Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Virtual Immersivity: some semiotic issues

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Abstract. In this essay, some theoretical semiotic issues concerning immersive technologies are presented and discussed. In particular, the somatic and corporeal dimensions of the construction of the user-visual hybrid, the problematic of point of view and realism, and the narrativity inscribed in immersive technologies will be discussed. The objective is twofold: tracing the semiotic perspective on the real/virtual relationship and questioning certain rhetoric of immersivity that underlies precise ideologies circulating in the contemporary imagery.

Keywords: semiotics, point of view, hybrids, realism, storytelling.

1. THE PLACE OF VIRTUALITY

As is well known, technologies, media and digital environments that constitute *extended reality* have developed at an uneven rate and diffusion. Originally presented as revolutionary in the 1980s-90s, immersive devices of various types have enjoyed moments of enthusiasm and high sales volume (such as the affordably priced *Oculus* visor available on the market since 2016 – now *Meta Quest 2*) and have become widely established in some sectors (gaming, professional training, design, cinema, cultural heritage, tourism), but have also suffered several slowdowns and produced quite a few disappointments (consider, for instance, two historically distant examples of commercial failures: the *Power Glove* for Nintendo, from the Eighties, used for the first experiments in virtual haptics, and the *Google Glass* for mixed reality, one of the most famous smart glasses[1]) .

This fluctuating trend of immersive devices, only partially due to the technology itself and its cost, is mostly related to the cultural meaning of immersive technology, of the experience it incorporates

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[1] For an in-depth examination of the story of Google Glass, see Eugeni (2021). On the Power Glove see the story of its designer, Jaron Lanier, also founder of the first commercial VR company (*Dawn of the New Everything*, 2017).

and enables. When is it used? To do what? Why would one buy a visor, for example, if one is not a gaming enthusiast? Since the 1980s, VR has always seemed to be on the verge of exploding in terms of success, but has experienced ups and downs without yet achieving widespread use. That is, without being compared to a smartphone or other smart objects such as Amazon's Alexa home devices (on which see Finocchi, Perri, Peverini [2020]; Peverini [2021], [2023]) or other digital body-contact devices, such as smartwatches. The Meta Quest 2 visors, as affordable mid-range devices, were designed precisely to make VR an economically accessible experience.

However, Meta's latest product, the *Quest Pro*, launched in 2022 (a visor with professional market positioning), is a visor for mixed reality. This should not be surprising: due to the difficulties in integrating the VR itself, it has been supplemented by the possibility of enjoying augmented reality content. Moreover, the design of the *Quest Pro* visor is more streamlined than common visors and looks more like a pair of large glasses. *Quest pro*'s is a sort of negative identity. It allows us to presuppose something about the value of immersivity itself, about the social and cultural meanings of this type of technologies and their use. There are marketing issues involved of course, but it seems to be more a matter of cultural acceptance that is related to the role these immersive devices play within the system of collective and social uses.

This kind of phenomena raises a series of interesting theoretical problems that have been discussed in the field of Aesthetics (Dalpozzo, Negri, Novaga [2018]; Pinotti [2021]; Montani [2022]) and with some specific issues that regard Semiotics: the dimension of corporeity and perception, the enunciative configuration and the transformation of the point of view, but also the narrative dimension involved in these technologies and their experiences. These are all aspects that concern both a general reasoning on immersivity and a reflection on the cultural role of the technical devices that shape it. Our aim here is to highlight some of the issues related to immersive

technologies that are relevant for semiotic study[2] as well as underline the theoretical challenges this type of technology poses to the science of signification and the research paths still worth pursuing.

2. REAL/VIRTUAL

The theoretical framework and the battery of analytical tools of Greimasian semiotics enable us to grasp the issue of virtual reality both on the level of visual semiotics (the notion of figurativity, plastic semiotics, the problem of iconism for example[3]) but also on that, perhaps even more pertinent, of the construction of a narrative and discursive dimension[4] of virtual immersivity.

The starting point of a semiotic approach to virtuality is non-essentialist comes from the idea that what is real and what is virtual is mutually constituted, not an *a priori* conceptualization. From this perspective, virtuality and reality are *effects of meaning*, which is to say that they are the results of complex meaning-making processes. They form a semantic category that, in turn, is connected with and articulated by the organization of other categories, equally considered as discursive effects: *continuity/discontinuity*, *inside/outside*, *natural/artificial*, to name but a few.

For instance, the inside/outside relationship is generally strictly separated in the most immersive devices, but this separation does not necessarily always work perfectly. In some cases, while I am virtually visiting an archaeological site entirely digitally reconstructed and walking around a tem-

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[2] Recent studies on semiotics of digital and extended reality are: Pezzini and Spaziante (2014); Finocchi (2016); Del Marco and Mazzucchelli (2018); Biggio, Dos Santos, Giuliana (2020); Eugeni (2021); Peverini (2021); Ventura Bordenca (2021).

[3] On VR as hyper-iconism, Volli (2020).

[4] For a general introduction to the main theoretical principles of Greimasian perspective as especially practiced in Italy, see, among others, Fabbri (1998) (on the discursive turn of Semiotics); Fabbri, Mangano (2012) (for a general recognition of the most significant scholars in the field of structuralist Semiotics); Marrone (2022) (on the metholodogical model of textuality).

ple, perhaps listening to the audio description of the place where I am, I may still hear the noises around me perfectly well, unless the visor is equipped with headphones. Just think of the touristic virtual tours that allow one to walk along the streets of a city wearing a visor so that what one can see and hear the medieval version of the city, for example, in the visor and that may clash with the urban environment around (noise, cars, traffic, dangers of the road). The differences between real/virtual-inside/outside are mostly dysphoric and strongly influence the general touristic experience (see the case shown by D'Aloia [2020]).

Just think of the new HTC visor called *Flow* is designed explicitly for mindfulness. It is a visor for meditation and relaxation, thanks to which it is possible to take one's mind away from the stress of everyday life, using meditation, breathing and yoga apps, which are good for relaxing or falling asleep at night, not having distractions, and so on. Again, the relationship between inside and outside, between virtual and real, is potentially conflicting: if the external environment is not well organised, calm and relaxed, it will not be possible to relax with an app that takes us to a desert island or in front of a calming waterfall. Namely, the external setting is part of the immersive experience itself and the relationships between what is around and what is inside are integrally connected.

This is, for example, the reason why visors provide for the creation of a virtual control grid, which warns the user of possible obstacles: walls, televisions, bookcases, and any furniture in the house as potential obstacles to the smooth unfolding of the immersive experience. Immersivity bases its assumptions in the *de-semantization* and *re-semantization* of the external space, so that the *real* must somehow switch off, or at least temporarily narcotize its previous meanings, in order to let the *virtual* work. It is in this sense that semiotics poses the problem of reality: not as something that exists in opposition to something that does not exist (the virtual), but as an effect of meaning of specific configurations that are based on different relations between what is built as real and what is built as virtual.

Hybrids

In order to talk about virtual immersivity, the constitution of a specific configuration of usage (the user and the visor, or the smartphone in the case of augmented reality) should be considered.

From this point of view, Latourian considerations on *hybrids*, on human and non-human concatenations and on all-modern forms of separation between cultural and natural, artificial and human (Latour [1991], [1993], [1999]) may be useful for research on extended reality. The semiotics of technology and design, in fact, opens up to a potentially fruitful research horizon on these topics[5]. The notion of *hybrid* as used by Latour especially at the beginning of his reflections on modernity, from the field of everyday life objects and from scientific research tools, extended to the field of immersive technologies allows us, among other things, to break down the aprioristic opposition between human and non-human and to think of the subject equipped with VR supports as a *new actant*: endowed with *other skills* and perhaps also *other wills*. As is well known, starting from the assumption that society has nothing human in it but is an assemblage, a continuous chaining of heterogeneous actors over which *agency* is distributed, and that only in modernity this continuous hybridisation has been denied and purified by placing humans on one side and non-humans, things, objects, natural elements etc. on the other, Latour starts from philosophical and anthropological positions that are profoundly anti-essentialist and irreductionist. They are not based upon an ontological distinction between things and persons, nature and culture but upon what happens in the relationship and what it does. Semiotics, after all, has been one of the most important epistemological approaches to the development of Actor-Network Theory. All the work Latour has done on science, innovation and techniques is a

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[5] For recent research on smart objects, see Finocchi, Perri, Peverini (2020). On the integration of Bruno Latour's studies on design and objects in the semiotic field, see Landowski and Marrone (2002); Mangano (2009); Mattozzi (2006); Latour (2021); Peverini (2023).

key point of reference for reasoning on the user-technology relationship. Semiotics, especially the semiotics of design and technology, has made extensive reference to it. In particular, with respect to the viewer/user relationship, the question, as Latour also poses it, concerns what happens in the relationship between the two actors and what is transformed, what new actant comes into play.

The notion of technological hybrid thus conceived could be enriched with a reasoning of the semiotics of the sensible and the corporeal, because it is precisely the body that plays a central role in these dynamics: the relationship of continuity or discontinuity between what one sees and hears in the visor and what happens around is in fact primarily a question of corporeal perception. In one of the earliest critical works on virtuality, Maldonado (1992) writes that virtual reality technologies, rather than dematerialising reality, produce a continuous need for it. VR experiences are based on the problem of how to translate body perception and movement.

While problems relating to *proprioception* and the idea of the *somatic chiasma* of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology arise and are constantly stressed and tested in immersive technologies, there is also the question of the emergence of a different kind of corporeity when wearing a visor. The relationship with the environment is redefined (the re-semantization of the external space which we have mentioned, but also the possible inclusion/exclusion of other persons, etc.) that creates and at the same time presupposes a certain type of user-visual actant with a specific body.

Looking closely at the visors may help in understanding the functioning of the real/virtual relation because it is precisely the characteristics of use of a specific device that makes it possible to define a certain experience and thus a specific somatic solicitation of the subject, a peculiar form of embodiment of immersivity.

For example, wearing a device that makes the vision of outside from inside impossible (strongly visually separating the most the immersive experience from the surroundings) is very different from wearing a visor that makes it easy to switch from one reality to the other, for instance by quickly lifting the headset. With most visors, once worn, it is no longer possible to visually interact with what is outside: apart from the initial few seconds in which the control area is prepared and the user can see the space around through the visor's cameras, during the VR session, in order to look around, the visor needs to be removed or at least lifted up, with the effect, however, of suspending what one was doing in virtual. It is clear that these types of devices strongly mark a sense *discontinuity*. Other devices instead are designed to create a sense of *non-discontinuity*: for instance, the HTC *Vive Cosmos* visor whose headset can be raised and lowered, making the user able to see and thus defining a freer idea of user. It is probably in order to create a fluid relationship between inside and outside that the Meta *Quest Pro*, which we spoke about at the beginning, aims to integrate the possibility of working in augmented reality, emphasising *non-discontinuity*, which is also underlined by the fact that the visor leaves the sides and the lower part uncovered. The user is immersed into the experience, but without drowning in it. The integration of AR and the design of the object is quite distant from the idea of mask, typical of visors, and seems to suggest a different relationship with the outside world. Moreover, the *Quest Pro* is designed to make it possible to add covers to the sides and bottom of the visor, to increase the effect of closure and isolation, thus in fact tuning the relation with the outside (in this case moving forward an opposite effect of *non-continuity*).

So, reasoning about virtual reality experiences can be possible by considering the dimension of use, the type of hybrid that is produced and the way in which the user-visor defines a precise relationship between real and virtual, by differently articulating inside and outside. Real and virtual are products of meaning, outcomes of complex configurations that relate objects, design, bodies, spaces and digital data.

Excesses of reality and meta-representation

Another issue Semiotics has begun to question is the relationship between immersivity and

the *reality effect*. If I use an AR app to visualize the future kitchen in the space of my flat or the Sephora app to try on a lipstick on my face, even though it is not a situation of immersion, but of superimposition on something pre-existing (the flat, my face), I will not have a less real effect, even though the distinction between the virtual and the physical image is well perceived and clear. It is in the specific and different situation, in what I expect from digital technology, that the relationship between physical and virtual, real and digital arises. Such considerations prevent one from associating the most sophisticated technology with the best result in terms of reality effect and immersivity. They are two different concepts. It is possible to experience reality effect, in the sense of Barthes, without immersivity (reading a novel or newspaper article, listening to a story) and immersivity without reality effect (e.g., in a totally abstract VR experience). In the second context, of course, the creation of the sense of illusion of presence is necessary, the perception of "being there". The first cinema, after all, was a highly immersive experience for the spectators of the time. Often in VR these two effects overlap in order to create a highly spectacular experience where one 'really' feels there, through very sophisticated realistic effects that astonish the user.

Some touristic and art VR apps reproduce (sometimes by photogrammetry) places of the world in hyper-realistic detail: art galleries, museums, natural parks, cities, archaeological sites, temples, and so on, all places that one can visit from the comfort of one's own home. This is the marketing idea behind these kinds of digital proposals (some of which were launched during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions). The main idea of these experiences is the extreme visual realism of the scenes: a realism so vivid and perfect, both outdoor environments or indoor spaces, the canyons of a US nature park or the halls of a museum, that it overflows in many cases into a hyper-realism typical of *trompe l'oeil*. Nothing new, in some respects: Calabrese (2011) writes that the reality effect and presence of trompe-l'oeil images is constitutive of the feelings of admiration and

wonder that the subject feels when in front of images that seem so real.

Detailed surfaces reproducing porosity, hardness, glossiness or softness, the use of lights designed to look as realistic as possible, shadow zones that stimulate a haptic gaze, materials and textures that invite one to get closer, objects in projection that stimulate one's grip: the functioning of hyper-realistic VR is that of an exercise, an exhibition of virtuosity. Something that, according to Kubovy's taxonomy (1986), lies somewhere between the trompe l'oeil of which one is aware and those which deny their identity as images in relation to the image to which they belong (such as Antonello da Messina's painted tags), and those in which, so to speak, one falls into, which are not perceived as images (cf. Pinotti [2021])

Again Calabrese (2006), analysing of Sànchez-Cotàn's *bodegòn*, speaks of them in terms, not of metaphysic works, but of paintings in which the artistic skill of making it seem real is exhibited. A *poetics of imitation* that was associated with its apparent opposite: the *poetics of dissimulation*, with the painting appearing to be self-made by removing the traces of Enunciation[6]. This is what virtuosity is all about: doing very difficult things

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[6] Enunciation in Semiotics is the process presupposed in the creation of any utterance, which in contemporary semiotic theory is not only linguistic but any product endowed with human and social meaning. The theory of Enunciation was developed by the linguist Benveniste and integrated by A. J. Greimas into a general semiotic theory as an intermediate level in the generation of meaning, between deep and abstract narrative structures, and the production of discourse, made up of actors, times, spaces, and specific figures and themes. In Benveniste's theory, the utterance is the place where subjectivity and intersubjectivity are founded, because by posing the categories of the speaking subject, of the space and time of discourse, the relationship between the 'I' and the 'you', between the simulacrum of the instance of discourse production (the Enunciator) and that of reception (the Enunciatee), is defined. Thus, in an experience of VR, the Enunciatee is the way in which the user is inscribed in the mode of use of the app itself, in what it is possible for them to do or not to do, in the levels of freedom or prohibitions of the gaze and so on.

with perfect nonchalance, concealing the effort behind them. «To be effective, trompe-l'oeil must be based on very sophisticated artifices, but the artifice must not be seen» (Calabrese [2011]: 17).

Unlike trompe l'oeil, however, in many hyper-realist VR apps, especially those for art and tourism, there is no irony, no playfulness of artifice (Braudillard [2014]). On the contrary, there is a spasmodic search for the perfect *mimesis*. Because, especially in apps concerning historical and artistic reconstruction, the idea is precisely to achieve authenticity through digital artifice itself. The Enunciatee must be surprised by the degree of perfection. The consequence, in many cases, is to create a realistic hallucination, the hallucinating 'similarity of the real to itself' (what Baudrillard affirms about hyperrealism in art): an excessive reality that becomes anti-reality, as in trompe-l'oeil.

Marin, in *Représentation et simulacre* (1978), writes that on the one hand the trompe-l'oeil falls within the sphere of mimesis but that, due to the excess of submission to the represented thing, it ends up producing not an effect of transparency but of opacity, of the presentation of a *double*: a mimesis in excess, which is the limit of representation.

What then is the point of these kinds of virtual experiences? The exhibition of technological expertise, that is, the exaltation of the technology itself, an all-self-referential work of immersive technology. It is not VR that portrays reality, but VR that talks about itself, that makes a kind of *meta*-discourse about technology, about its possibilities, and about the capacity of virtuality to create a believable simulacrum of reality. With the risk of the "self-referential closure" of virtual reality already that had been highlighted by Maldonado (1992): when the immersive experience is pure experimentation with the perceptual potential of technology.

3. POINTS OF VIEW AND PATHEMIC EFFECTS

In the mechanism of the construction of the effect of reality, the inscription of the type of gaze plays a central role. What changes if the installed gaze is a wide, zenithal point of view or if it is a close, focused gaze? Is there a form of direct involvement or is the user basically a spectator? A few examples will help to clarify. In 2020, Prada launched *Prada Virtual Reality*, a 360° VR video experience, inaugurated for the spring/summer 2020 fashion collection released therefore in the midst of the pandemic lockdown, and continued in 2021 as "an innovative way to experience its universe in the first person: an intense and immersive journey that stimulates the senses and arouses emotions, breaks down barriers and overcomes distances, to recreate a relationship that is both familiar and radically different," one can read on the Prada VR website[7]. Once again, the central issue is that of the body, of involvement, of closeness. How is this effect of closeness and presence created? Semiotics can examine this dimension by calling into question how the dimension of Enunciation is articulated and the relationship created between the subjects of this Enunciation, the Enunciator and the Enunciatee[8]. In the case of Prada VR, it is very clear: the journey through

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[8] The enunciative specificities of extended reality technologies were discussed by Paolucci (2020). Eugeni and Catricalà (2020) have connected the different technological devices of extended reality, and their respective enunciative configurations, with different types of *presence* as the concept has been elaborated by Fontanille and Zilberberg (1998): that is, the result of the relation between the categories of tonic/atone (with respect to the possibility of grasping an object or not) and orientation/grasping (*visée/saisie*) (with respect to the subject's perceptual predisposition, as oriented toward an object or as a simple prehension). Eugeni and Catricalà identify different degrees of presence for as distinguished by Fontanille and Zilberberg (Emptiness, Inanity, Lack, Fullness): for example, at one pole of this scale, one finds classical media such as cinema that presuppose an Enunciatee who is neither an active part of the media product (atony) nor can come into contact with the object (emptiness); while at the opposite pole there are totally immersive media that not only let one enter inside the narrative (tonicity) but also allow one to modify it, generating an effect of complete presence on the part of the subject (fullness).

Prada's backstage and fashion shows takes place subjectively, it begins with someone taking us by the hand and, unlike at an in-site fashion show, the models look us in the eye, very often individually. We are not at the sides of the catwalk, we are the culmination of the catwalk: the model comes out of the wings and walks towards us, looking at us (often taking off sunglasses to do so). There is subjective engagement that is not a novelty invented by VR, but that works in opposition to the usual fashion catwalks of the ordinary world. There is an underlying ideology in these projects: such a subjective discourse is in itself more engaging, memorable and positive. In addition to this aspect, there is that of what we might call the 'extra' content (what used to be part of the 'special content' on DVDs): extradiegetic material that in principle should enrich what we are seeing or have just seen. These are precisely the backstage scenes: Prada VR takes you to the ateliers, to Prada shops around the world, to the spaces that host initiatives and exhibitions, as well as to "actively touch and explore" (so it says on the Prada VR website) the garments in the collection.

The case of *Dior Eyes VR* was different. Created back in 2015, the headset (branded Dior) allowed a peek into the backstage preparation and makeup of the models: no subjective interpellation, just an eye with a 360° view of what was happening behind the scenes.

In fact, the enunciative dimension not only allows us to distinguish different communicative strategies, subjectifying and objectifying, with the transitions from one to the other, but also helps us to go beyond what is commonly and simplistically defined as user involvement. It is the complex issue of point of view. In immersive realities, the frame is missing (Pinotti [2021]) because, whether it is a 360° video in which the subject cannot act or a VR app that allows action, the point of view, in VR in particular, changes completely compared to other visual media. Even though, as Pinotti notes, there is always some kind of framing procedure, which in the case of virtual reality is a temporal one (e.g. the moment when the visor is put on, when it is switched on, etc.), there is no doubt

that immersive technologies completely change the way in which the point of view is set up. The possibilities of the gaze as shown above in section 2. 1, with just the design of the visor itself, can make possible a continuity with the surrounding environment (and thus an adjustment of the frame becoming fluid) or a clear break with reality (and thus an appearance or disappearance of the temporal limits of the VR experience). Despite this fluidity, it is possible to identify forms of articulation of this point of view for instance in its figurativisation: is it internal or external? Is it represented in the form of an avatar or is it non-figurative? And what is the part of the avatar? What position does it have in relation to the whole scene? In Prada VR, the frontality is total: the models look us in the eyes. In Dior, not only the point of view is external and in the third person, but it is slightly elevated in relation to the scene and thus seems to place the Enunciatee in a position of supervision and control which clearly accentuates the effect of spying and being where one should not (behind the scenes).

It also raises the cognitive question of knowledge flows and regimes of seeing: is it possible to see everything in a given VR app? And what, instead, is not allowed to be seen?

Not to mention the pathemic consequences. It is commonly though that immersive technologies are more engaging, stimulate empathy and make us feel 'inside' things. There is a passionate dimension that semiotics can still explore. It remains an untracked field at present, but is central to the discourse of immersivity. Not only is the body called into question, but all the pathemic effects of immersion, in its various degrees, must be considered. It is by no means a euphoric feeling to find oneself at the end of the Prada catwalk, as the model comes towards us and stares at us, in a completely empty space, with no other guests and no photographers, influencers or other fashion stars. And what kind of passionate predisposition triggers such an enunciative device? The questions may be numerous: how does immersivity generate a certain emotive disposition? Is there a specificity of the immersed viewpoint on a pathemic level

compared to other media experiences? This is one of the challenges for the semiotics of digital technologies. This goes in the direction of overcoming that rhetoric of empathy that Pinotti (2021) critiques (for instance in the ideological discourse around some non-fiction VR products such as documentaries about refugees, war, poverty).

The point is to articulate the general idea that VR produces 'empathy', understanding what passion we are talking about specifically and how it is set in motion by the specific semiotic device[9]. As is the case with the use of passion in social and non-profit communication (Peverini, Spalletta [2009]) or dissuasive marketing (violent or bloody images on cigarette packets, for example), dysphoric passions (fear, anguish, anxiety, etc.) are not effective or ineffective alone, but depend on the specific discursive configuration and narrative structure.

4. BEYOND STORYTELLING

Another ideological rhetoric of VR is that of so-called storytelling. Digital technologies make it possible to *tell* something that could not be told before, or to do it differently. Reliving the past (as in virtual tourism tours), making a painting speak (as in virtual app of exhibitions or museums), animating an archaeological site or a shop window (as in Zara AR, an app for the integration of online and physical shopping with which, by pointing the smartphone at selected shops, models wearing the brand's collections appear).

Something static is set in motion and a storytelling made possible by digital technology begins.

This conception of storytelling is very distant from semiotics' idea of narrativity because it is based on a limited idea: that of a communication process, predominantly verbal, in which there is a subject - a brand, an institution, an association - that decides to start talking to its audience and to do so using forms that are not necessarily those of traditional advertising. The idea is to "humanize" the sender and "involve" the listener.

For semiotics, storytelling is always there: it is not a story in the common sense, it is not always voluntarily produced, and not exclusively with anthropomorphic actors as protagonists, because it is rather *a model* for understanding human and cultural meaning. It is *narrativity* which does not coincide with narration in the strict sense (a film, a story, a VR tour). There is narrativity even when an institution or a brand does not do the so-called storytelling but performs actions in its field of activity, and there is narrativity in advertising campaigns that semiotics analyses as stories, even before the current fashion for storytelling.

It is not animating something static that carries with it the idea of narrativity, but it is generating value, creating an objective, a trajectory to be followed to reach a goal. Otherwise, the experience of the virtual, in some fields, will be exhausted once its technological novelty is experienced. From this point of view, consider the Zara's app that allows the visualization of models in the shop. In which story does it fit? Is the animation of the archaeological site an objective, in itself producing a narrative transformation? Is a distant voice that we listen to while walking around a city with visor enough to generate storytelling? And why don't virtual supermarkets work, or at least not yet? Is augmented reality in itself a value?

If the AR app serves, for example, to help me in the choice of the most suitable make-up for my face, to visualize the sofa in a specific colour and fabric in my living room, to simulate the fitting of a dress on my body in front of the mirror, it acquires a sense, but if it instead activates the animation of the Zara shop window it is not necessarily a valuable tool. Similar reasoning happens with a virtual grocery: once you have experienced what it is like to walk around a supermarket in VR, why would you need to do it again when there are delivery apps (web and AR) that perform the same task? Returning to the case of virtual tourism: if there is a strong dissonance between the experience with the visors and the physical outside in the city, how should the virtual tourism experience itself take

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[9] On the theory of semiotic of passion see Fabbri, Sbisà (1985); Greimas, Fontanille (1991).

on a positive value? Might it not have dysphoric effects on the reality around it (annoyance, fear, misunderstanding)? The urban environment could be perceived as an obstacle to virtual fruition and vice versa. A clash, rather than a happy integration of mixed reality.

This is not to say that the use of immersive apps only makes sense when it has some utility, but that what makes it valuable is the narrative path in which it is embedded and not the technology itself. For example, consider the case of packaging, a sector in which brands are experimenting a lot with AR apps. Here, one can clearly distinguish a utilitarian use (hence the construction of the AR app as an Object of Utilitarian Value) when apps allow for a quantitative extension of the information of the labels: thanks to AR, the packaging, which has a limited physical space, can expand by increasing what it already does, i.e., inform about the product. These apps, by increasing the information about the product, create a user with a *want-to-know*, or that wants to know *more*. There are cases in which with AR packaging takes on functions it usually does not have: cans that move and transform, tins from which avatars, characters or other animated figures appear around, boxes from which filters can be generated to be relaunched on social media - a denial of utilitarianism, in favour of a completely playful enhancement of the experience itself, which overturns packaging as an object of use and information and makes it part of a broader brand discourse.

On the other hand, some consider the ability to produce emotions as the main strength of VR, rather than its ability to narrate. In this context, the heart of the immersive experience is not the story itself but what the viewer feels emotionally and feels physically. For semiotics, this distinction is not relevant, as the relationship between the pathemic and pragmatic dimensions is always present. There may be situations in which one prevails over the other, but there is no opposition between actions and passions, as actions can generate passions and conversely passions can produce consequent actions.

5. IN CONCLUSION: AGAINST THE RHETORIC OF IMMERSIVE MEDIA

I would like to conclude by emphasising how one of the tasks of semiotics and contemporary language studies is to demystify certain rhetoric circulating in our imagination on the relationship between real and virtual, physical and immersive spaces. More specifically, this essay has attempted to question at least three common ways of understanding this relationship. The first is that of the rhetoric of technology as an end in itself: the idea that the spasmodic search for the latest technology, applied to art, cultural heritage, branding, is in itself a choice of value, a form of progress. This is not always the case, and the lack of success of some large companies' investments in VR testifies to this, along with, as seen in the part of this essay devoted to the problem of hyperrealism, the imposition of a type of immersive experience of extreme realism that serves, after all, to exhibit technological expertise as an end in itself. The second rhetoric is that of the memorability and affective involvement that VR and AR devices would allow with respect to other languages (static visual, verbal, etc.) and that should not be considered per se but as the effect of complex strategies of the general configuration of a certain experience (see the difference between Prada and Dior mentioned above), of the enunciative situation installed and so on. The third rhetoric concerns the narrative dimension which, as mentioned above, does not only concern the dynamism made possible by these technologies and the user's ability to act, but the more specifically transformative dimension of meaning that is - or is not - brought into play.

In conclusion, let us consider what Maldonado (1992) writes about the virtual as a synonym for *illusory*: it is not a technological innovation but an all-human constant, Maldonado argues, which is the capacity to create, imagine and realize illusory worlds to believe in, not intended as false, but as something very close to Eco's (1979) *possible worlds*. For a semiotic analysis of the virtual to be central is not the opposition with reality, but the question of semiotic *efficacy* (Fabbri 2017). That

is, the capacity, inherent in signification, whatever its expressive language, to act, to make believe, to transform.

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