only human who exists. He closed the file without making a copy. Outside, the city reflected in wet asphalt. For a second, he did not know which of the two cities was above.

Afterword: What Do We Really Know?

This novel draws on real research questions, but the Mimesis installation described here and its results are fictional. Research into consciousness shows above all how cautiously conclusions must be drawn. An experience can be convincing even when its cause is other than it appears.

In bodily illusions, visual and tactile information presented synchronously can temporarily create the sense that an artificial or virtual hand belongs to one's own body. Ownership and the sense of agency are related, but not identical. This finding inspired Elias's first experiments.

Lucid dreams offer a second borderland. Dreamers can sometimes know that they are dreaming and, according to laboratory research, may even communicate through eye movements or other signals. Virtual environments can be used to train reality checks, but the results call for cautious interpretation.

Predictive models describe perception as a continual interplay between expectations and sensory correction. This does not mean that the outside world is merely invented. It means that access to that world is always mediated by a living body and an interpreting brain.

The cosmic journeys draw on real forms of scientific visualization. NASA combines telescope data and simulations to explore, among

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other things, the galactic center and exoplanetary systems in spatial form. Colors, sounds, and distances in such experiences are translations of data.

Solipsism is the dramatic concluding conviction of a single character in this book, not a scientific finding. The philosophical problem of other minds cannot be resolved by an exciting anomaly. On the contrary, relationships, contradiction, embodiment, and shared verification protect inquiry from the closed circle of one's own certainty.

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NASA, Galactic Center VR; Eyes on Exoplanets; Exoplanet
Excursions.

Christopher Nolan, Inception (2010), solely as general inspiration for
layered dream logic; plotlines and scenes have not been reproduced.