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Foreword

Going Virtual – But How? Mapping Virtualities in Contemporary Technoculture

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Abstract. The increased availability and usage of immersive devices, together with futuristic narratives promoted by technology and media “gurus” and entrepreneurs, has encouraged a strong revival of the notion of virtuality. At first sight, this notion appears straightforward, and its application clearly connected to specific objects and phenomena of our time. On closer inspection, however, confusion starts to arise. The concept of virtuality is still in need of in-depth critical examination. The challenge is not much solving highly specific thematic or terminological matters; but rather addressing them while considering their wider frame and background, so that the richness of the virtual is not neglected or depleted. This issue of *Aisthesis* aims at providing the ground precisely for such an attempt, by gathering contributions with multifarious angles and scope, yet unified by the awareness of the intricacies of “going virtual” today.

Keywords: virtuality, immersivity, technoculture, digital culture, embodiment, interaction.

The increased availability and usage of immersive devices, together with futuristic narratives promoted by technology and media “gurus” and entrepreneurs, has stimulated a strong revival of the notion of virtuality. At first sight, this notion appears straightforward, and its application clearly connected to specific objects and phenomena of our time. On closer inspection, however, confusion starts to arise.

To begin with, the class of today’s technologies with which virtuality ought to be associated is actually far from well-defined. Should this class comprise immersive devices only, i.e. headsets and CAVE systems, so that the scope of the discourse is limited to virtual *reality*? This, however, would not explain why we often evoke the virtual to describe a desktop videoconference, an online 2D shop, cryptocurrency, and so on. But also, and much more problematically, this would neglect the key fact that virtuality, as a con-

cept, abundantly precedes the advent of any type of virtual *technology*.

Indeed, well before its recent resemantization, the virtual has been historically employed, in the philosophical debate, to identify an ontological category, often in a complex relation with cognate yet distinct categories such as real, actual, and potential. Dating back at least to Aristotle, the discussion surrounding virtuality so conceived has spanned the centuries, animating not only ontology but epistemology as well: one may recall, in this regard, how Leibniz recurred to the notion of virtuality to argue, against the empiricists and Locke in particular, that ideas are innate yet not necessarily manifest in our mind.

The first conceptualizations establishing a connection between the virtual and technology emerged during the last century, predominantly in France (one may think of authors like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Pierre Lévy, Philippe Quéau). In this context, the virtual started to be perceived as possibly dangerous, as the increasing virtualisation of several aspects of contemporary life was seen to promote forms of simulation and derealisation.

The most recent strains of the debate, both in analytical (David Chalmers) and continental philosophy (Grant Tavinor), go back to unanswered questions from the past, which can only become even more challenging as the bond between the virtual and the technological domain has become indissoluble. How does the virtual, for instance, relate to the *digital*? Are its traditional philosophical accounts still valid for analysing what the virtual has become today?

Based on these premises, it is evident that the concept of virtuality is still in need of in-depth critical examination. The challenge, however, is not much solving highly specific thematic or terminological matters; but rather addressing them while taking into account their wider frame and background, so that the richness of the virtual is not neglected or depleted again.

This issue of *Aisthesis* aims at providing the ground precisely for such an attempt, by gathering contributions with multifarious angles and scope,

yet unified by the awareness of the intricacies of “going virtual” today.

The issue immediately brings to the core of the debate on the ontology of the virtual by presenting contrasting approaches to it.

On the one hand, Andrea Colombo and Floriana Ferro propose a definition of the virtual that draws from Deleuze’s and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts. More in detail, the former’s idea of immanence and the latter’s notion of flesh are employed in order to capture virtuality in a way that is meant to embrace both the latest technological developments, and the analog world.

Francesca Perotto expresses a different standpoint with regard to Deleuze specifically. In Perotto’s view, though the French author has become a key reference in the current discussion on virtual technologies, his concepts did not originally apply to them and thus should be left aside in today’s debate on this specific topic.

Combining ontological with phenomenological concerns, Nicolas Bilchi addresses critically the widespread idea of a fundamental isomorphism between virtual and physical environments. Bilchi’s alternative account, based among others on Gibson’s ecology of perception, stresses that virtual environments, different from concrete ones, only afford predetermined possibilities of interactions, which in turn reduce the chances of feeling fully immersed in them.

Interactivity and immersivity lie at the heart of the two following articles.

Lorenzo Manera focusses on interactive *art*. After discussing its connections with media and digital art, as well as participatory media, the author examines the very recent issue of text-to-image technologies. These are presented as the possible source of a new form of creativity, rooted specifically in human interaction with artificial intelligence.

On the other hand, Ilaria Ventura Bordenca takes immersivity as the departure point for examining different aspects of virtual *reality* from the methodological angle of semiotics. Among other issues, the author draws attention to the ways immersive technologies affect the enunciative con-

figuration of the point of view, enhance particular forms of narration and storytelling, but also involve the users' corporeality.

The body is the core object of Philippe Bédard's reflection. In the author's view, contrary to those who lament its disappearance, the user's physical body remains a critical component of any experience of virtual reality. Even though we often cannot see it, we still can perceive it, which gives rise to a hybrid regime in which the body and its physical reality serve to *augment* virtual reality.

With Veronica Cohen, Ariela Battán Horenstein, and María Clara Garavito's article, the focus moves from individual corporeality to *inter-corporeality*. By adopting a phenomenological standpoint, the authors discuss in particular the experience of being with others as mediated by screens through videoconferencing platforms. The virtual interlocutor becomes, it is proposed, a "phantom" other, i.e. a quasi-present whole body with which we coordinate.

Virtual intersubjectivity can take different forms. Mariapaola Della Chiara reads the phenomenon of *hikikomori* as an instance in which the virtual encounter with the other overcomes and replaces its physical counterpart. Such escapist function of virtual reality, employed as a safe yet fictional alternative to *real* reality, is explored with reference to how it is depicted in recent Japanese animation.

Other types of virtual environments blend mere escapism with a form of countercultural utopianism. As Margherita Fontana shows, this is the case of geodesic domes, futuristic architectural structures that originated in the context of American counterculture of the 1960s and later evolved into "virtual domes", allowing to enjoy virtual reality and connect with others in a shared environment.

Lastly, shifting from shared to public experience, Logan Canada-Johnson reflects on street art and its possible connections with film, in the form of what he calls "cinematic street art". After setting conditions for describing the latter, the author tests the applicability of the resulting definition to two media products: site-specific projected films,

and primitive moving image devices. Cinematic street art, it is concluded, may still be nascent, and as such it is likely to spark new discussion among philosophers and artists themselves.

The issue is further enriched by a focus dedicated to Hans Blumenberg containing a contribution dedicated to his reading of Kafka's *Prometheus* (Valentini) and a presentation of a series of unpublished texts about palaeoanthropology in Blumenberg's *Nachlaß* (Ros Velasco).

Finally, in the "Varia" section, this issue hosts a number of varied and interesting studies that aim to explore the relationship between life stages and social networks (Jerrentrup), fashion and social identity (Sudarmanto, Pujiyanto), as well as to offer an exploration of the aesthetic commitment of public art (Blanco-Barrera) and an introduction on the aesthetic value in the Vedic mathematics (Aimo).