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Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico

Going Virtual – But How? Mapping Virtualities in Contemporary Technoculture

edited by

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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).



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Virtuality and immanence in Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty¹

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Abstract. In this paper we aim to find a definition of virtual which fits the latest developments of digital technology, but also applies to the analog world. We consider the virtual as related to immanence, taking inspiration from Deleuze's reading of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty's last work. We first analyze Deleuze's idea of immanence, from which virtuality emerges, then we focus on Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh and its virtual center. We argue that both philosophers see immanence as a dynamic medium of virtuality, overcoming the traditional concept of substance and theorizing a deep intertwining of bodies and technology. Our analysis shows that the virtual is defined by the following features: it implies an epistemological and ontological monism, relationality, and entanglement with reality. The virtual clearly emerges in digital technologies, but also belongs to analog reality, as a general condition for our knowing and being in the world as such.

Keywords: virtual, immanence, flesh, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty.

INTRODUCTION

The words “virtual” and “virtuality” are of common use, especially since the development of digital technology. In a specific sense, one talks about “virtual reality” (VR) referring to specific environments characterized by an immersive experience², which takes place inside a simulated version of analog reality. However, the word “virtual” is used also about less immersive cases: one calls “virtual identity” the one used in social networks, just as Facebook,

¹ This paper has been realized through a strong collaboration and synergy between the two authors. However, it shall be specified that Andrea Colombo has mainly worked on Part 1 and Conclusions, whereas Introduction and Part 2 were mostly written by Floriana Ferro.

² The definition of “immersive” shall be properly developed and referred to the relation between our embodied mind and the surrounding environment; since it is still a matter of discussion, it needs to be addressed elsewhere.

Twitter, Instagram, etc. In this case, the word “virtual” seems to be closer to the word “digital”: a virtual identity is simply a digital identity, our identity transposed in a digital dimension. Moreover, one shall not forget that there is a less recent (and maybe deeper) sense of “virtual” and “virtuality” that is not strictly bond to digital technology: it is something in potency which is related and/or opposed to something in act. The first name coming to our mind is Aristotle (*Metaph.* IX), who develops this distinction, thus giving birth to the Western concepts of “possible” and “virtual”. Another important author is Leibniz, who writes about the «power to receive ideas» (Leibniz [1765]: Book II, Chap. xxi), also known as virtual innatism, which opens the way to the Kantian concept of transcendental³. However, our aim here is not to outline the full history of the idea of virtual, but to understand how we conceive it philosophically in our own time, therefore in light of the new technological developments and of their effects on our subjectivity.

Our proposal is a definition of virtual which takes inspiration from two crucial ideas: Deleuze’s immanence and Merleau-Ponty’s flesh. Notwithstanding the differences between these concepts and their philosophical background⁴, they have something in common: they give sense to virtuality, conceiving it on a ground of dynamical immanence, which overcomes the traditional concept of substance and consists in a deep intertwining of bodies and technology. According to our perspective, the virtual is defined by the following characters: (a) it refers to an epistemological and ontological monism; (b) it implies

relationality; (c) it is not opposed to the “real” or “actual”, but is entangled to it.

Our proposal will start from the analysis of the virtual according to Deleuze, who takes inspiration from Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* and develops an idea of immanence which extends to all the bodies in the world. We will then focus on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, deepening the passages where he writes about a “virtual focus” or a “virtual center” of the flesh in *The Visible and Invisible*. Interpreting these passages in light of a posthuman interpretation of the idea of flesh, the bond between bodies and technology will turn out to be very tight, dynamical, and in line with future developments. The virtual will be thus considered not only as related to digital technologies, but even as a condition for shaping our view of and our being in the world as such, in both analog and digital dimensions.

1. FROM THE INDIVIDUATION OF THE BODY TO THE PLANE OF IMMANENCE: THE CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUAL FROM BERGSON TO DELEUZE

While the concept of the virtual is often linked to different meanings, making a rigorous analysis and theoretical coherence difficult, in France its authorship is very clear. The concept of the virtual, in contemporary French philosophy, is closely linked to the name of Henri Bergson. It is from Bergson, in fact, that Deleuze inherits this notion, which would later become one of the most characteristic concepts in his entire oeuvre, to the point that research conducted today on the philosophical value of the virtual must always be supplemented with his name. It is no coincidence that Pierre Lévy, in the introduction of his own book devoted to the virtual, writes that the fundamental distinction between the virtual and the actual is something that first «Gilles Deleuze discussed in ‘Difference et Repetition’» (Lévy [1995]: 24). In the following pages we will try to clarify how the concept of the virtual has been transformed by moving from Bergson to Deleuze, trac-

³ Even if Kant distances himself from Leibniz’s theory of knowledge (Kant [1781]: 371-383), his idea of the transcendental, of pure principles constituting the conditions of possibility of phenomena, may be considered as a development of virtual innatism: these conditions of possibility, which virtually shape our mind, shape also empirical data when they are received and processed by our faculties.

⁴ Deleuze does not share a phenomenological perspective, indeed, as Montebello states, he tries to use Bergson to contrast Merleau-Ponty (Montebello [2012]).

ing its history and, more importantly, its theoretical implications.

In *Matter and Memory* (1896) Bergson has an ambitious goal, namely to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism. The former, represented by Descartes' thought, holds that empirical reality does not depend on the subject's perception and is absolutely separate from it. The second, which has Berkeley as its polemical target, thinks the opposite: real objects depend on the subject's perception of them. It is worth mentioning that Bergson's rivals, namely Descartes and Berkeley, will be the same as those of Deleuze, who will, however, further radicalize the issue by seeing them not only as two distinct ways of doing philosophy, but as part of the same great error that, from Plato to Husserl, has marked *all* Western philosophy: the problem of representation. By conceiving subject and object as two separate spheres, the Western philosophical tradition has attempted to resolve this gap, which, however, philosophy itself has generated. For Bergson though in his 1896 work, the way to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism passes through the concept of "image." Bergson, anticipating the phenomenological reduction by a few decades (Ronchi [2011]: 113-119), hypothetically imagines himself on the side of the common man asking: how would we see the world if we knew nothing of all the theories and ideas we have had for centuries about reality and the way we perceive it? The answer is: only images would be seen. «Here I am in the presence of images» (Bergson [1896]: 1). Images which, as Bergson himself writes in the preface to the 1907 seventh edition of *Matter and Memory*, are «more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*— an existence placed halfway between the 'thing' and the 'representation'» (Bergson [1896]: vii-viii).

Among all these images, however, which are presences and perceptions at the same time, and which have no definite or clear origin because they *simply* appear around us, there is one that man immediately recognizes to be different from all others. Our *body*. The body is, in fact, the

only image that I do not know solely by perception (it is not just around or in front of me), but that I perceive internally because of the *affections* it gives me. In addition, the body is the only image, among those I perceive, that has the power to modify other images. It is not simply passive or *already there*. The body, according to Bergson, is an image capable of selecting and modifying the images around it on the basis of what is necessary for its survival and needs. The fact, however, that the body is capable of this operation places it on a different degree than other images: the body breaks and ruptures the mechanical continuity of images that simply allow itself to be perceived, because it is capable of performing a higher-level operation. It is not merely matter in the midst of other matter, but matter capable of acting on the rest and modifying it. «My body, an object destined to move other objects, is, then, a center of action» (Bergson [1896]: 5). The question that remains is, then: where does it come from, and what is this capacity that only the body possesses? It is in answering this question that the concept of the *virtual* makes its first appearance.

The answer, for Bergson, is that this unique capacity of the body comes from *memory*. The reference to memory, and not to other faculties or capacities, might be surprising, but it becomes clear when one considers that for Bergson every action of the body, every modification imposed on the images around it, comes from a need that has been learned in the past. Our actions are the result of the images and perceptions we have already known, which have taught us needs and impelled us to realize them. Having reached the needs, these, in turn, push us, however, toward other images, in a chain from the past to the present, where the body then acts. However, a very clear distinction must be made within the concept of memory. On the one hand, in fact, there is a habit-memory and on the other a pure memory, which is the virtual. What is the difference between the two? The former is simply related to the body's action on the basis of mechanical reflexes, which have transformed previously perceived images into habits, which the body now

repeats. Pure memory, on the other hand, is the set of all perceptions of images that the body has experienced, of which memory-habit realizes only a small part. In other words: habit-memory extracts from pure memory those impulses that the body needs to act according to its needs. Pure memory, on the other hand, is the set of all images that the body has perceived or been affected by. A set that thus corresponds to the entirety of the identity of the subject in question (which Bergson calls consciousness or *esprit*) from which the body, based on what is happening around it in the world, extracts the impulses necessary for action. What is the special feature of pure memory? It is that it does not contain all possibilities, it is therefore not a general open and indeterminate whole, but it is the collection of the overall experience of a single individual, and, since it is from this that habit-memory extracts the possibilities of action, it is also all that an individual can do. If pure memory is thus what an individual can do, and if pure memory is also what an individual is, it means that, for Bergson, the being of an individual *coincides with what the individual can do*. And that is precisely what the *virtual* is.

This purity of the virtual, however, should not be misunderstood. Indeed, it is not a feature that places the virtual on a higher level than the world of images: it only means that pure memory, as opposed to habit-memory, is not characterized by the need to act. It is also for this reason that Bergson proposes a curious and apparently ambiguous observation. He writes, in fact, that consciousness does not function by adding something to the objects of the world, but, rather, *by taking something away from them*. Habit-memory is in fact the realization of *a part of* what is contained in pure memory, with a view to action and the realization of a need. In order to act, an individual is forced to select the images around him, indulging a specific purpose. He must therefore take away completeness from things, seeing objects only according to what, in some way, is useful to him. But, on the other hand, pure memory feeds on *all* the images that the individual's body encounters in its actions. Between the two types of memory, therefore, there is a continuous relation-

ship and hybridization. They are two different, but not distinct, orders of the same singular individual. On the one hand, habit-memory acts among images, based on need; on the other hand, pure memory retains these images (which are perceptions) in their completeness. The acting thus imprints affect on the virtual, and the virtual gives the acting possible solutions on how to move in the world.

To sum up: if we suppose an extended continuum, and, in this continuum, the center of real action which is represented by our body, its activity will appear to illuminate all those parts of matter with which at each successive moment it can deal. The same needs, the same power of action, which have delimited our body in matter, will also carve out distinct bodies in the surrounding medium. Everything will happen as if we allowed to filter through us that action of external things which is real, in order to arrest and retain that which is virtual: this virtual action of things upon our body and of our body upon things is our perception itself. (Bergson [1896]: 309)

We can then draw some conclusions. For Bergson, reality is composed of entities in contact with one another (*continuum*). Among all these entities man, with his body, is able to act not following strict necessity, but according to his own impulses, which illuminate the portion of matter on which he acts. Other bodies also behave in this way, so reality is composed of bodies acting against each other on the basis of their own needs. In bodies, however, not only the effects of our actions are recorded, but also the images we encounter in the world, depositing themselves in a pure memory that contains them in their entirety (the virtual). From this pure memory, each time, bodies extract habits on the basis of which they react to external impulses. In other words: the action of bodies on each other increases the capacity of pure memory, which, in turn, can offer more capacity for action to habit-memory. For Bergson, in this sense, a body *is what it can accomplish*, because it acts on the basis of the images it contains (in the virtual), and, at the same time, *a body acts on the basis of what it is*,

because memory-habit extracts from the virtual its possibilities for action. Thus, there is a cyclical relationship⁵ between the virtual and the world, and this is why there is not the same kind of relationship between the virtual and the real as there is between Aristotelian essences and possibilities. For Aristotle, the essence of an entity establishes what the entity is and what the entity will become. For Bergson, and Deleuze, the being of an entity is determined by its capacity to act; a capacity that acting itself concretizes and changes. This is why Bergson writes that the virtual «it is neither its cause, nor its effect, nor in any sense its duplicate» of the real, but «it merely continues it» (Bergson [1896]: 309). To express this relation not causally or hierarchically, but horizontally, Bergson and Deleuze speak of *actualization*: the virtual actualizes itself (habit-memory) and, at the same time, remains distinct from any actualization of it. Aristotelian essences, on the other hand, are *manifested* or *actualized* as the cause of bodies, which are therefore already determined a priori. For Bergson, on the other hand, each body is surrounded by a constant aura of latent possibilities (the virtual) that determines action on the basis of external impulses (i.e., of other bodies) and yet is also sensitive to what happens to it, modifying itself.

Gilles Deleuze inherits from Bergson both the distinction between actual and virtual and their relationship. But he radicalizes its ontological power. Above all, there is a specific point at which Deleuze contradicts Bergson and changes his premises. Keith Ansell Pearson sums it up very well this way: «It is true that Deleuze is keen to develop the theory of virtual in the direction of

ontology. This is because he wants to show that there is a being of the virtual which, although peculiar complex, individuated form of life such as us, is not reducible psychological consciousness» (Pearson [2005]: 1117). In other words, Deleuze does not consider the (human) body as a special entity, but broadens the ontological scope of the virtual to *all* reality. The virtual, according to Deleuze, does not belong exclusively to man, but to every entity that populates the world and which, as such, always possesses its own degree of latent elements susceptible to change through its relationship with other entities. A potentiality that does not reduce an entity to its actualizations alone, but always leaves open a possibility of becoming and change. Deleuze thus eliminates the anthropocentric component and the remnants of subjectivity. A text by Deleuze is particularly helpful in understanding this point, especially since he seems to take up the passage from *Matter and Memory* that we have quoted, changing, however, some fundamental elements:

Purely actual objects do not exist. Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. This cloud is composed of a series of more or less coexisting circuits, along with the virtual images are distributed, and around which they run. [...] It is by virtue of their mutual inextricability that virtual images are able to react upon actual objects. From this perspective, the virtual images delimit a continuum, whether one takes all of the circles together or each individually, a spatium determined in each case by maximum of time imaginable. (Deleuze [1977]: 149)

All the main terms used by Bergson return in this passage: there is the concept of image, *continuum*, circuits of actual-virtual, and images meeting. What is missing is exclusively the body, because, for Deleuze, *every* entity is a composite of actual and virtual and man has no ontological priority. To succeed in expressing this world devoid of subjects or anthropological references, Deleuze will need a different language than Bergson's. As Manuel DeLanda shows very well (DeLanda [2002]), Deleuze will find in mathematics the use-

⁵ It is Bergson himself who uses the *circuit* metaphor. For example, he writes: «Thus there is supposed to be a rectilinear progress, by which the mind goes further and further from the object, never to return to it. We maintain, on the contrary, that reflective perception is a circuit, in which all the elements, including the perceived object itself, hold each other in a state of mutual tension as in an electric circuit, so that no disturbance starting from the object can stop on its way and remain in the depths of the mind: it must always find its way back to the object whence it proceeds» (Bergson [1896]: 126-127).

ful language to define this reality composed of entities whose identity corresponds to the actions they are capable of performing, without the need to refer to a consciousness or a thinking mind that represents them. At the same time, Deleuze will also engage philosophy in the search for useful concepts to describe this union of actual and virtual, as opposed to Aristotelian essences, such as the well-known *plane of immanence*, which arises precisely in the need to consider the virtual as an ontological element.

2. THE CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUAL IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S *THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE*

Another author in French philosophy who gives way to an interesting interpretation of the virtual, beyond purely digital contexts, is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His idea of virtual is very present, though not clearly developed, in his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. There are only a few passages where the word “virtual” is mentioned: it is used as an adjective in the expressions «virtual focus» (Merleau-Ponty [1968]: 34, 215) and «virtual center» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 115). In order to give an interpretation of this concept, we will refer to the general idea of flesh, which is at the center of Merleau-Ponty's reflection in this fundamental though unfinished work.

(a) In this way, we suddenly meet what is a basic characteristic of the virtual for us: its reference to an ontological and epistemological monism. The term “monism” may remind us Spinozism and its objective way to see reality or, on the other hand, German idealism and its subjective, spiritual perspective on being. Merleau-Ponty has something in common with these views, that is a dynamic monism: the flesh, in which being consists, is always becoming and in motion, a hiatus between polarities directed the one towards the other.

What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy. As the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is

not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment; [...] this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 147-148)

As this passage clearly shows, even if Merleau-Ponty shares dynamism with both subjective and objective monism, he sees dynamism as chiasmatic and dialectic. The flesh is a «hiatus», «a zero of pressure», which may be considered as an “in-between”, a *Zwischen* between the object and the subject, of two supposed “solids”, even if solidity is just illusory⁶. It is neither the hard core of being, an untouchable and changeless substratum – as in traditional metaphysics – nor the privation of being, the void, or non-being.

Merleau-Ponty calls into question not only metaphysics and ontotheology, as Heidegger (1953) does. He also criticizes Husserlian phenomenology and its way to see subjectivity. According to Husserl, our body shall not be conceived as a *Körper*, as a purely physical body, but as a *Leib*, as the zero-point (*Nullpunkt*) of our orientation (Husserl [1952]: 165), a subject which coincides with the individual, phenomenal living body and its perceptual field. In Merleau-Ponty's earlier works, especially in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty [1945]), Husserlian influence on this respect is evident, whereas, in the *Visible and the Invisible*, subjectivity is conceived differently. The flesh is an extended subjectivity, that is an extended mind in an extended

⁶ With “illusion”, we do not mean something that is not real. Rather, illusory phenomena have their experiential value, just as Merleau-Ponty asserts about the vision of the cube (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 236), taking inspiration from Gestalt psychology (i.e., Köhler [1929]). According to phenomenology, illusions are ways in which reality presents itself to us and are considered deceptive only from a scientific, non-experiential point of view (Taddio [2020]).

body. It may be considered as an “impersonal”⁷, but not in a privative sense, that is the absence of “personality” as such: if “personal” is considered as purely individual, then the flesh will be “impersonal”, however, it is not a-subjective or anti-subjective. It may be defined as an extended first person (Vanzago [2012]: 194-195), a subjectivity which is not confined within the limits of the phenomenal body, but as involving the subjectivity of other people, animals, plants, etc. The flesh is the common element of the world, its “stuff” (*étouffe*)⁸. In this way, Merleau-Ponty overcomes anthropocentrism and goes in the direction of a posthuman subjectivity, which is not on the top of the hierarchy of being⁹: the flesh is impersonal and thus non-hierarchical. Moreover, subjectivity is not confined to the sphere of our ego-pole or of the other ego-poles in the world, but involves also objectivity, where our intentionality is directed. In this way, the phenomenological concept of relation between subject and object is differently defined, through an innovative way to conceive dialectic.

In Merleau-Ponty’s words, «We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?» (Merleau-Ponty

[1964]: 138). The opposition between the objective world and the subjective body disappears: the flesh involves both and is the world itself. This characteristic of the body allows to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism (which is also the aim of Bergson in *Matter and Memory*), since it eliminates the dualism between the subjective and the objective dimension. It also gives rise to a particular kind of monism, which does not consider the two poles as opposites, but as animated by a «hyperdialectic» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 94), which repels the Hegelian synthesis and resembles, according to Vanzago, the circular dialectic theorized by Schelling (Vanzago [2012]: 194-195). This dialectic is what constitutes the reversibility of one pole into the other, which is «always imminent and never realized in fact» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 147). The visible and the invisible, the touching and the touched are about to become their corresponding opposite, but it never happens: this being “on the verge of”, this hyperdialectic movement is what constitutes the virtual.

In this context, the virtual focus or center is what characterizes the flesh as such: in its dynamism and openness, it contains the potentiality of existence, of the poles which may emerge and become actual, without being imprisoned in a traditional and static view of substance. Merleau-Ponty’s flesh does not correspond to Aristotle’s *hypokeimenon*, since it is, at the same time, matter and form, but not a form-matter compound, a «synolus» (*Metaph.* VII, 1029a1-3), thus the poles are chiasmatically involved in a movement which brings the one towards the other. They are distinct, because of the *écart* (divergence) between them, but not radically separated: «this divergence is not a void, it is filled precisely by the flesh as the place of emergence of a vision, a passivity that bears an activity» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 272). This point is crucial, since the virtual is not pure passivity, that is pure potency separated from activity, but passivity “bearing” activity; this clearly refers to the difference between virtuality and possibility, which will be discussed in point c.

(b) If the flesh is openly considered by Merleau-Ponty as dialectic and chiasmatic, it has

⁷ Enrica Lisciani Petrini has pointed out a turn toward the impersonal in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, which starts from the *Phenomenology of Perception* and its concept of pre-personal (Lisciani Petrini [2012]: 80-83), a concept whose history shall be deepened elsewhere. Moreover, Reynolds and Roffe notice that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh has a strong affinity with Deleuze’s immanence, since they both reveal «an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field that cannot be determined as consciousness» (Reynolds, Roffe [2006]: 233).

⁸ This shall not be confused with the Deleuzian “membrane”, which, unlike Merleau-Ponty’s flesh, has no thickness (Michalet [2012]: 247-249).

⁹ Anti-anthropocentrism is one of the main features of posthumanism and is well expressed by the first principle of the *Posthuman Manifesto*, according to which «humans are no longer the most important things in the universe» (Pepperell [2003]: 177).

to involve a relation between two poles at least. However, this aspect needs to be deepened, since hyperdialectic is different from the Hegelian one, considered by Merleau-Ponty as a «bad dialectic».

The bad dialectic is that which does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it, which wishes to be dialectical immediately, becomes autonomous, and ends up at cynicism, at formalism, for having eluded its own double meaning. What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationship and what has been called ambiguity. (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 94)

Unlike bad dialectic, which opposes the thesis and the antithesis, in order to obtain an overcoming synthesis, resulting «in a new positive, a new position» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 95), good dialectic gives up the sharpness of this new position. It is a movement which embraces ambiguity, a well-known concept in Merleau-Pontian philosophy and at the heart of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to this idea, the poles are not considered as two opposites of which the one is the negative and neatly contrasts the other, but as a duality whose limits are blurred. Taking inspiration from what Husserl writes in the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl [1950]: 97), Merleau-Ponty points out that the boundary between the subject and the object of perception is not clear (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 106); moreover, the subjective body (*Leib*) is the place of third-person processes, such as agility, motility, sexuality, etc. (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 230).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, these characteristics are enhanced and considered in a different framework, which is the phenomenology of the flesh: ambiguity turns into reversibility, therefore not only the limits between the two poles are blurred, but each of the pole is on the verge of becoming the other. The flesh is thus relational in itself and not only in a dual way: the chiasmatic movement between the poles takes place inside the *Umwelt*, the surrounding world, which is characterized by a tissue of relations between subjects and objects, living and non-living beings,

body and technology, etc. It is a particular kind of field, which has not a privileged center or starting point, because its center may be virtually everywhere. It means that it is focused in our body as much as in the body of the other, in our hand as much as in the digital device I am holding, in the society outside the screen as much as in the social network. The flesh is virtually there in the network of relations¹⁰ taking place in both the analog and the digital dimensions, thus allowing an authentic «transdimensional analogy» (Ferro [2022]) to take place. Even in this case, the virtuality of the flesh leads us toward a posthuman reading of this concept, since technology is seen as taking part in the transformation of the human (Pepperell [2003]: 177).

In this context, the virtual may be intended as the main characteristic of the chiasm – which defines flesh as well – that is the “separation in relation”: separation (*écart*, divergence) concerns poles which are different the one from the other, but are, at the same time, related in a movement of reversion. The flesh, which is considered as the *Zwischen* between the poles, is not in a specific place and moment, but “virtually” everywhere and connected to everything that constitutes the surrounding environment of the poles. It is an «originary connectedness» (Clarke [2002]: 213), which is the main feature of the flesh, a shared ontological medium among polarities and what surrounds them: it is an extended corporeity where an authentic interpenetration occurs (Ferro [2021]).

(c) This brings us to the third feature of the virtual, that is the entanglement with the real. In order to understand this point about Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, the difference between the concepts of “virtual” and “possible” shall be pointed out. As we have already shown in section 1, Pierre Lévy shows how the virtual is conceived in French philosophy, taking inspiration by

¹⁰ We are taking inspiration here from Yuk Hui (2012; 2016), who defines digital objects as being in a network of relations, thus adopting an anti-substantialist perspective. However, unlike Hui, we think that this characteristic extends also to analog objects, shaping the idea of virtual as such.

Deleuze. Lévy opposes two couples: possible-real and virtual-actual. Whereas the poles of the first couple are fully constituted – the possible resembles the real, since it misses only existence – the poles of the second couple belong to the event: «the virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization» (Lévy [1995]: 24). Let us think, for instance, to social networks. In this case, virtual identity cannot be considered neither as “real”, nor as simply “possible”: it is not real, because it does not correspond to our analog identity (which we conventionally, socially, and juridically assume to be the real one); neither is possible, because it does not properly lack existence, since we can find it in a digital dimension. Something similar may be said about virtual reality: it is not the analog world where we live, so it is not “real” in our usual sense, but is not either “possible”, because it is there and we may have an experience inside it, with its peculiar ways to configure space, movement, perception, etc.

Lévy’s perspective helps us catch the ambiguity of the virtual, its being neither possible nor real, but in relation to the actual. What is virtual is already “becoming” into the actual. If reality is dynamically conceived as a process, where singularities are included in a network of relations, then the virtual will not be something that is not there yet, or waits to be there, or is ready to be there in this or that way: it is how reality is, a dynamic being in a process of transformation towards actuality, where the latter is not fully defined and constituted. This idea also applies to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh. The dynamism of the latter shall be conceived as dialectically becoming, as a reversion of divergent poles in a network of multiple relations. This recalls a well-known characteristic of the virtual body, which is «in essence interactive» (Diodato [2005]: 2). As we have shown in point (a), the flesh is not pure potency or passivity, but bears activity, moreover this activity shall be considered relationally, as inter-activity (“activity between” or “among”). If

the flesh is the body of the world, its being virtual means to be crossed by a plurality of singularities which continuously relate. At this point, there is not whatsoever distinction between the virtual and the real, since virtuality characterizes the tissue of reality itself, its warp and weft, whose knots are multiple singularities in multiple relations the one with the other.

CONCLUSIONS

Reviewing the history of the concept of the virtual, however incompletely, has allowed some basic theoretical considerations to emerge:

(a) The idea of virtual does not coincide with the idea of digital, philosophically speaking. In fact, digital is closely related to information technology and the mathematics behind it, as well as requiring the presence of material supports for its manifestation. Why the two terms have come to be identified is yet to be explored and needs its own history.

(b) The virtual has its own ontology, distinct from the ontology of the actual and the digital (Evens [2010]: 150).

(c) The ontology of the virtual has a strongly posthuman and desubjectivizing connotation.

(d) By virtue of its ontological approach aimed at entities and not the psychological subject, the virtual enables a new epistemological collaboration between philosophy and science.

From Bergson and Deleuze to Merleau-Ponty, the concept of the virtual has been created both to counter a way of doing philosophy that is still dualistic and tied to a distinction between subject and object, and to propose an ontological image of a processual and becoming world, whose end, however, is not established by any *a priori* essence. All this makes the virtual a concept today that needs to be deepened in its specificity, since it allows for a rigorous and coherent philosophical analysis of many of the phenomena in which humans find themselves involved, from expanded reality to the digitization of spaces.

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Is the virtual of virtual technologies the Deleuzian virtual?

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Abstract. Gilles Deleuze has become a key reference for the recent debate on virtual technologies, as his conception of the virtual is widely used to argue for the reality of virtuality. Nonetheless some scholars, among which Slavoj Žižek stands out, have warned about the risks of flattening the Deleuzian concept on the tech debate. This paper aims to show why the two concepts of the virtual do not overlap by explaining some features of the Deleuzian virtual that make it incompatible with virtual media. Namely, its intensive dimension, its relationship with the possible and its imperceptible nature. The paper will also claim how differentiating the two concepts opens up wider applications for the Deleuzian virtual while, at the same time, lightening the tech debate of its ontological burden, allowing to approach the issues of virtual technologies from a more fruitful perspective – that is to say, their pictorial functioning.

Keywords: virtual, Gilles Deleuze, Virtual Reality, intensive.

With the advent of new media and digital technologies, beginning around sixty years ago with the Digital Revolution, we have increasingly started to talk about virtuality. The case of virtual reality, as a «technology that convinces the participant that he or she is actually in another place by substituting the primary sensory input with data received produced by a computer» (Heim [1998]: 221) is certainly emblematic, but it is just the tip of the iceberg and only one of the most recent examples of the application of virtuality in the tech domain. Many other technologies based on and experiences allowed by the digital have been labelled in the years as virtual.

The concept has rapidly become a sort of *passe-partout* predictable of many different actions and places that found in the digital medium their common denominator: from virtual meetings to virtual exhibitions, passing through virtual museums, virtual stores, virtual dating, virtual researches, and so forth.

However, this pervasiveness is symptomatic of a certain conceptual vagueness that hovers around the term: what exactly makes some-

thing virtual? What is the difference between a virtual experience and a «computerized» one (Tavinor [2021]: 26)? How does virtuality function?

Heavily contributing to the confusion is an ontological prejudice that often overshadows the study of the functioning of virtual technologies: in the everyday discourse, virtuality seems to allude to the phenomenon of dematerialization through digitalization; a virtual meeting is a remote meeting from which the physical presence of participants is excluded, a virtual exhibition can show a computer-generated version of an artwork without needing the presence of the original object, and so on. Virtual seems therefore to be used as a synonym for an artificial/computer-based experience, presupposing a sort of opposition between materiality and dematerialization. The problem is that, in this dualism, while materiality takes the role of the essential feature of reality, dematerialization often evokes the semantic field of fiction and illusion.

This is because, as Brian Massumi points out,

The word “virtual” came into everyday use [...] as a rider on “reality”. The rider overrode: the connotation was unreality – in the phrase “virtual reality”, the adjective virtual stood as a synonym for artificial. Artificial, in this context, meant illusionary. The context, of course, was dramatic registering in the popular imaginary that enormous changes were on the horizon with the dawning of the digital age. (Massumi [2014]: 55)

Technophobia is not the only reason for these suspects of unreality. As Joaquim Braga claims, «in Western philosophical thought, there has been, for centuries, a clear primacy of the “actual” over the “virtual”» (Braga [2019]: V), and this «metaphysics of presence» (Derrida [1967]) has reverberated on the discourses belonging to the technological studies and to everyday language, contributing to shed a negative light on virtuality.

In recent years, the debate on virtual technologies has expanded, focusing mainly on the phenomenon of virtual reality, but, despite the efforts at clarification, it is still largely in the shallows of this patina of unreality, and many of its questions remain open.

1. GILLES DELEUZE AS A POINT OF REFERENCE

Whilst the use of the term in contemporary culture seems almost exclusively related to the digital, the concept of the virtual (used as a substantive, rather than an adjective) has a karstic but richer history in the Western philosophical tradition.

Narrowing the focus to the contemporaneous, in the France of the second half of the 20th century Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Lévy, Philippe Quéau, and Paul Virilio, to name the most important, have investigated the modal status of the virtual.

Despite the synchronicity with the advent of the new media, these thinkers were mainly focusing on reconnecting virtuality to its etymological meaning. «Derived from the Latin word for strength or potency, the base definition of the virtual in philosophy is “potentiality”» (Massumi [2014]: 55) and explaining this realm of force was the main objective of the debate. A pivotal role in the discussion was played by Gilles Deleuze who, together with Félix Guattari, has made the virtual one of the key concepts of his theoretical proposal.

The French debate of those years has not escaped the later thinkers engaged in the clarification of the virtual in its technological applications (in particular, the ones of the last decade) and Gilles Deleuze has become a point of reference in the most recent virtual media studies. Proof of this can be seen in the centrality of the references to his work in almost any academic discourse on virtuality: from *Aesthetics of the Virtual* by Roberto Diodato (2005), to *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality* edited by Mark Grimshaw (2013), passing through *Conceiving Virtuality: From Art to Technology* edited by Joaquim Braga (2019), and to *Aesthetics of Virtual Reality* by Grant Tavinor (2021).

If the recourse to Gilles Deleuze seems by now a necessary step in the debate around virtual technologies, there are also some philosophers that believe that the use of the Deleuzian virtual in relation to the issues raised by virtual reality is

unjustified: «the first determination that comes to mind apropos of Deleuze is that he is the philosopher of the virtual – and the first reaction to it should be to oppose Deleuze’s notion of the virtual to the all-pervasive topic of virtual reality: what matter to Deleuze is not virtual reality but the reality of the virtual (which, in Lacanian terms, is the Real)» (Žižek [2004]: 3). If Slavoj Žižek position is, in accordance with his style, particularly radical, he is not the only one to believe that the Deleuzian notion has little to do with the phenomenon of virtual technologies. Also Brian Massumi ([2014]: 55-70), Paulo M. Barroso ([2019]: 133-144), and Jonathan Roffe ([2005]: 176, 177) have supported this line.

The motives for considering the use of the Deleuzian virtual improper are not limited to observing that, for historical reasons, the French philosopher could not and does not directly refer to the phenomenon of virtual reality. They run deeper and they concern the meaning and the motives behind the use of this concept in Gilles Deleuze’s ontology. But they also regard different views on how virtual technologies should be addressed.

If the use of the Deleuzian concept is at least controversial, why do many scholars belonging to the tech debate refer to it? We believe they do so because they find it particularly useful in fighting against the ontological prejudice mentioned before. One of the most known formulas Gilles Deleuze uses to describe the virtual, borrowed from Marcel Proust, is indeed: «Real without being present, ideal without being abstract» (Deleuze [1964]: 58). Through it, Gilles Deleuze claims the reality of the virtual, refusing the distinction between reality and virtuality. The virtual is real because the criterion for reality is not presence and materiality, but «a capacity of real transformations in a system» (Simondon [2005]: 56).

The Deleuzian concept can therefore be used to claim that virtual technologies are real, insofar as they produce effects. It is in this sense, we believe, that ontological claims such as «virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, and what goes on in a virtual reality is truly real» (Chalm-

ers [2017]: 309) should be understood. What is important to underline is that Gilles Deleuze does not restore reality to the virtual by endowing it with presence. What he does is undermine the equation “real = present”. Therefore, when applied to the tech debate, the Deleuzian concept does not allow to claim for the presence of virtual objects, but only for their effectiveness.

Anyhow, what seems important for the tech debate in this regard has probably more to do with the expanded Deleuzian conception of reality, rather than with his specific idea of the virtual, whose belonging to the real is just one of its specific traits and whose most notable consequences should probably be found elsewhere. Furthermore, we suspect that the mixing of the two debates, instead of resolving the ontological prejudice, risks complicating the issue even more, as the Deleuzian virtual is often presented as the same virtual of virtual technologies.

2. THE REALITY OF THE VIRTUAL

When Gilles Deleuze introduced the concept of the virtual, he did not have in mind virtual technologies. What he was interested in, on the contrary, was transformation, becoming. As it is known, Gilles Deleuze belongs to a school of thought – what Rocco Ronchi calls the «minor canon» of philosophy (Ronchi [2017]) – that theorizes the primacy of becoming over being, of difference over identity, and it is precisely in this context that the creation of the concept of the virtual should be understood.

Gilles Deleuze’s problem was the creation of novelty. How is it possible to explain the new, the «aberrant» (Lapoujade [2014]), when the Western philosophical tradition only focuses on identity, stability, eternity, substance, and when being and thinking are conceived as forms of *mimesis*, representation (Deleuze [1968])?

The question, in those years, was perceived as particularly pressing not only for philosophical reasons (even though important Deleuzian predecessors can be found in the «minor canon» of

philosophy), but also because of the changing paradigm in the sciences (physics in particular) and the experimentation in the arts of the beginning of the century. In all these different fields a new, more dynamic – even chaotic, unpredictable, allo-tropic, and creative conception of reality started to emerge.

Gilles Deleuze wanted to propose a metaphysics up to the mark of science and to the artistic experimentations of the avant-gardes. In trying to do so, he had to revolutionize and overturn many of the common places of Western thought, restoring dignity and reality to the ever-changing and non-conforming and, in this metaphysical effort, the virtual played a pivotal role.

Being so implicated in his philosophy and having a multitude of important forefathers, bloodlines and lines of contagion, the concept of the virtual (and the sufficient reasons for its creation) cannot be exhaustively explained here. We will therefore focus on its characteristics that, we hope, will show why it should not be superimposed on the virtuality of the tech debate.

2.1 *Intensive and Extensive*

We will start by claiming that, for Gilles Deleuze, the real is composed of two dimensions: one is extensive and the other is intensive. One is the realm of bodies and their interactions, the other is the one of force and energy. Both are real because, as we have seen, both produce effects. The extensive dimension of reality is what Gilles Deleuze calls the actual. The actual is what exists. The virtual, on the contrary, does not exist – because it does not have extension – but it insists. The relationship between the virtual and the actual could be thought of as the relationship of a force applied to a body: we can experience the effects of a force, but never the force in itself. This is because the result of the force has not a mimetic relationship with the force; the virtual expresses itself through heterogenesis, creating the new.

However, things get immediately more complicated since, from *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze also claims that the virtual is a «surface

effect» of the bodies (Deleuze [1969]: 4). The virtual is not only a domain of force insisting on the actual, but also an immaterial effect of the interactions between bodies.

After all, those who are acquainted with the Deleuzian philosophy know that paradoxes are at the centre of his logic. And this paradoxicality has noble origins. It comes from the Stoics, a central reference for the Deleuzian notion of the virtual: «The Stoics saw clearly that the event is subject to a double causality, referring on the one hand to mixtures of bodies which are its causes and, on the other, to other events which are its quasi-cause» (Deleuze [1969]: 94).

This circularity between actuality and virtuality ensures that the virtual is not to be understood as a foundation of extension: the virtual does not chronologically precede the actual, because it is not a transcendental dimension of reality. Virtual and actual are two dimensions of the same immanent reality, so that everything has both an actual and a virtual side, as two sides of a coin.

One way of characterising becoming is with the following schema: virtual/real <-> actual/real <-> virtual/real. What such a diagram points to is that becoming is not a linear process from one actual to the other; rather it is the movement from an actualised state of affairs, through a dynamic field of virtual/real tendencies, to the actualisation of this field in a new state of affairs. This schema safeguards the reversible nature of virtual and actual relations. (Boundas [2005]: 297)

The creation of novelty could also be thought of as a paroxysm: it happens when the virtual, insisting on a state of affairs, becomes unbearable and forces the system to change, reconfiguring itself. But when the virtual becomes actual is not exhausted, rather it changes too, in a circularity that allows for the emergence of the true and immanent difference. In this sense, a way of understanding the Deleuzian notion of the virtual is to trace it back to the conception of individuation of Gilbert Simondon (2005), a key reference for the Deleuzian ontogenesis. In a nutshell, what Gilbert Simondon claims is that the individual

should never be thought of as absolute and atemporal, because it is the result of a deeper process, that of individuation, in which it is generated from the interaction of different fields of forces. This domain of forces is called the preindividual. The virtual, as the preindividual, is that intensive domain from which individuation is triggered. But the individual does never free itself from it, as the preindividual, or the virtual, continues to insist on it and to make it change, in a common processual feedback system.

2.2 *Virtuality and Possibility*

In the framework of a systemic «metaphysics of presence» characterizing Western thought, another more specific polemical target of the Deleuzian concept of the virtual is that of possibility.

According to the philosopher, virtuality should not be conceived as a synonym for possibility, since possibility is sterile, while the virtual is reality's «crucial site of the struggle; everything is ultimately decided here» (Žižek [2004]: 28). Possibility is something that only appears *a posteriori*, when a principle of identity is given, and constitutes a mere variation of the theme, while identity is conserved. The virtual, on the other hand, does not resemble anything, does not refer to anything: it is pure becoming.

In this sense, only the virtual is real: «rather than expressing abstract alternative possibilities, virtual multiplicity forms something like a real openness to change that inheres in every particular situation» (Roffe [2005]: 177). On the contrary, the possible is tautological and redundant, it does not add anything to reality, does not change anything, because it is a mere copy functioning by restoring a principle of identity and, therefore, a transcendence. Possibilities do not change a system, there are logically constructed and do not have effectiveness on the real. The virtual, on the other hand, does it necessarily.

The process of realization is subject to two essential rules, one of resemblance and another of limitation. For the real is supposed to be in the image

of the possible that it realizes [...]. The virtual, on the other hand, does not have to be realized, but rather actualized; and the rules of actualization are not those of resemblance and limitation, but those of difference or divergence and of creation. (Deleuze [1968b]: 96)

When arguing against possibility, Gilles Deleuze does not only resume a Bergsonian argument: he also has in mind his transcendental empiricism, as opposed to the Kantian transcendental method (Deleuze [1963]). According to him, when Kant claims that he wants to grasp the conditions of *possibility* of experience, he falls into the problem of the possible. This means that his method only allows him to grasp empty possibilities for experience, constructed by keeping the subject as a principle of identity, without being able to catch the real conditions for experience to emerge. On the contrary, Gilles Deleuze wants to destroy the principle of identity granted by a fixed subjectivity, pushing its faculty to its limits and accessing that chaotic and ever-changing domain of reality, where the real production of experience takes place – that is, the virtual.

2.3 *The Virtual as Imperceptible*

We have seen how, for Gilles Deleuze, the virtual is not a specific characteristic of particular technologies, but an intensive dimension of reality allowing the emergence of the difference. Everything has both an actual and a virtual side, as these dimensions constitute the ontology of reality. Virtual technologies do of course belong to this reality, but not because they represent its virtual pole. On the contrary, they are subjected to this logic of becoming as every other process of individuation: being, for Gilles Deleuze, is univocal. The two concepts of the virtual therefore respond to two very different sets of problems.

Still, there is another feature of the Deleuzian virtual that renders it definitively incompatible with the virtuality of virtual technologies. That is, the Deleuzian virtual is imperceptible. Being an intensive dimension of reality, the virtual can

never be perceived in itself: it manifests, expresses itself, in the actual, but what is perceived are only its effects, the changes it produces. This is linked with the difference posed between possibility and virtuality: while the possible is only a mere copy of reality, the process of actualization is an heterogenesis, it proceeds by differentiation and its result is always new and unpredictable, radically different from the virtual insisting on it. Perceiving the effects of the virtual, therefore, does not make us capable of perceiving it.

As Brian Massumi claims: «Neither the future, nor the past thickening the present for it, is sensuous. The sensuous elements in play envelop the nonsensuous past and future in the materiality of their impinging on the body. They are the leading edge of the forming event, bringing past and future together in the present of their bodily impingement» (Massumi [2014]: 61).

On the contrary, virtual technologies are perceptible, they rely on a medium that has a strong materiality and they produce a sensuous representation of reality.

The fact that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also claim that the virtual «“must” be perceived, it cannot but be perceived, the imperceptible is also the *perciendum*» (Deleuze, Guattari [1980]: 281) should not be misconstrued. We have already seen that the paradox is a procedure dear to Gilles Deleuze and to explain it is sufficient to show the two senses in which the virtual is simultaneously imperceptible and «it cannot but be perceived». We have seen that the virtual is imperceptible because it is what insists on the extensive, and only the extensive is perceived by the senses. Nonetheless, being both quasi-cause and effect of the bodies, the virtual is what grants the field of perception. It is in this sense that the virtual cannot but be perceived, because it is at the base of all possible perceptions. What changes is the point of view:

It is the plane of organization and development, the plane of transcendence, that renders perceptible without itself being perceived, without being capable of being perceived. But on the other plane, the plane

of immanence or consistency, the principle of composition itself must be perceived, cannot but be perceived at the same time as that which it composes or renders. (Deleuze, Guattari [1980]: 281)

What is important to note here is that, even if Gilles Deleuze connotes the virtual as what «cannot but be perceived», there is no possible reference with the phenomenon of virtual technologies: virtuality, for him, remains a domain of force and not a technique of expression and representation.

3. THE HERITAGE OF THE DELEUZIAN VIRTUAL

To deny the flattening of the Deleuzian concept of the virtual to the virtuality of virtual media does not mean depriving it of its possible contemporary application. On the contrary, we believe that freeing it from the tech-debate can open up broader futures for it. Considered in its full sense, as a solution for the immanent creation of novelty and for ontogenesis, the Deleuzian concept of the virtual has indeed a much richer legacy than the one it currently has in relation to virtual reality.

In this last section, we will briefly provide a few examples, each belonging to a different field: from science to ethics and ecology, and lastly to aesthetics. These examples will inevitably be very partial; nonetheless, we consider them useful in the perspective of suggesting what could be a more productive heritage for the Deleuzian concept. Furthermore, we claim that this differentiation also benefits to the virtual media issues, by reducing the ontological confusion hovering around the debate.

For what concerns the sciences, a meaningful example of application of the Deleuzian virtual can be found in the recently published *Differential Heterogenesis* (2022), by Alessandro Sarti, Giovanna Citti and David Piotrowski. In this work, the differential virtual is a central tool for thinking about individuation as «a matter of composing fields of force» (Sarti et al. [2022]: 2) and for

renewing the mathematics underlying heterogenesis. The Deleuzian intuition is used to provide a formalization of a radical dynamic of metamorphoses, of which an empirical example can be found in the brain. As the authors claim,

Today [...] we are dealing with the possibility of providing a renewed epistemic depth to the conceptual elaboration of Deleuzo-Guattarian heterogenesis. We intend to do this by both reconsidering the mathematical research of sub-Riemannian geometry, on the one hand, and by further developing a concept of heterogeneity capable of taking dynamics into account. (Sarti et al. [2022]: 5)

But the fortune of the Deleuzian concept also reverberates on ethical and ecological issues, as the virtual allows for thinking about reality as a constructivist and impersonal immanence, where the emergence of novelty is always possible and does not depend on human beings. And these intuitions have been used to rethink and renegotiate our relationship with non-humans in an ecological way. An example of this can be found in what Rosi Braidotti calls an «Affirmative Ethics» (Braidotti [2019]), that is to say a critical posture capable of creating alternative imaginaries and new forms of life, rather than focusing on the negativity of present time. And this posture is based on the virtual, as Rosi Braidotti uses it to claim that: «the present does not coincide flatly with a here and now [...]. The present, the contemporary, is multi-layered and multi-directional. We are always dealing with the virtual past, what “we will have been”. We are always projected/projective futures, always dealing in a time continuum» (Braidotti [2019]: 465).

Lastly, a final suggestion from the aesthetics. In this domain, the Deleuzian virtual has contributed to a direction of thought that has been working on conceiving affects and feelings as forces independent of subjectivity. Rather than being felt by a subject, affects would be something that precede and triggers individuation, as the virtual. As Alessandro Sarti claims: «the becoming of the individual unfolds, furthermore, in relation to a field of forces composed of kinetic and dynamic

as well as perceptive and affective forces» (Sarti et al. [2022]: 1). The theme of the «autonomy of the affect» (Massumi [2002]) follows from the conception of the virtual as what «cannot but be perceived» (Deleuze, Guattari [1980]: 281). If the virtual cannot be perceived from a subject, precisely because it precedes individuation, at the same time, it must be perceived as something insisting on what is individuated and changing it, something that undermines the perceptive thresholds.

4. CONCLUSIONS

We have started this paper by pointing out a certain confusion in the contemporary debate on virtual technologies. We have shown how an important factor contributing to this conceptual vagueness is an ontological prejudice according to which virtual technologies would not be real. The reasons for this prejudice belong to at least two sets of problems: the technophobic ones and the Western primacy of the actual.

It is, we believe, to address these suspects of unreality that Gilles Deleuze has been heavily called upon in the debate on virtual technologies. His conception of virtuality is in fact not opposed to and fully belongs to reality as, for him, the criterion of reality is not presence but effectiveness. But the recourse to Gilles Deleuze's concept risks bringing more disadvantages than advantages: even if his conception of reality helps fighting the ontological prejudice, the parallelism between his idea of virtuality and the one related to the tech debate can be strongly misleading.

With his concept of the virtual, Gilles Deleuze wanted to include in his ontology the «existence of an energetic, non-material world» (Simondon [1982]: 6) that could explain the emergence of the difference without postulating a transcendental level of reality. The reasons and the applications of the Deleuzian concept of the virtual are therefore very different from the virtuality implied in the new media. To show this incompatibility we have considered three main characteristics of the Deleuzian virtual: its intensive character, its oppo-

sition with the concept of the possible and its imperceptible nature.

Lastly, we have claimed how separating the Deleuzian virtual from the virtual of virtual technologies does not deprive the Deleuzian concept of an interesting future in the contemporary debate. On the contrary, relieved of its post in the tech debate, the Deleuzian virtual can embark on other meaningful philosophical enterprises in different fields. Among the others, we have suggested that it can have an important role in thinking about differential heterogenesis from a scientific (mathematic) point of view, it can help define what Rosi Braidotti calls an «affirmative ethics» (2019), or its legacy can be used in the aesthetic domain to theorize an autonomous conception of the affects.

What we wanted to suggest by showing that the virtual of virtual technologies is not the Deleuzian virtual is not only a wider meaning of the Deleuzian concept, but also that, by lightening the debate from the ontological burden, another possible approach to the issues of virtual technologies could emerge. As Grant Tavinor has shown in his last book, *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality*, to address the problem of virtual technologies (VR in particular) from an ontological perspective distracts us from the real problem: the pictorial function of these media. Rather than focusing on the ontological status of virtual worlds and objects, he claims «how people use virtual media to do things» should be under study (Tavinor [2021]: 135)¹. Grant Tavinor is not the only scholar

¹ About Grant Tavinor's book, it is interesting to note how he falls into the same problem of flattening the Deleuzian concept of the virtual to the technological debate, blaming Deleuze's lack of clarity for the confusion between the two terms. In the note number 5 to the second chapter of his book, Tavinor writes «An often-cited precedent of this view is Gilles Deleuze (2002), who argues that the informative contrast for the term “virtual” is “actual”, rather than “real”. Unfortunately, Deleuze's work is not particularly helpful in clarifying the issues here as his paper is marred by repetitive, overstretched metaphors and jargon appropriated from physics (mixed, it seems from electrical engineering, nuclear physics optics)». However, as we have tried to demonstrate, the reasons why the Deleuzian concept of the virtual is not very use-

believing that ontology is obscuring more interesting issues, of all the representation functioning and potential of virtual technologies. As Bruce Damer claims,

In arguing against using the earlier term virtual reality, I often stated, “there is nothing virtual about the reality of being in-world with other people”. I felt that the cognitive immersion experienced in these spaces was as compelling as that created by the storytelling in the caves of Lascaux, by the actors in the classical Greek theatre, by the great novelist and filmmakers, or by the wizards in textual worlds of MUD predecessors. (Damer, Hinrichs [2014]: 22)

Separating the two virtuals can therefore be fruitful to both domains: the Deleuzian (and ontogenetic) studies and the debate on virtual technologies, as clearing the field from possible superimpositions can help focus on the specificity of virtuality as a medium. Rather, if a technological heritage is to be found in relation to the Deleuzian virtual, we suggest looking for it in a philosophy of technics that enfranchises the technical medium from its purposes, granting it a virtual dimension of creativity and unpredictability.

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Towards an ontology of virtual environments: A critical account

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Abstract. The growing critical and economic success of Virtual Reality technologies is generating renewed scholarly interest in virtual environments. One of the most long-lasting and influential perspectives on the topic has been labelled «virtual realism» (Heim [1998]), and it has passed throughout the entire history of *virtual environments studies* up to recent days (Chalmers [2022]). Virtual Realism frames virtual environments in terms of realism, and precisely of perceptive soundness and isomorphism between physical environments and virtual ones, producing a convincing illusion of being physically present in the digital space. This article develops a critical counter-argument to this account. By employing James J. Gibson's ecology of perception and Deleuze's and Lévy's philosophy of the virtual, the article aims at demonstrating that the ontology of virtual environments is rooted in a domain of predetermined possibilities, and that the resulting aesthetics can not be fully immersive. Instead, the latter should embrace the «emersive» and anti-realistic qualities of the medium as an expressive device.

Keywords: virtual environments, ecology of perception, affordances, philosophy of the virtual, virtual realism.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is a virtual environment (henceforth, VE)? At the present time, such a wide and encompassing question is yet to be answered, in spite of the relatively recent growth of the field of *virtual environments studies*, which has provided an in-depth analysis of specific aspects of the user experience of digitally-generated immersive environments, mainly by means of experimental inquiry. Research in the field has achieved many important results, among which one of the most remarkable is, arguably, the formalization of the concept of «sense of presence» as a key feature in the media experience of the environments produced by immersive technologies: that is – regardless of the slightly different meanings bestowed on this notion according to the perspective adopted – the cognitive and perceptive

illusion of being physically located in, and surrounded by, the representational space¹, and recognized by it as an active subject who can interact with it and suffer the effects of the virtual entities inhabiting it (Steuer [1992]; Slater, Wilbur [1997]; Zahorik, Jenison [1998]; Biocca [2003]; Riva, Davide, IJsselsteijn [2003]; Slater [2005]; Slater [2009]; Slater et al. [2009]; Calleja [2011]; Riva, Waterworth [2014]; Lombard et al. [2015]; Micalizzi, Gaggioli [2018]; Riva, Gaggioli [2019]; Rogers [2019]). But what this corpus of researches generally seems to lack is the prowess to connect its outputs to a wider aesthetic theory of VEs, one which may help us grasp a better understanding of how VEs work for their embodied user.

This article aims to offer a contribution to such a project by linking together the notion of presence, philosophical accounts of the virtual and psychology of perception. I claim that in this way it will be possible to confer on the «virtual» in the expression «virtual environments» a theoretically grounded definition, which may shed light upon the strategies of engagement devised by immersive media and their conceptual criticalities.

However, it is paramount to clarify that the critical discussion which will be developed in what follows is not intended to provide a holistic theory of VEs. In fact, our starting question («what is a virtual environment?») is likely to be, as such, ill-posed: being VEs produced by a vast range of heterogeneous media and technologies, to adopt an all-encompassing, metaphysical notion of virtual environments would be a grave methodological mistake, since it would lead to overlook the distinctive qualities of different typologies of VEs. To reach a totalizing theory is well beyond the goals of this text, whose theoretical framework has a scope that is more realistically limited to

the analysis of a specific, yet very common, class of VE: the one, usually devised by media such as Virtual Reality films and videogames, which is based on the co-presence of a completely computer-generated virtual environment and of a human interactor being the only entity able to exert (or at least *willing* to exert, as we will see) an agency, by consciously and freely deciding what to do in the experience. So, this also means not to take into account those VEs structured to foster interactions between a plurality of living human users (i.e. VR social media or collaborative practices), as well as other unique hybrid systems such as Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality: all of them would demand an *ad hoc* inquiry that is not possible to develop here.

2. SHORTCOMINGS OF VIRTUAL REALISM: AN ECOLOGICAL COUNTER-ARGUMENT

As a starting point, it seems consistent with main trends in the design practices of VEs to argue that one of the most coveted aims they pursue is the fulfillment of a strong effect of *realness*: that is, the temporary illusion that the VE possesses all the attributes of material environments and, thus, has a full existence of its own. In order to produce such an impression, a convincing sense of presence must be reached, meaning that the VE has to be interactive: in fact, a fundamental feature of real environments, simulated by artificial ones, is that the former allow us to interact with them. This does not necessarily mean physically acting upon the environment, since even just looking at it is a form of interaction. As proposed by Noë (2004), visual perception is intrinsically imbued with action, meaning that we never see the world around us in the form of a stable, snapshot-like image; on the contrary, to see implies movement, meaning that the perceiving subject moves (at least with her eyes), as well as the elements of the environment change their position before us. Visual perception is, thus, based on patterns of «sensorimotor contingencies» (the changes in the appearance of the perceived environment, result-

¹ The illusion of presence is, obviously, a goal pursued by immersive formats and technologies long before the advent of digital media. For centuries, images have strived to hide their nature by trying to reconfigure themselves as boundless and enveloping environments, as demonstrated by research devoted to an archaeology of VR and virtual environments (Grau [1999], [2003]; Pinotti [2018], [2021]; Bilchi [2021a]).

ing from movements) which are evidence of the dynamic and enactive nature of our visual experience of the environment.

Therefore this basic form of interaction, that in VEs corresponds to the so-called «three degrees of freedom» (3 DOF), which allow the user to visually explore the VE via rotational movement without leaving a stationary position in space (Eugeni [2018]), is enough to reach the impression of realness in VEs (although the virtual experience must also provide a justification, at the representational level, for the fact that the user can not freely move and act in the environment).

This idea that a VE can be experienced as a real one has been labelled «virtual realism», and it was originally proposed by Michael Heim, who claimed that «virtual realism requires the capacity to reconstitute the real through computers» (Heim [1998]: 6). The remarkable intuition of Heim's theory was that the digital reconstitution of the real was not meant merely as the simulation of existing and knowable spaces; instead, «realism in VR results from pragmatic habitation, livability, and dwelling, much more than from scientific calculation. [...] A virtual world can achieve a functional isomorphism with a primary world – it does not have to re-present the primary but only to foster a similar livability» (ivi: 48-49). So, it is not a matter of mimetic representation, but of «livability», or, said better, «believability» of the VE (Casati, Pasquinelli [2005]): namely, that «it is not the fidelity to the real model (the world) that makes the synthetic environment looking and feeling real, but the fidelity to the perceptual conditions involved in the mental construction of perceived objects» (ivi: 435).

More recently, virtual realism (and, indirectly, the issue of believability) has resurfaced in the philosophical account on Virtual Reality proposed by David Chalmers (2022), who expressly makes reference to Heim's theory and advocates for acknowledging full value of reality to digitally-created environments and entities. According to Chalmers, VEs can be ontologically qualified as real because they possess at least one of the philosophical criteria that must be matched in order

to recognize something as real: they have «causal powers», meaning that their parts (the virtual objects and beings inhabiting them) can perform actions which cause reactions in, and responses by, the rest of the environment². This allows Chalmers to even claim that «you can always interpret a three-dimensional VR as a physical space, and some of your perceptual mechanisms will interpret it this way» (ivi: 225).

These scholars hint at how VEs, if properly designed, can replicate the same perceptual conditions, and involve the same «perceptual mechanisms» regulating our experience of real environments. To express this in more fine-grained theoretical terms, one must turn to James J. Gibson's ecology of perception, and employ one of its most influential concepts: that of affordance. According to Gibson (1979), affordances are possibilities for interaction with the material entities (both inanimate objects and living beings) of the environment, recognized by a subject who is understood as an embodied being whose body is surrounded by the environment, and who looks at the environment from within (instead that from a metaphysically detached position like in the tradition of Renaissance perspective). Moreover, affordances are not objective attributes of things, but dynamic properties emerging from the relationship between the physical specificities of an animal and those of the environment, thus forming an «animal-environment system» (Stoffregen [2003]).

Since the appearance of VEs (as three-dimensional spaces surrounding the subject and populated by volitional creatures) resembles that of

² Besides, Chalmers lists other reasons to recognize VEs as real: for example, he stresses the materiality of the apparatuses (headsets, cables, equipments). That is indeed true, but it also shifts the focus to, so to speak, the means of production of the VE, thus foregrounding its nature as artifact. This is an important topic, but it can not be addressed in this article, which is focused on the representational dimension of the alleged isomorphism between virtual and physical environments. However, the apparatus can indeed affect the illusion of presence in VEs experiences, often to its detriment, as has been discussed by Slater and Steed (2000).

physical environments, VEs would seem particularly suitable, at a perceptive level, for fostering affordances. In fact, several studies have demonstrated that virtual objects can offer affordances for the human observer (Regia-Corte et al. [2013]; Meyer, Draheim, von Luck [2019]), and also that the user's expectations about what oneself can do in the environment are heightened by the level of realism of the latter (Grabarczyk, Pokropski [2016]). These findings would seem to validate the theoretical stance of virtual realism, because the idea of isomorphism between real and virtual environments would be confirmed by the ecological validity achieved by virtual ones. In other words, VEs seem able to replicate what Gibson (1979) defines as an «ambient optic array»: that is, the (dynamic and variable) asset that an environment assumes specifically for an animal, which perceives the environment from its own embodied perspective. However, I contend that this is not enough to grant that «you can always interpret a three-dimensional VR as a physical space», as stated in Chalmers' previous quote.

In order to clarify my critique, now I have to express what, according to the literature discussed up to this point, can be legitimately understood as a general principle of the design practices of VEs: VEs engage their user by trying to replicate the perceptual pre-conditions that are the core of how human beings experience the physical world. From an ecological perspective, that means that the VE has to be enveloping and rich in affordances; but such a configuration elicits in the user a variety of stimuli for action in the environment, and this can pose major issues for the theory of the isomorphic relationship between real and virtual environments. In fact, to be (or feel) present in an environment «is tantamount to successfully supported action in the environment» (Zahorik, Jenison [1998]: 87), and is, therefore, also related to experiencing a corresponding sense of ownership of one's own body (Slater et al. [2009]) as potentially suffering the effects of the actions performed by the other beings that are in the environment. I argue that for completely digital VEs it is *ontologically* impossible (and not just a temporary condition

caused by the technical limitations of a medium which could be improved in the future) to reproduce the complexity of human beings' enactive engagement with the environment, and I will try to explain why in what follows.

VEs are digital objects created by someone (the designer, or the design team) according to a set of rules and parameters which determine the specific form that the environment takes, and the number of affordances that it allows to actualize. Thus, I propose to analyze VEs in terms of *textualities*: they are, in spite of their appearance as boundless and living spaces, pre-organized formal configurations, based on laws imposed *from outside* the environment and which can not be violated, due to their being embedded in the codex (or being the codex altogether) of digital artifacts (Myers [2017]). If this interpretation is correct, then VEs are characterized by a certain degree of *closeness*: although much more open than non-interactive media, VEs preprogram everything that can be done, and constrain both the user's agency and that of the virtual entities into a range of possibilities that is always limited, even if disguised as complete freedom.

Here lies a discrepancy between the affordances recognizable in the environment and those that can effectively be actualized, which can have important disruptive effects on the user experience of VEs: the user perceives an environment which offers a wide variety of possibilities for interaction, and thus she could be driven to perform the corresponding actions; however, she would soon realize that only a small percentage of the perceived affordances can be translated into what Zahorik and Jenison call, as we have seen, «successfully supported action». With this expression the scholars mean that:

When actions are made in an environment, the environment reacts, in some fashion, to the action made. When the environmental response is perceived as lawful, that is, commensurate with the response that would be made by the real-world environment in which our perceptual systems have evolved, then the action is said to successfully support our expectations. (Zahorik, Jenison [1998]: 87)

So, if a user's action does not receive an adequate response by the environment, the user feels a strong inconsistency in the ecological array she is experiencing, one that finds no correspondence with the ways our interaction with material environments unfolds, since in the latter case any action has consequences. Moreover, the same goes for what virtual entities are concerned: they may perform actions intended to affect the user, but which would fail in fostering an appropriate response by the user's virtual body, thus hampering the sense of ownership of it (Bilchi [2021b]).

Such discrepancy is usually conceived as a flaw of the medium that must be carefully concealed, rather than employed as an expressive device. This is particularly evident in 3 DOF Virtual Reality experiences, whose very functioning reduces the user's allowed actions to rotational movement and visual exploration from a fixed position. In these cases, it is often unjustified, at the perceptive level, why the user is unable to physically interact with the surrounding environment although she recognizes in it a wide variety of affordances that nothing in the simulation prevents to actualize. Similarly, in 6 DOF experiences a user who has performed an action according to an actually perceived affordance may discover that the action is not supported by an adequate environmental response. Examples of this are manifold; just to mention a few, taken from very different expressive projects: in the horror 3 DOF experience *Face your Fears* (2016), the user is lying in her bed while eerie phenomena occur before her eyes. From an ecological perspective, the environment is organized in such a way as to offer all the affordances needed in order for the user to leave her position and escape; yet the 3 DOF-based design of the experience prevents her from doing that, without providing an ecologically valid explanation. While in Alejandro G. Iñárritu's 6 DOF art installation *Carne y Arena* (2017), the user is placed among a group of migrants who are trying to cross the Mexican border in order to reach the USA, when they are violently stopped by a military patrol. The user is free to move in any direction, but can not inter-

act with the other characters in the representation (nor with its inanimate entities), although she can come close to them and thus perceive the affordances they foster.

Circumstances like these are very common when one is experiencing completely digital VEs, and they will ultimately result in what Slater and Steed (2000) define «breaks in presence»: unwanted occurrences which shatter the illusion of being present in the environment by revealing its artificial and mediated nature, thus interrupting, at least temporarily, the hitherto unhindered immersive flow of the experience. What consequences does this produce for an aesthetics of VEs? I will now address this topic by trying to integrate Gibson's ecology of perception with philosophical theories of the virtual.

3. TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

In the previous section, I have highlighted a fundamental conflict involving the textual nature of VEs and their appearance as boundless, self-sufficient worlds. Such contrast comes from the fact that by emulating an ecologically sound «ambient optic array», VEs take on the look of a living complex of beings and objects, open to never-ending changes of state which result from the interactions happening in the environment. That is to say, the artificial environment deceives our perception, presenting itself as a space of possibilities characterized, as physical environments are, by a substantial *indeterminacy*: it is not possible to foresee with absolute certainty what transformations will be brought in the environment by the events occurring in it, because the active entities of the environment possess, at least to a certain degree, a free will which can change the shape of the environment in unexpected ways, continuously recalibrating and updating the system of affordances perceived by the subject. As stated by Carr: «In the midst of an action, the future is not something expected or prefigured in the present, not something which is simply to come; it is some-

thing *to be brought about by* the action in which I am engaged» (Carr [1986]: 34). This account is not at odds with ecology of perception, since Gibson seems to hint at it in the following passage:

The richest and most elaborate affordances of the environment are provided by other animals and, for us, other people. These are, of course, detached objects with topologically closed surfaces, but they change the shape of their surfaces while yet retaining the same fundamental shape. They move from place to place, changing the postures of their bodies, ingesting and emitting certain substances, and doing all this spontaneously, initiating their own movements, which is to say that their movements are *animate*. These bodies are subject to the laws of mechanics and yet *not* subject to the laws of mechanics, for they are not *governed* by these laws. [...] When touched they touch back, when struck they strike back; in short, they *interact* with the observer and with one another. Behavior affords behavior. (Gibson [1979]: 126-127)

By claiming that living beings are not governed by laws of mechanics, Gibson is refusing any deterministic drift in the theory of affordances: behavior is made of free choices, and thus, to state that «behavior affords behavior» can mean that the actions freely performed according to the affordances available at a given moment create new, and not completely predictable, sets of possibilities for interaction. The system of relationships between the components of the environment changes anytime one of the latter acts.

Clearly, freedom can never be total, since a variety of constrains indeed affects human behavior: natural constrains (i.e., laws of mechanics and physics) restrict human agency by making impossible to contravene the laws themselves; while contingent constrains which have social, economic or cultural origins can influence and orient (but not determine) behavior. Therefore, by free choice I mean the faculty to act according to consciously developed decisions and resolutions. On this basis, contingent constrains are not of particular interest for my argument, since they can only partially hamper, and not actually deny, free decision-

making (that is, one is never ontologically prevented from acting against contingent constrains, although that may indeed represent a hard choice and carry grave consequences). On the contrary, what is important to take into account in this context are natural constrains.

In fact, advocates of virtual realism could argue that a crucial point in defense of the theory of isomorphism between real and virtual environments is that both would be governed by laws determining what can or can not be done; so that one can never, neither in real environments, be in a condition of total freedom of choice and action.

This is true to some extent; however, VEs are artifacts, entirely designed by an external creator who sets the laws governing them according to a certain aesthetic project. As repeatedly stated in this article, a dominant trend would seem to be that of simulating the mechanisms ruling our experience of real environments, as the adoption of an asset of the VE that is consistent with the principles of psychology of perception demonstrates. The problem is that the artificial and coded nature of wholly digital VEs makes it impossible to reproduce the human experience of the environment in its full complexity: that is, its identity as a system of dynamic and ever-changing interactions between entities provided with decision-making powers which produce consequences and transformations in the structure of the environment itself. Transformations can occur in VR environments, but only within the limited amount of responses that the designer has programmed, and in spite of all the other responses conceivable (that is, ecologically plausible), but unrealizable, during the experience. Therefore, human beings are indeed only partially free in the ordinary experience of physical environments; but they are even less free when interacting with digitally created environments. What this implies for an ontologic, and consequently aesthetic, analysis of VEs may be better clarified by approaching the matter through the lenses of the philosophy of the virtual.

More specifically, here I employ the theory of the opposed conceptual pairs «virtual-actual» and «possible-real» proposed by Deleuze (1968)

and later reprised by Lévy (1995) in the form of an «ontologic quadrivium». According to them, these four concepts have, each, a full ontological value; they can be grouped in two couples because between virtuality and actuality, on the one hand, and between possibility and reality, on the other, stands a relationship of procedurality: the virtual is involved in a process of actualization (that is, what exists at a virtual level becomes actual), while the possible in one of realization (that is, what exists as possibility becomes real).

The difference lies in their ontological status: the possible is predetermined, «static and already constituted» (Lévy [1997]: 24), meaning that the dynamic of realization of possibilities unfolds as a predetermined path, a compelled transformation sustained by a rigorous logic. The virtual, on the contrary, «is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization» (ibidem). Deleuze and Lévy's definition of the virtual is inherently *pluralistic*: virtuality is presented as a multiplicity of tendencies and forces whose mutual interaction leads to the actualization of one of the uncountable virtualities of the situation. Therefore, actualization truly results in a heterogenesis, which leads the virtual entity to a new, unforeseeable, state. As argued by Lévy in a telling passage:

Actualization thus appears as the solution to a problem, a solution *not previously contained in its formulation*. It is the creation, the invention of a form on the basis of a dynamic configuration of forces and finalities. Actualization involves more than simply assigning reality to a possible or selecting from among a predetermined range of choices. It implies *the production of new qualities, a transformation of ideas, a true becoming* that feeds the virtual in turn. (ivi: 25. Emphasis added)

And still:

Actualization creates a solution for the problem presented by the virtual. In doing so it does not simply replenish its resources or provide a form for the mechanism of realization. Actualization *creates*

form. It creates a radically new kind of information. Efficient cause is related to actualization because the laborer, sculptor, or demiurge, if it is a living and thinking being, can never be reduced to a simple executant, for it interprets, improvises, and resolves problems. (Ivi: 174. Emphasis in original)

This interpretation of the virtual as a problematic complex of forces seeking for an actualization is consistent with both Lévy's account and Deleuze's one. But there are at least two distinctive elements of Lévy's theory that are important for my discussion of VEs: first, Lévy's examples of actualizations are usually taken from situations involving a human actor, thus stressing the importance of freedom of choice in exercising one's agency. And second, Lévy is not primarily interested in actualization, but in its reverse, and consequent, process: virtualization, that is, the return of a previous actuality to a state of virtuality. One should not understand actualization and virtualization as opposed processes, since they are actually co-essential to one another: an actuality is indeed what results from the resolution of a problem, but *in the very moment* of this resolution the new state of affairs that has been produced constitutes a new virtuality, a new «knot of tendencies or forces» open to multiple actualizations. Therefore, the actual immediately runs through a process of virtualization; that is, it returns to the state of problem, not in the sense of a regression, but as the opening of a new space of interaction between the world and a human agency. Still, with Lévy's words: «virtualization is not a derealization (the transformation of a reality into a collection of possibles) but a change of identity, a displacement of the center of ontological gravity of the object considered. Rather than being defined principally through its actuality (a solution), the entity now finds its essential consistency within a problematic field» (ivi: 26).

Therefore, the never-ending loop of actualizations and virtualizations represents, in Lévy's theory, the infinite processuality of existence itself. This account can be integrated with ecology of perception: since, as discussed above, the actual-

ization of an affordance generates new affordances, the experience of the environment can be understood, at this point, as a problematic complex, truly as a knot of tendencies (those expressed by the actions of the living beings inhabiting the environment). What one does in the environment affects its general structure, and can change the latter in unexpected ways, creating a new system of relationships. Moreover, both the idea of virtualization and the experience of environments seem to share three essential properties: the crucial presence of a human agency, the availability of other beings to be transformed by the latter, and the opening of a space of interaction where changes can happen.

Now, as previously demonstrated, VR environments tend to replicate the conditions of our being present in the environment; that is, to configure ecologically sound environments. So, if some basic principles of philosophy of the virtual can be related to ecology of perception, they can also be employed to question the ontological status of VEs. I have discussed how the illusion of presence seems likely to be shattered when, behind the ecological plausibility of the VE, the textual nature of the latter resurfaces. Being texts, completely digital VEs can not reproduce a process of actualization-virtualization, because any change of state in the environment is already pre-programmed, inscribed in the laws regulating how the artificial space works. It is not a matter of how many actions the system allows: indeed, they can be a lot, but no more than the number determined by an overarching rule set by an external creator (and always less than those characterizing the physical environment simulated); and consequently, even the effects of such actions will be unavoidably inscribed in the system.

I want to stress again, as already done in the introduction to this text, that its findings are valid for a vast, but indeed not all-encompassing number of VEs. A relevant exception is represented by those VEs which are primarily intended as spaces of interaction between existing human beings (the virtual world *Second Life* is one of the most famous cases, but any multiplayer videogam-

ing system suits well this definition). Here it is legitimate to claim that actualizations of virtualities (and consequently new virtualizations) happen, but due to the fact that who is involved in the interaction are two or more entities provided with actual decision-making power and, albeit between the boundaries set by the arbitrary laws of the artificial environment, freedom of choice. That is, provided precisely with what AIs (the apparently living creatures inhabiting the VE) and the characters of pre-recorded images of VR movies lack. Thus, the shortcomings of the alleged isomorphism between real and virtual environments discussed in this article characterize those VEs in which a human user, acting directly with her own body or by means of an avatar, interacts exactly with entities and objects that are completely digital and, as such, programmed to act and be responsive according to limited schemas and rules of behavior. So, it is reasonable to interpret the media experiences fostered by such cases in terms of realizations of pre-determined possibilities, as revealed by the fact that the actual degree of agency bestowed on the user by the medium is inconsistent with the far wider number of affordances perceived in the ecologically sound VE. A consequence of this is that the experience enables only an amount of interactions which is inferior to the corresponding one characterizing the physical environment.

Therefore, as a closing remark, I believe that if one assigns a philosophically grounded meaning to the word «virtual», it is legitimate to claim that the typologies of VEs analyzed in this article should be more appropriately rethought as *possible* environments: that is, they entirely fall under the domain of the couple possible-real. This is due to the fact that at least two of the three aforementioned attributes of virtuality are missing in VEs: the agency of the human subject is partial and constrained, forced to follow predetermined paths; and there is no actual availability of the environment to be transformed by our actions, since only limited and calculated changes can happen.

All that is at odds with the illusion of freedom and self-sufficiency that the majority of VEs seem

to seek. In pragmatic terms, the user of VEs lives a condition of inherent «inter-passivity» (Montani [2017]), meaning that she results much more passive than active, if one confronts her apparent agency with what she is actually allowed to do and what is denied to her. Plus, the aesthetics of VEs would seem bound to cause, in the user, an interweaving of immersive (in which the user experiences a proper sense of presence) and «emersive» states (D'Aloia [2018]), with the latter being the occurrences which arouse acknowledgement of the mediated properties of the environment.

If designers try to conceal these qualities, as well as the ontological roots of VEs in the domain of the possible, proposing instead the illusion of freedom and self-sufficiency, then the immersive and emersive conditions seem doomed to clash, with disruptive effects which hamper the communicative and expressive power of the experience. I hope that the critical analysis of certain typologies of VEs developed in this article may prove useful to suggest an alternative way to design them: one that embraces their predetermined nature, their limits, conceiving them as an expressive device, rather than a flaw to be (unsuccessfully) corrected. This implies an altogether different aesthetics: for example, one could experiment with creative assets for the artificial environment, thus disrupting the simulative logic of the attempted isomorphism with the physical environment. A few cases of such an effort to problematize our ecological relationship with the VE exist: in *Superhot* (2016), events occurring in the environment stops if the user stands still, so that the illusion of the VE as a self-sufficient system is shattered; in *Astro Bot Rescue Mission* (2018), the user is immersed in the artificial world and at the same time controls another avatar from a third-person perspective, multiplying the affordances available at a given moment and undermining the supposed transparency of the ambient optic array; in *Moss* (2018) the system lets the user adopt a god-like perspective, achieving a totalizing and detached view on the environment that is impossible to replicate in the physical world, since in the latter case our body is always surrounded by the environment.

However, at the present time these cases represent an absolute minority of current design practices of VEs; nonetheless, their creative potential should be understood and exploited, especially in light of the crucial shortcomings of the aesthetics of isomorphism that I hope this article has highlighted. Opportunities for creative design of VEs abound; but in order to grasp them, it is necessary, first, to address the not easy task of emancipating oneself from the logic of isomorphism.

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Aesthetic perspectives on interactive art and Text-to-Image technologies (TTI)

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Abstract. By reconstructing the connections between different artistic forms, such as *Art Sociologique*, cybernetic, media and digital art, the paper addresses how the concept of interactivity has evolved in relation to the development of aesthetic paradigms. Firstly, the paper problematizes the concept of interactive art, by discussing connections and differences with media and digital art. Secondly, the paper shows how Flusser's concept of participatory media, influenced by the artistic work of Fred Forest, together with the theoretical perspective developed by members of the Group for an Aesthetics of Communication, contributed to the development of new perspectives in interactive art. Thirdly, the paper shows how theoretical perspectives such as Relational aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Communication constituted the basis for the successive reflection on the potentialities of virtuality and immateriality from an artistic perspective. By drawing on such premises, the paper addresses the issue of the meta-operational processes involved in the use of Text-to-Image technologies (TTI), discussing the level of interactivity and the creative processes involved in its use. Finally, the paper problematizes the features of interactivity that characterize emerging forms of art made possible by virtual devices.

Keywords: Vilém Flusser, Fred Forest, art sociologique, aesthetics of communication, digital aesthetics, interactive art.

1. THE AESTHETICS OF INTERACTION FROM CYBERTENIC ART TO DIGITAL ART

The concept of interactive art, intended by Kwastek (Kwastek [2013]) as the hybridization between the visual arts and a variety of digital technologies, allows the viewer to engage with an interactive system developed by an artist or an art collective, and involves both subjective and objective factors.

The subjective factors involve processual and contingent aspects such as the users' social interactions and individual behaviors, the artists' intentions and their implementation, realized in collaboration with the programmers. The objective factors, instead, refer to the artifacts used by the artist, such as an interface equipped with

a technical apparatus and the relative programmed processes.

Kwastek argued that a perspective based on interaction aesthetics might provide a better understanding of media art by reducing its vagueness. The category of “media art”, which starting from the ’80 refers to artistic works that make use of electronic media, has been criticized by Rech (Rech [2002]), who noticed that all art is media art insofar as each form of art aims to express a message through a medium of some type.

Furthermore, Kwastek (Kwastek [2016]) underlined that even if we consider a narrower definition of interactive art, which only refers to artistic expressions that use electronic media, we risk failing to distinguish between participatory and representative works, as well as between analogue/digital images and sound production processes. However, the definition allows to highlight the aspects of technically focused and process-oriented creative forms that make their presentation in the framework of visual arts insignificant. The concept of interactive art differs as well from the category of “digital art” (Torre [2021]), which is generally understood to include installations and performative works incorporating digital technology and wholly immaterial works represented in code, software, or data. Furthermore, it is used to describe artistic projects where the processual aspects of digital technology are fundamental aspects of the work, as well as projects that predominantly use digital technology as part of their production technique.

On the contrary, “interactive art” is a term used to describe works of art that require the viewer to do an action beyond just cerebral receipt. Gendolla (Gendolla [2001]) argued that the term “interactive art” is used anytime generally interactive processes, which need not to be digitally mediated, are mentioned. The category of “interactive media art” refers to digitally mediated interactive artworks, where digital technology count as the main interface for aesthetic experience.

As Sakane (Sakane [2009]) noticed, the category of contemporary interactive art first appeared

when, in the 1960’s, thanks to computer science, it became possible for viewers to participate in the realm of the artwork actively. In that decade, computer technology had advanced to the point where real-time feedback interaction between humans and machines started to be feasible.

The capacity of artists to conceptually connect the scientific field of cybernetics with the aesthetic discourses was crucial to apply the cybernetic science to artistic problems.

Cybernetics, as Sage argued (Sage [2016]), is an epistemological subject primarily aiming at developing models of systems based on the information, feedback, and control properties, seeking to understand systems in a variety of media, such as social biological, organizational and technological. The term was introduced by Norbert Wiener in the 1948 book *Cybernetics*, which inaugurated a field of studies aimed at understanding communication processes and control practices. In its historical evolution, cybernetics turned from engineering to systemic constructivism’s influence on human cognition and social interaction. Heinz von Foerster, an Austrian-born physicist, examined how complex systems manage themselves toward a specific objective in facing challenges by using information, modelling, and regulating operations. As Raschke argued (Raschke [2022]), due to the phenomenological focus of his philosophical approach, von Foerster’s work sparked a vast critical interest in media-theoretical and artistic circles in the 1970s and early 1980s. In those years, in fact, several artists used cybernetics as a model for aesthetic investigation and as a paradigm for redefining the idea of art itself by drawing metaphorical connections between the two fields of study (Cfr. Sakane [2009]). Such a perspective emphasized the artistic process, as opposed to the product, and highlighted the environment or context as opposed to conventional subject matter or style, by putting art into motion, using the concept of feedback, and invoking interaction with the viewer.

These patterns assisted in creating a point of intersection between cybernetics, art, and aesthetics. For example, the new media artist Fred For-

est, co-founder of the *Art sociologique* and of the *Communication Aesthetic Group*, was among the first in France to use video and closed-circuit television in his art¹, and in 1970 created an audio-visual environment and presented it at the Universal Exhibition in Osaka.

2. PARTICIPATORY MEDIA AS DIALOGICAL STRUCTURES

In 1972, as part of his *Space-Media project*, Forest published on the columns of the Parisian newspaper *Le Monde* a little blank area, defined *150 cm² of Newspaper*, and readers were proposed to fill in the blanks with their own works of art, poetry, or criticism and submit them to Forest. It was a provocation aimed at reflecting on the authorship and public's participation in the artists' work. In the same year, Forest met the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, as they were both attendees of an art conference organized by René Berger.

In 1974, the artist chose Flusser as the subject of his video *Les gestes du professeur* (The Professor's Gestures), and the Czech philosopher wrote an essay dedicated to the French artist. In the essay, titled *Art sociologique: Dossier Fred Forest*, Flusser (Flusser [1977]) discussed *Space-Media*, which he viewed as Forest's most effective attempt at sociological art, including the above-mentioned artistic blank space in *Le Monde*, and stated that in his research, the artist expertly combined the principles of cybernetics (Flusser [1977]: 367). Furthermore, the Czech philosopher argued that the key to Foster's artistic actions is his idea of video as mirrors, an aspect related to an inter-subjective and post-objective epistemology. In Flusser's view, in fact, video is not considered only as a recording tool, but rather as a relevant epistemological instrument, since:

It has virtual properties which are absent in other media: it is an audio-visual and space-time continuum. It is involved in the phenomenon which it

shows. It can be immediately projected without having to be 'edited'. It is open to the dialogic process. It summarizes certain aspects of the printed word, and film; and the lecture (Flusser [1974]: 236).

In his view, video was a brand-new kind of mirror tool that was extremely useful from an epistemological perspective, as the epistemic advantage that mirrors may provide is directly dependent on our inventiveness in "manipulating" them, particularly by purposefully placing them so that they mirror each other, opening up recesses within recesses in endless regression. As a tool that creates an artificial separation between the world and ourselves, the mirror is seen by Flusser as the critical paradigm of the post objective epistemology, because it enables us to see the world from a different perspective. According to this epistemological perspective, "knowing" results by causing a vision in a mirror in which the subject and the object unexpectedly appear together, where videos function as mirror-devices that reveal the relationship between subject and object. In this perspective, moving images are not considered as mere mirrors of reality, but rather as tools that could contribute to new modes of relationality.

Also in 1974, Flusser participated to *Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and presented the essay *Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television*, published in 1977 (Flusser [1977b]). Following a phenomenological approach, he argued that the impression of control over the video-projection enhanced an illusionary impression of participation, when in reality it fostered passive reception. At the same time, Flusser noted that, if used dialogically in open circuits, television could become «a medium for understanding the world and dialoguing with others» (Flusser [1977b]: 247).

As highlighted by Tooley (Tooley [2022]), the idea that videos could be used as tools to enhance a dialogical practice and to develop an "interrelational style" sets him apart from the post-structuralist perspective that prevailed in media theory in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, unlike Baudril-

¹ Martial Raysse produced the first video display in France two years earlier, in 1967.

lard – who was convinced that mass media had substituted reality with hollow simulacra and signs lacking any real referent (Baudrillard [1981]) – Flusser offered a less pessimistic interpretation of the images produced by technical devices. In his view, the moving images produced in videos, photographs and television screens had the potential to project new dialogical models and ideas into the visual domain. In our view, such a difference is also due to the fact that, unlike the French thinker, Flusser did not yearn for a “real” that had supposedly existed prior to technical reproduction, but rather considered reality to be increasingly modulated by technical images that inscribe concepts through connotative forms of signification.

From 1975 to 1976, at the Théâtre du Centre in Aix-en-Provence, Flusser delivered several lectures within a series of seminars titled *Les phénomènes de la communication* (The Phenomena of Communication). In the fifth lecture, titled *Du discours scientifique à la démagogie*, he criticized McLuhan’s famous metaphor of the global village. In contrast with the idea that the electronic communication technologies transformed the world into one interconnected village (McLuhan, Fiore [1968]), Flusser argued that «our society became a global amphitheater, a global circus, and not a global village, as McLuhan claims²» (Flusser [1976]). In Flusser’s view, in fact, the metaphor of the global village excluded the issue of the unidirectional communication that characterized mass media at the time. Instead, the Czech thinker – without concealing the possible deleterious consequences implied in the emergence of apparatus designed to create programmed information – interpreted video art as a challenge that could disclose unexpressed possibilities in terms of participatory media, holding out hope for agency and critical practice in the activity of media makers and users.

An example of such emerging possibilities is described in Flusser’s essay *Line and Surface*

² «Notre société est devenue un amphithéâtre cosmique, un cirque cosmique, et non un village cosmique comme le dit McLuhan» (our translation).

(Flusser [1973]). He argued that technical moving images, thanks to their dialogic virtualities, could combine the synchronous capacity of images with the linearity typical of texts «lifting the linear historical time of written lines onto the level of the surface» (Flusser [1973]: 101). In his view, the synthesis of surface media and linearity may inaugurate unprecedented types of thinking, characterized by a new kind of codified symbols that allow images to order concepts within visual structures, and concepts into images. The new video technologies, intended as moving images that allowed to merge conceptual and imaginative thinking, inaugurated the possibility to transform mass media’s unidirectional communication channels into dialogical structures.

In his view, unlike cinema and television – which can be edited and encourage passive reception – videos are able to provide real-time feedback through a monitor, therefore enhancing the dialogical and discursive dimension.

While television and cinema’s temporality is largely an optical illusion, video art made by the videographer is fundamentally temporal, since the people recorded are not just the subject of the videographer’s aesthetic and critical gaze. Instead, it shares an analytical focus due to the monitor’s capacity to offer real-time feedback and their ability to see the motions of the videographer as they work.

During the 70s, Flusser started to develop a phenomenological analysis of cultural techniques and channels of communication, which was further developed in the following years and published with the title *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. In the chapter *The gesture of video* (*Die Geste des filmens*), the author argued that

film is an artistic tool: it depicts; video, conversely, is an epistemological tool: it presents, speculates, and philosophizes. The contrast is not necessarily functional. Film can present (e.g., in documentary), and video can represent (e.g., in video art). Nevertheless, the origin of the tool “video” gives the impression of a whole series of epistemological virtualities that have not yet unfolded (Flusser [1991]: 124).

As Schwendener argued (Schwendener [2018]), the Czech thinker recognized an epistemological exploration of the dialogical and discursive dimension of videos in the work of Fred Forest. Flusser considered his work unique from many other artists who experimented with video, because Forest was fully aware of its epistemological dimension. In particular, he insisted on the importance of Forest's dialogical experiments, a practice able to generate unprecedented forms of images and to inaugurate new forms of interaction.

3. THE VIEWERS AS CO-AUTHORS AND THE ISSUE OF IMMATERIALITY IN THE AESTHETICS OF COMMUNICATION

In an essay that the Scholar Michael Leruth (Leruth [2017]) dedicated to Forest's artworks, he stated that Flusser mentioned but did not analyze what is likely to be the best illustration of Forest's epistemological use of video in his work, a 1973 oeuvre titled *Archaeology of the Present: Electronic Investigation of Rue Guénégaud*.

The artist employed a closed-circuit video installation to transport the environment of the gallery into the street and the unfiltered reality of a Parisian street into the *Galerie Germain*. The basic idea behind the project was to use real-time closed-circuit video to metaphorically bring the space of Rue Guénégaud into an art gallery and the gallery space into the street, with the street serving as an art object and the gallery world serving as a visual clutter exposed to the bemused scrutiny of bystanders.

The street footage was shown in two different locations of the gallery. Firstly, on a line of screens without any commentary, where viewers probably took it at face value as unadulterated, in-the-moment reality; secondly, it was projected, practically life-size, onto a vast scale wall of the museum, where it looked like it was recorded in a different time.

The artist's intention was, on the one hand, to create an artificial gap in historical time in order

to elicit a new kind of perspective; on the other hand, he intended to distort and intensify the spectator's dual position of observed object and observing subject. In fact, his poetics was based on the refusal of object-based art, favoring the idea that artistic and communicational events, consisting entirely of the relational dynamic and intersubjective knowledge that results from public participation, should reshape both the social contexts and the media environments.

Furthermore, in Forest's poetics, the artist should aim at developing an open system that allows the viewers to become co-authors. In his view, the work itself does not exist as a stable representation of reality that the public may view as an aesthetic object (or anti object). Instead, it is an instance of information in flux that briefly arises through direct public contact, derived as well from the study of how the artistic space is socially constructed.

The research dedicated to the aesthetic properties of telecommunications media was developed by Foster throughout the creation of the *Groupe International de l'Esthétique de la Communication*, presented in 1983 by Fred Forest, the Italian philosopher Mario Costa and the conceptual artist Horacio Zabala. If several artists at the time were interested artistic possibilities related to new electronic media, the members of the *International Group for an Aesthetics of Communication* focused their interest on the impact that the emerging communication media technologies were exerting from a perceptual and experiential point of view.

According to their perspectives, artworks, information, and art systems must all be viewed as integrated wholes that cannot be reduced to the sum of their material components. The artwork as a "whole" is no longer defined by a physical medium, nor by its graphical depiction, but rather by aspects that are only perceptible to our awareness, since its substance, consisted in electric signals that make possible the information technology: the communication artist aimed at diverting the emerging tools of knowledge to broaden the viewers' perception and to revitalize their approaches to thinking, seeing, and knowing. In this perspec-

tive, the concept of “relationship” played a key role, as it allowed to examine reality as a “whole”, as a complex web of connections and interactions, and to interpret art as a systemic concept, in direct dialogue with cybernetics and information theory.

In the essay titled *Le sublime et l'esthétique de la communication* (Costa [1986]), the co-founder of the Group for an Aesthetics of Communication Mario Costa argued that the event of the aesthetics of communication was not to be intended as a mobilization of “concepts”, but rather as a mobilization of energy. The immaterial tensions of the field were the substitute for the aesthetic object and form, as the technologies of communication were capable of subverting the traditional notion of event.

The issue of the immateriality in the aesthetic of communication was addressed in the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated in 1985 by Jean-François Lyotard, which linked the post-modern condition with the tendency toward dematerialization. Pierre Moeglin (Moeglin [1985]) criticized the exhibition by stating that the process of dematerialization, rather than through material artworks, would have been better expressed by presenting works that no longer concerned the final product, but rather the process. Instead, Costa's concept of immateriality consisted in the negation of the difference between a foreground of material nature and a background of spiritual nature in artworks, and differed from Lyotard's perspective and his idea of “representing the unrepresentable” through art works, and from his interpretation of the concept of “sublime”. In 1984, Lyotard published an article dedicated to the *Sublime and the Avant-garde* (Lyotard [1984]). In the paper, he argued that Burke's and Kant's aesthetics of the sublime «outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their path» (Lyotard [1984]: 161). In contrast to Lyotard's idea that the properties of the sublime belong to the matter of art itself, and that the task of the sublime consists in approaching “presence” without recurring to representation (Rancière [2004]), Costa conceptualized and advocated an aesthetics of simultaneity

at a distance, and the replacement of the beautiful with the “technological sublime”. In the essay titled *Le sublime et l'esthétique de la communication* (Costa [1986]), he argued that the immaterial did not need to be represented anymore, because communication technologies allowed to “presentify” the immaterial electronic fluxus. The Italian thinker stated that the sublime stemmed from exorbitant and outsized experiences, and that in the case of the technological sublime, it emerged from the process of symbolic de-subjectification related to the self-developing and self-organizing complex of new electronic and digital technologies.

The issue of immateriality was tackled as well by the French philosopher Paul Virilio, who argued that technological developments in the fields of communication had produced a new world where speed was the guiding principle. In the essay *Speed and Politics*, Virilio (Virilio [1977]) deepened the concept of “dromology” (*dromologie*), a phenomenological perspective aimed to address the impact that the communication technologies had on perception, and how they were transforming the collective spatial and temporal experience through their character of speed. From an artistic point of view, with the concept of “aesthetics of disappearance”, the French thinker described how cinema, unlike sculpture or painting, produced artistic forms that do not need lasting material support, inaugurating a different logic within the more general space of artistic production. If a sculpture has consistent shape that endures over time because of its materiality, in the case of the cinematic picture the reference to a temporal dimension of exposure replaced the spatial and material references, favoring what Virilio refers to as a “intensivity” of a temporality of exposure.

In an interview published in 1988, Virilio and Foster addressed their approaches to modern aesthetics, and the former stated that:

the world can no longer be represented through a sculpture, or the fixed image of a painting, and its right representation consists in the speed of the

movement, in the juxtaposition of sources of information, the simultaneous heterogeneity of its physical and electronic supports. (Forest, Virilio [1988]: 14)³

In their views, the world had to be portrayed through an “aesthetic of disappearance” marked by a quick instability and dematerialization, rather than an “aesthetic of appearance” based on gradual emergence and permanence through time.

4. INTER-SUBJECTIVE AND RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO ART

The relational basis of Forest’s art is explicitly mentioned in the third manifesto of the members of the *Art Sociologique* collective, published in 1976, aimed at fostering the transition from an aesthetic perspective based on objects and representation, to one that – by creating systems of relations – emphasizes information and interaction. Similarly, in his essay *Relational aesthetics*, Bourriaud (Bourriaud [1998]) offered a vision of contemporary art as an experience of social relationship, evident in those artistic practices that take as their theoretical point the human relational aspects. The inter-relational paradigm, based on the exploration of various forms of subjectivity’s founding interdependence, «links up most of the century’s avant-gardes, which called for a joint transformation of attitudes and social structures. Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Situationists» (Bourriaud [1998]: 44). Compared to Neo-Avant-garde artists such as the collective *Fluxus*, the role of artworks «is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real» (Bourriaud [1998]: 44).

In this regard, Claire Bishop (Bishop [2012]) noted that – in the last decades – several artists developed a series of practices pioneered by Neo-Avantgarde movements such as Fluxus and Neo-Concretism, consisting in seeking to forge co-authoring and participatory social body, where the artist plays the role of a collaborator in creating

peculiar circumstances rather than the solo creator of disparate items.

Conversely, argued Bishop, the increased activation and agency of the audience risks of leaping into the consensual consumption of the viewers’ image, and participation risks of plunging into mere spectacle. To avoid this risk, the author underlined the importance of creating a tension between the polarities on which interactive art is founded, such as author-spectator and individual-collective, without collapsing them.

In participatory art – a term which includes a variety of practices, such as collaborative art, community-based art and contextual art – those who were watchers became participants and often protagonists of a creative process aimed at restoring a collective space of shared social engagement.

An aspect that differentiates the avant-garde artistic experiences from the early technical feedback-based art initiatives lies in the fact that the latter used electronic media, and was closely related to cybernetic concepts. Furthermore, in some cases, the artists came from the computer science field, and labelled their creations *cybernetic* or *reactive*, laying the groundwork for the subsequent development of interactive art.

5. THE AESTHETICS OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA ART

In Kwastek’s perspective (Kwastek [2016]), the aesthetics of interactive media art, compared to the perspective of reception aesthetics, places the focus on the process of artistic creation, on participation and on the recipient’s experience, which is the main source of the aesthetic experience. Although the work is involved in both production and reception, in interactive art they are clearly distinct processes. The interactive work – which is what sets it apart from typical visual artworks – does not perform its function in the absence of the receptive act.

On the one hand, in interactive art the focus is on technologically mediated feedback procedures rather than on direct communication. On

³ Our translation.

the other hand, when it comes to interactive art, the “recipients” are not presented with an artistic offering that calls for observation; instead, they must first make the object available by their action before any act of contemplation (or reflection) is feasible. Another standout quality of the digital medium is its adaptability to the demands of a single user or intervention, as shown in artworks where the user’s unique profile serves as the foundation for the evolution and modification of the piece. While some digital art pieces are primarily aesthetic (Hansen [2016])⁴, others are more interested in databases or raw data.

By examining the aesthetic mechanisms at play in this branch of the arts, Kwastek (Kwastek [2013]) notices that the subjectivity of the unique perspectives of researchers and recipients is what limits research on reception aesthetics. Such consideration holds true for all analyses of creative works, but it is notably valuable for analyses of works that are based on open interpretability rather than conventional sign systems, and it is much more accurate for analyses of works that depend on receiver activity to take on their final form.

On this regard, Paul (Paul [2016]) noticed that any interaction with an artwork ultimately relies on the recipient’s fabrication of meaning through a complex interplay of situations. However, when it comes to seeing classic art forms, this interaction is still a conceptual event in the viewer’s head; the materiality of the painting or sculpture does not alter before his or her eyes. In digital art, interactivity enables many ways of exploring, putting together, or adding to an artwork beyond this merely cerebral experience. While performance art, happenings, and video art have all addressed the user’s or participant’s interaction with artworks, we are now faced with complicated possibilities of remote and instantaneous intervention exclusive to the digital medium. Furthermore, the

author underlines how the potential for dynamic interaction in digital art goes well beyond the straightforward ‘pointing and clicking’ that provides nothing more than a sophisticated way of seeing work or the sort of interactivity where a user’s input prompts one particular answer. Digital art frequently relies on participative, multi-user input and is not always collaborative in the word’s traditional meaning.

6. TTI TECHNOLOGIES, META-OPERATIVITY AND INTERACTIVITY

In a recent essay, Paul (Paul [2020]) argued digital art is now «predominantly understood as digital-born, computable art that is created, stored, and distributed via digital technologies and uses the features of these technologies as a medium». According to this interpretation, artworks produced by Text-to-Image (TTI) technologies, could be considered as forms of digital art. Text-to-image AI generators are applications that create a picture that matches the text prompt that serves as the user’s input for a natural language description of an image (Reviriego [2022]). Softwares such as *Dall-e 2*, *Imagen*, *Colab* and *Midjourney* allow the users to obtain get the visual depiction of a written text by drawing on vast images’ databases, associating them with tags, words, and phrases, and then producing a synthetic image.

In the contemporary scenario, an aspect of interest that concern the relationship between the technological re-mediation processes and the meta-operative nature of human creativity is, in fact, the emergence of TTI, which allows the creation of images through text commands. A meaningful example is represented by Jason Allen, who in September 2022 won the Colorado State Fair’s annual art competition with a work titled *Théâtre D’opéra Spatial*, created with Midjourney⁵.

⁴ Mark Hansen, for example, takes the perspective of reception aesthetics to examine the digital age new understanding of the image and its new concepts of the body, supporting his philosophical theories by thorough analyses of media art.

⁵ In particular, Allen won the prize dedicated to the division for “digital art/digitally manipulated photography” (the rules of the category allowed artistic practices that used digital technology as part of the creative or presentation process).

By generating images from natural language description, digital images generated with deep generative models might revolutionize the manipulation of visual symbols and, as Oppenlaender argued (Oppenlaender [2022]), a main question arises: how does human creativity fit into the process of creating images using text-to-image systems? The author argues that users cede partial control to artificial intelligence when producing text-based art (TTI). As a result, human creativity in text-to-image synthesis arises from human interaction with AI and the practices that develop as a result of that interaction, rather than from the final result. At the same time, a community-driven, developing an ecosystem of tools and resources shapes and informs the practices related to TTI and its peculiar form of creativity.

If the creativity in text-to-image synthesis arises from a linguistic human interaction with AI, and the practices that develop as a result of that interaction, can text-based be considered a form of creative and interactive artistic expression?

An aspect that allows to discuss the issue of the creative features involved in the use of TTI, regards the meta-operative processes involved. The meta-operative attitude, consisting in an internal and distinctive feature of human technical behavior, is expressed in the use of tools not just to pursue a specific goal, but in using them to build further ones. It is the aspect that distinguishes the one-dimensional operative behavior of non-human animals from the multi-dimensional one which characterizes our species. Garroni's analysis of meta-operative and creative traits of the human technical specificity (Garroni [1978]) leads to define new implications, aspects and dimensions in contemporary research on the processes of re-mediation that are rapidly and increasingly modifying expressive human behavior. The pragmatic feature of technical distancing has recently been addressed by Montani (Montani [2020]), who applied the notion of meta-operativity to the contemporary scenario, defined by the pervasive presence of digital devices. Such an increasing presence, according to this perspective, attributes central importance to the dialectic

of meta-operations. The author argued that meta-operativity might either evolve towards self-referential escalation, a process of anaesthetization that would reduce the contingency of our environment, or move in the direction of its enrichment and re-organization. Which of the two regards the most recent development of TTI? According to Oppenlaender, «the images may not be the fruit of human creativity. Instead, the images are a result of computational creativity» (Oppenlaender [2022]: 7). Nevertheless, on the one hand, the artistic use of text-to-image art is comparable to how photographers choose and organizes pictures from a broader library. On the one hand, the process use of Text-to-image technologies' systems works iteratively, and is exploration-driven, contextualizing the curative-creative feature of TTI within a wider process of image generation.

The use of prompting is a meta-operative skill, which requires a peculiar use of language, whose effectiveness depends on one's familiarity with the training set as well as their knowledge of and experience with the process of modifying prompts, named prompt engineering. As the author underlines, the effective use of prompt modifiers requires understanding the system's training data, the setup parameters, and the aspect ratio of a given topic.

7. TTI AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA ART: NEW POSSIBLE SCENARIOS?

The issue of the Text-to-Image Art's meta-operativity can be referred to the process, the prompts and the system.

Firstly, the process implemented to generate the picture might be the outcome of a laborious iterative process that involves a complex interaction with the system that defines prompt engineering for text-to-image synthesis. Secondly, the issue of the prompt engineering is further complicated by the fact that some Text to Image models⁶ accept not only textual prompts, but also images.

⁶ For example, *VQGAN-CLIP*.

Thirdly, numerous setup options on specific text-to-image systems may be changed individually to improve the outcomes. Understanding and modifying the setup variables is essential for differentiating between novice use of default settings and skilled and intentional understanding of text-to-image creation. In TTI, the images are the result of an input offered by a human, which is based on a meta-operative process, on the application of linguistic prompt within a constantly evolving setting, characterized by principles within the specific settings constituted by softwares that turns lines of text into hyper-realistic graphics, and can give origin to a creative behavior. Nevertheless, in its actual configuration, the interactive dynamic that characterizes text-to-image technologies refers exclusively to the image creation process, while the fruition of the artwork does not involve forms of generative feedbacks.

In the case of interactive art, the relationship between the artwork, audience and artist is reconfigured with an emphasis on viewer engagement and interaction with the work. Instead, in the actual configuration of TTI, the role played by digital technologies regards only the processual dimension managed by the artist and does not concern the mutual relationship between the viewer and the artwork.

The possibility to enable several ways of exploring and adding to a virtual artwork beyond the viewers' receptive experience is illustrated by Roberto Diodato (Diodato [2021]).

According to the author, a relevant investigation of interactivity in connection with the degrees of unpredictability made possible by virtual devices is particularly prominent in the work of the studio Fuse*. In the media performance and video installation *Dökk*, held in 2017, the Fuse* group designed ten consecutive rooms in which the interactive relationship between the viewer and the performer, mediated via digital devices, defined unique sound features and visual connotations. Six music tracks accompanied the video installation and were activated in response to algorithms that analyzed media messages that circulated in real-time, allowing the audience to

have differing degrees of influence over how the installation sounds and looked visually. By challenging the author's independent realization of the artwork, the described experiences created space-times able to foster a participatory dynamic and express the aesthetic potential of interactive media art. In our view, the possibilities that the text-to-image synthesis process offers in terms of allowing individual interventions to partially modify the resulting image – if merged with the forms of generative feedback typical of interactive media art – might disclose new directions made possible by virtual devices for further research on reactive and interactive scenarios.

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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 glasses¹).

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

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 study² 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 example³) but also on that, perhaps even more pertinent, of the construction of a narrative and discursive dimension⁴ 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-

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 methodological 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 topics⁵. 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

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-semanticization 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 Sánchez-Cotán’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 Enunciation⁶. This is what virtuosity is all about: doing very difficult things

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 website⁷. 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 Enunciatee⁸. In the case of Prada VR, it is very clear: the journey through

⁷ <https://www.prada.com/it/it/pradasphere/special-projects/2020/prada-vr.html>

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 thought 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 device⁹. 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

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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Virtuality+: The physical body in virtual reality and the path toward augmented virtuality¹

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Abstract. While many scholars have decried the erasure of the body in virtual reality (VR), this paper focuses on the body – and the physical reality for which it stands – as a critical component of any experience of virtual reality. Specifically, studying VR from the perspective of the physical body allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the unique reality of this «virtual» reality. Moreover, this paper argues that the body should not be seen as a distraction from the immersive potential of VR, but rather as a potential tool for augmenting what virtual reality can currently offer.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, body, virtuality, reality, phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin with an anecdote. On various occasions, either in conversations with colleagues or during conference presentations, I heard someone decry the fact that when they looked down at their body when immersed in a virtual reality (VR) environment, they were surprised, even disoriented, by the absence of a body; either theirs or even that of an avatar. I have since found several forceful assertions to that effect in scholarship on VR from the 1990s to this day (see Balsamo [1995]; Murray, Sixsmith [1999]; Popat [2016]; Dalmasso [2019]; Zimanyi, Ben Ayoun [2019]). I am of a differing opinion. Namely, that we do really have a body in VR, albeit one whose nature and qualities merit more thoughtful consideration. In the following essay, I want to argue that the body – and the physical reality which it embodies – is not so much «missing in action», as the title of Sita Popat’s insightful article puts it, but perhaps simply misunderstood. By extension, my analysis of the body will lead me to make broader claims regarding the potential of con-

¹ This paper’s title is in reference to David J. Chalmers’ *Reality+*, a major interlocutor of this project.

sciously integrating physical reality in one's experience of virtual reality.

In what follows, I take the body as a central object of study, but also as a tool for approaching physical and virtual «realities» in VR. That is to say that while this essay is inspired by David J. Chalmers' recent work on the (techno)philosophy of virtual worlds and the issue of «reality» therein (Chalmers [2022]), I also make use of a phenomenological toolkit to analyze how different realities *appear to* and *function for* an embodied user. To begin, I borrow from Chalmers' discussion of what I will call the «reality status» of virtual entities, namely the issue of if and how these special entities may be considered real. This will allow me to argue for a similar rejection of the outmoded distinction between «virtual» reality and what some might call «real» reality. I depart from Chalmers, however, in my focus on a phenomenological approach to the experience of virtual environments from the perspective of my own corporeal body².

Central to this approach is the belief that being attentive to one's perception of virtual worlds, objects and bodies can reveal the complex intermingling of the physical and virtual entailed by VR, or by any experience on the reality-virtuality continuum (Milgram et al. [1995]). In fact, to dispel the idea that our bodies are absent in VR, I will put forth an alternative to the typical opposition between virtuality and reality by suggesting that bodies are best understood as occupying a liminal position and as contributing to a form of «augmented virtuality», a term I borrow and adapt from Paul Milgram et al. (Ibid.). This will entail

² Because it is based on a phenomenological account of my own experience of virtual reality experiences, this discussion is limited to consumer-grade VR head-mounted displays. To avoid diluting my arguments by speculating on experiences I did not personally have, I will omit devices such as haptic suits and gloves or olfactory attachments. While these exist and while they might eventually further the claims I make in this essay, they currently remain out of reach for most and would therefore take away from the following discussion of contemporary VR.

refocusing the presence of the body as an important vector toward immersion in virtual worlds, rather than as a distraction from the virtual, as it so often has been considered.

HOW REAL IS VIRTUAL REALITY?³

One of Chalmers' most resonant claims about virtual objects is that they are, in fact, real. The author makes this point throughout his book, but one example stands out in the context of this paper. This concerns the now famous reality-virtuality continuum introduced by Milgram et al. (Ibid.). The continuum describes all manner of mixed realities – what we would call today extended reality (XR). These are bookended by reality and virtuality, where «reality» names the physical environment a user inhabits, and «virtuality» is exemplified by «a VR environment [...] in which the participant-observer is totally immersed in a completely synthetic world» (Ibid.: 283). The authors are careful to point out that reality and virtuality should in no way be thought of as antithetical to one another, being that they are simply «opposite ends of a *continuum*» (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Chalmers (Chalmers [2022]: 236) criticizes this naming convention, «because it bakes in the premise that virtuality is opposed to reality. [...] A better name would be the *physicality-virtuality continuum*». If Chalmers rejects the opposition between virtuality and reality, how does he define the notion of the virtual in relation to the real? More importantly, how does physicality play into virtual reality as it exists on this new spectrum?

For Chalmers, virtual objects might not be *the* real entities to which a given word refers in common parlance, but they are real nonetheless. Put simply, virtual objects exist virtually just as physical entities exist physically; each are merely different instantiations of a given concept in their respective reality. Virtual pets, vehicles, and objects are all real, even though some are harder to consider as real as their physical counterparts.

³ I borrow this title from Chalmers (2022): 192.

This raises a number of questions. How can we explain this appreciable difference in the reality status of certain virtual entities over others? What are Chalmers' criteria for considering these virtual objects as real? Finally, how do bodies – and a phenomenological perspective more broadly – affect our understanding of how real «virtual» reality truly is?

Out of the many ways Chalmers argues that virtual objects, worlds, and phenomena are real, three main criteria merit our attention⁴. To summarize, these relate to metaphysics, appearances, and functionality. The first way virtual objects can be said to be real is that they are in fact «realized» by bits in much the same way that physical objects are the product of an underlying structure of particles and atoms, themselves made up of fundamental quantum processes⁵. With this explanation comes great limitations, however. Being that virtual objects exist in a different manner than we do, this criterion is also impossible for us to judge. It might tell us that virtual objects are real in and of themselves, but not whether they are real *for us*.

This is where a phenomenological approach comes into play, asking us to consider how virtual phenomena appear to us, and how their appearance relates to that of their physical counterparts. The second of Chalmers' criteria is helpful in this regard, as it relates to the appearances of virtual objects. As Chalmers (Ibid.: 66-67) indicates, VR

⁴ There are five criteria in total: «Does it really exist? Does it have causal powers? Is it independent of our minds? Is it as it seems? Is it a genuine X? These five criteria – existence, causal powers, mind-independence, non-illusoriness, and genuineness – capture five different strands in our concept of being real. When we say that something is real, we sometimes mean one of these things and sometimes a mix of them» (Chalmers [2022]: 114).

⁵ N. Katherine Hayles offers a similar explanation of this virtuality/reality opposition: «*Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns*. The definition plays off the duality at the heart of the condition of virtuality – materiality on the one hand, information on the other. Normally virtuality is associated with computer simulations that put the body into a feedback loop with a computer-generated image» (Hayles [1999]: 13-14). Original emphasis.

satisfies the «idealist» view according to which «appearance is reality [...] If something appears real, and there's no appearance to the contrary, it is real». In one example the author gives, if a virtual apple appears red, then it really is (virtually) red (Ibid.: 210)⁶. At first glance, this would seem to align with the phenomenological doctrine according to which considerations of one's perception of the external world are given priority over supposedly *a priori* knowledge of reality (see Merleau-Ponty [1945]; Zahavi [2018]). However, a major caveat of this criterion is that it only functions – when at all – within the limited sensorial range accounted for by contemporary VR headsets, the nature of which Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith describe as predominantly optical (Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 316). At the time of writing, it would be more appropriate to say that dominant VR HMDs are *audio-visual* in nature. The fact remains, however that other senses (e.g., touch, smell, taste, etc.) are excluded from all but the most niche immersive technologies.

Indeed, since Chalmers likes to discuss virtual worlds in their (as yet unrealized) ultimate potential, he often glosses over the fact that «[c]urrent VR headsets achieve *audiovisual* immersion [...]. They don't achieve *bodily* immersion, in which you experience your whole body as part of the world» (Chalmers [2022]: 189). While certain objects in virtual worlds might appear a certain way, they only do so for the eyes and ears. This means that if we leave behind the visual connotations of the word «appearance», it becomes clear that virtual phenomena do not appear to be real to the nose, mouth, skin, and other sense organs (e.g., in terms of temperature, equilibrium, pain, etc.). Indeed, as Sita Popat (Popat [2016]: 375) remarks, quoting Anne Cranny-Francis «“[o]ne cannot not

⁶ «For now, I'll just say that an object is virtually red when it looks red to us, at least to normal human observers under normal conditions for VR, such as wearing a headset. This is parallel to a common view of physical colors. What does it mean to say an apple is red? Very roughly, an apple is red when it normally *looks red*, at least to normal observers under normal conditions for ordinary vision, such as daylight» (Chalmers [2022]: 210).

touch, so one is always connected to the world – to other people, species, objects, phenomena”. But in a virtual environment the experience is the opposite: the user cannot touch the virtual objects, people, and phenomena, although she can touch her own body and the physical objects around it (which may not be visible in the virtual environment)». This limitation is damning for appearance as a criterion of reality in the context of VR. Indeed, a phenomenological approach to the body’s place and potential within virtual environments will allow us to see in the latter half of this paper that these other senses challenge the impression that virtuality can be considered real.

The final of the three criteria I wish to evoke at this moment relates to the functionality of virtual objects as it compares to that of their physical homologues⁷. On several occasions throughout his book, Chalmers seeks to demonstrate that virtual objects have «causal powers», namely that they «can affect one another. A virtual bat can hit a virtual ball. An avatar can scoop up a virtual treasure, and so on» (Chalmers [2022]: 196). Functionality and causal powers are particularly useful tools when discussing virtual realism. While the word «cat» typically refers to physical cats rather than virtual cats, context clues allow us to understand that when I say I saw a cat in VR, I am referring to a (real) virtual cat. Part of Chalmers’s project of bringing causal powers in conversation with the issue of language is to reject a kind of absolute internalism that would imply the meaning and function of things are independent of their context. Instead, he focuses on the function a given object serves within a virtual world, specifically as it relates to its being used by human agents. As Chalmers writes:

In some cases, human minds may play a role in making an object what it is. What makes a table the

object that it is? In part, that we use it as a table. A statue is what it is in part because we built it and regard it as a statue. Money is what it is because we treat it as money. These things are also true for virtual tables, virtual statues, and virtual money. Physical objects like statues are made of atoms, perhaps with a contribution by human minds. In the same way, digital objects like virtual statues are made of bits, perhaps with a contribution by human minds. (Ibid.: 195-196)

In other words, a (virtual) table deserves to be called just that if it serves for me the function of being a table (e.g., a surface upon which to set down a given object, or perhaps something I can climb onto if need be). Where I start to disagree with Chalmers, at least to a certain degree, is when he writes (Ibid.: 196): «Virtual objects can also affect *us*». To be sure, virtual object *can* and *do* affect us in powerful ways, but these are limited in both scope and efficacy. I return here to my earlier critique of the audiovisual limitation of contemporary VR. The causal powers of virtual objects are most salient when it comes to their visual or auditory capacities. A virtual river might *sound* like the real thing, but perhaps it won’t make me wet – maybe not even virtually so – as I would expect water to do in physical reality. A virtual flower might *look* like the real thing, but it probably won’t feel or smell like the real plant. In a curious reversal of Shakespeare’s famous adage, a virtual rose might keep the name and visual appearance, but it would lack the power to smell as sweet, as well as the risk of pricking me with its thorns⁸.

The logical continuation Chalmers’ arguments is that, «while virtual reality isn’t the *same* as ordinary physical reality (at least, not unless physical reality is itself a simulation), it’s a genuine real-

⁷ We find echoes of this criterion in the way the editors of this issue framed «virtualization», from the perspective of Grant Tavinor’s recent *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality* (2021): «a transformative process through which something maintains its function, while being instantiated in a non-customary way».

⁸ Chalmers addresses this limitation when he writes that «objects have many grades of causal powers. [...] These virtual objects affect only our perception; they have the causal powers to make you experience a virtual elephant or a virtual mountain. [...] But if you think of reality as coming in degrees, you could reasonably think of these decorative objects as being less real than interactive objects» (Chalmers [2022]: 197).

ity all the same» (Ibid.: 202; original emphasis)⁹. However, what becomes clear in the counterexamples I have proposed here is that the reality status of virtual objects is not as easy to determine when we consider how the external world is perceived by users inhabiting bodies that are physical, rather than virtual. Adding the body to this discussion not only complicates the debate around whether virtual entities are real, but it also offers a path toward a potential resolution in the form of a hybrid «augmented virtuality».

WHERE AM I?¹⁰

To set the stage for my analysis of the corporeal body in virtual reality, allow me to describe a unique encounter I had with virtual reality. I have selected *The Book of Distance* (Randall Okita, 2020) for this preliminary analysis as it presents a virtual world which exemplifies some of the previously described criteria for judging the reality status of virtual reality, as well as some of their most salient limitations. I saw *The Book of Distance* for the first time in June 2020, during a virtual edition of the Cannes film festival. Having cleared all the furniture in the living room of my modest apartment, I put on my Oculus (now Meta) Quest headset, along with a pair of handheld controllers. I was instantly transported to a space that was mostly black and empty, save for a pedestal on which lay a book which I needed to open in order to start the story. It is important to note at this point that I did not, in fact, have a body in this space, save for a pair of floating hands mapped to my controllers. Nevertheless, guided by shining particles I opened the book cover with my right hand and was greeted by a short introduc-

tory paragraph. Upon turning the page once more, I found real photos of the filmmaker and his grandfather playing horseshoes, as the text behind one photograph explained. When I grabbed the horseshoe that was lying on the opposing page, a patch of bare ground emerged from the darkness to my left with a stake conspicuously sticking out of it, allowing me to test my skill at throwing the weightless object. At this point, a stylized avatar of Randall Okita appeared, telling me about the way his grandfather taught him to play the game. From there, and for the duration of the thirty-minute experience, the filmmaker invited me on a journey through different tableaux retracing his grandfather's steps from Hiroshima in 1933 to western Canada, and eventually to a Japanese-Canadian incarceration camp during the Second World War.

Throughout the narrative, I was invited to manipulate different objects (letters, photographs, newspapers, personal belongings, etc.) and perform various actions (write a letter, take pictures, plant strawberries, etc.). While the director chose to render this virtual world in a stylized manner rather than in a photorealistic style, all the elements of the scenery did bear the appearance of the physical objects they represented (see figure 1). Even when more realistic objects appeared (notably the real family photos which showed up when I used the camera to capture key moments in the story), the fact remains that all objects that could be seen within the virtual environment appeared to be as they are: a camera, a field of strawberries, a house, a rocking chair, a black and white photograph, etc. Upon first inspection, then, the world of *The Book of Distance* does seem to satisfy the three criteria described in the previous section: the various virtual objects are «realized» by bits, which enable their presence and are crucial to their appearing before us as they are; they «appear» to be real and bear all the markers that allow us to identify different objects as what they really are; finally, they «function» in the way we would expect them to (i.e., the camera takes pictures, the mallet helps us drive stakes into the ground, etc.).

Upon closer inspection, however, it is not hard to see where Chalmers' criteria fall short. While

⁹ The issue of whether we live in a simulation is central to Chalmers' project, but it is beyond the scope of the present essay. However, a more thoughtful critique of Chalmers' handling of that concept would be needed to highlight some of the shortcomings of his arguments on the matter.

¹⁰ This subtitle is in reference to Daniel Dennett's essay of the same name (1978).



[Figure 1. Despite their stylized appearance, many of the objects are interactable in *The Book of Distance* (Randall Okita, 2020). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada].

the metaphysical criterion is beyond our capacity to evaluate, the other two criteria are easier to challenge through phenomenological analysis. To begin, objects in *The Book of Distance* may bear the visual and auditory appearance of their counterparts in physical reality, but they fail to translate any of their other sensory characteristics (e.g., the weightlessness of the horseshoe and other objects, the complete absence of odour in vastly different environments [from the sea to a farm in rural Alberta], the lack of distinct texture in different objects, etc.)¹¹. This demonstrates the short-

¹¹ This is a recurring problem in virtual reality, as suggested by scholarship from the 1990s which likewise highlight the lack of sensory feedback in VR. In the context of touch, Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith write: «Similarly, Hayles (1992) describes the act of closing the hand in VR to grasp an object. While the person sees the virtual object, often there is no kinesthetic feedback of touch. “Proprioceptive sense flows out of the body to meet the artifact, but since there is no material object, it returns a feedback loop that acts to de-materialize the body”» (Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 333). See also Hayles (1993): 168.

coming of the second criterion (appearance), at least as far as current virtual reality technologies are concerned. Shifting to causal powers, there are only a few predetermined occasions when these are fully functional. In most other cases, I could not choose to pick up an object and use it in a way that was not intentionally programmed as such in the making of the film. In these moments where I might have wanted to use a given object as I pleased, it became clear that the virtual objects lacked many of the causal powers an equivalent physical object would normally possess.

The limitations of Chalmers’ criteria are made even more apparent when I attend to my immediate physical sensations, specifically as they concern senses other than vision and hearing. When extending my attention to phenomena that are not audiovisual, I cannot help but be drawn away from the virtual realm and back to physical reality. Paying attention to my tactile sensations, the physical dominates over the virtual as I shift to describing the feeling of the wrist strap, the controller’s weight and texture in my hands, the weight of the headset on my brow and on the

ridge of my nose, the head strap tightly cinched around the base of my skull, and perhaps even the uncanny proximity of the Fresnel lenses to my glasses¹². I could even expand my field of sensations and attend to the warmth of the headset, the build-up of fog on the lenses obscuring my vision of the virtual world, or the smell of the rubber membrane pressed around my eyes and nose. Broadening my attention still further outwards, I could also describe my awareness of my partner's presence and movement within our cramped living space and the scent of coffee brewing in the adjoining kitchen, two more elements which contradict what my eyes and ears told me was happening within the virtual world.

While I did feel a characteristic sense of presence within the virtual environment of *The Book of Distance*, a phenomenological description of my immediate sensations makes clear to me the inexorable presence of the corporeal body within a virtual reality which is predicated upon the exclusion of all things physical. What I aim to demonstrate in describing all these incursions of the physical world is not to say that I consider these virtual environments and virtual objects to be any less real than Chalmers would consider them to be. Simply, I wish to highlight the complex and hybrid character of any current experience of VR. While we see and hear real virtual objects, we are also always sensing phenomena that come from the physical world which, in many cases, are framed as roadblocks toward immersion within virtual realities. Conversely, we cannot see those very same things which we sense in the physical world. Case in point being the corporeal body, whose status as a physically real yet virtually non-existent entity merits further attention.

¹² Interestingly, Chalmers does address the presence of the screen, dismissing it as phenomenologically invisible: «In the case of a VR headset, the case against seeing screens is even clearer because the screen isn't visible. Instead, you see right through the screen, all the way to virtual objects, such as avatars and buildings, in a three-dimensional space» (Chalmers [2022]: 208).

VIRTUALLY PRESENT, PHYSICALLY INVISIBLE¹³

The absence of one's physical body from virtual reality has been highlighted by many scholars since the technology's earliest iterations. In what follows, I offer a brief overview of some comments on the perceived absence of the body in VR, followed by a discussion of what this absence represents, and finally a possible solution to this conundrum. The recent revival of VR in the 2010s brought along a wave of scholarship on the body's absence in virtual environments. For example, Anna Caterina Dalmaso (Dalmaso [2019]: 109) writes of the person experiencing Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena* (2017) that: «She feels her own body, but she cannot see it». Sita Popat makes a similar argument, noting on several occasions how she could not see her body in VR, describing it as «missing in action»¹⁴. More recently, Eszter Zimanyi and Emma Ben Ayoun have echoed this concern for the «visual absence» of the body in VR, which the authors also describe in terms of a forcible erasure (Zimanyi, Ben Ayoun [2019]: 17).

While all three examples speak of the physical body as being invisible, missing, or erased within VR, the authors are ultimately describing a kind of phenomenological confusion that is at the heart of most experiences of virtual reality. Popat (Popat [2016]: 371) says it best when she describes her experience in VR as being «neither bodily nor metabodily anchored; instead, it was shifting and slipping, simultaneously both and neither. [...] this was the experience of a single subject with blurring boundaries and definitions». Already in the 1990s, this phenomenological uncertainty was

¹³ This is the subtitle for Alejandro González Iñárritu's monumental VR exhibit *Carne y Arena* (2017).

¹⁴ A few examples are: «And yet, glancing toward where my senses were screaming that my body should be, I saw nothing. My body was, I will argue, "missing in action"» (Popat [2016]: 361); «My body was highlighted by its visual absence [...] The visual absence of my body, missing as object, focused all of my attention on my action as subject» (Ibid.: 365); «my missing, yet acting body» (Ibid.: 366).

being described by scholars of the nascent technology. In *How we Became Posthuman*, for example, N. Katherine Hayles remarks that: «Questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage in this situation, for the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen» (Hayles [1999]: 27). Meanwhile, Murray and Sixsmith describe a similar duality when they ask, «how is it that while we are physically sitting in a room at a computer terminal we can also be phenomenally embodied in virtual representations?» (Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 315). One of the answers the authors propose for this ability to feel embodied in VR over one's immediate physical environment is that it hinges upon a «dampening of awareness in reality and a heightened acceptance of the surrounding virtuality» (Ibid.: 324). In other words, a user's ability to direct their intentionality toward their virtual surroundings rather than their physical reality depends on what Anne Balsamo calls a «willful repression of the material body» (Balsamo [1995]: 123). With that said, the impossibility of fully repressing the physical aspects of our embodied experiences may explain the phenomenological confusion I alluded to earlier.

The rationale behind this erasure of the physical realm – and the corporeal body along with it – derives from the impression that the physical distracts and detracts from the virtual. This is not to deny Chalmers' arguments as to the reality of virtual entities. Simply, the nature of their reality must be recognized as different from that of the physical reality upon which is predicated our very mode of being in the world. Once again, while virtual objects might be real in and of themselves, they are not necessarily real *for us*. The reverse is also true: my body might be physically real, but that doesn't mean it can be real in a virtual context. As virtual and physical phenomena do not always mix, it becomes clear why a privileged strategy when designing for VR has been to shut the user off from physical reality (including their body) in favour of a more undivided attention toward virtual stimuli. With all signs pointing to this erasure as a crucial component of a flaw-

less immersion into virtual worlds, it is important to remember that the physical cannot, in fact, be eliminated. Recall that «[o]ne cannot not touch» (Anne Cranny-Francis, quoted in Popat [2016]: 375). Contemporary immersive interfaces are not «transparent» enough to allow for an immediate experience of virtual reality. Even if I attempt to fully immerse myself in a virtual world, the physical will always be either sharing my attention (the weight of the headset pressing on my nose and face, etc.) or just barely out of reach, constantly threatening to break into my field of sensation and jeopardizing my appreciation of a virtual reality. Dalmasso's description of this phenomenon is worth quoting in full:

In fact, it should be noted that what is supposed to be – according to the rhetoric of total immersion – an hermetically sealed and seamless reality, on the contrary, is pierced by a number of discontinuities in perception [...] As a matter of fact, in virtual environments the experiencer faces the continuous emergence of a fundamental discrepancy between the virtual visible world and the physical presence of her own living body. (Dalmasso [2019]: 105)

One solution I would like to propose to this perceived discrepancy between the virtual and the physical comes in the form of a change in perspective. Indeed, rather than seeing incursions of the physical realm into the virtual as discrepancies, could we imagine a case where the physical and virtual synergize? In other words, I want to suggest that the physical might serve to *augment* what virtual reality can do. Moreover, this solution would also put an end to critiques of the body's absence in VR by insisting on the crucial role the body can play toward the creation of this augmented virtuality.

TOWARD AUGMENTED VIRTUALITY

Rather than speaking of an erasure of the body in VR, Chalmers reminds us that: «A human being in a virtual environment typically has *both* a physical body (sitting at home interacting with

a computer) and a virtual body (in an adventure in a virtual world). At different times, someone's sense of having either a physical body or a virtual body may dominate» (Chalmers [2022]: 221). More importantly, the author is careful to insist on the fact that in the context of contemporary virtual reality, «awareness of one's virtual body is *mediated* by awareness of one's physical body, tying the two senses together. For example, you may know where your virtual arms are by knowing where your physical arms are» (Ibid.; original emphasis). Chalmers puts into words here the main counter-argument I have always brought up in response to those decrying the lack, erasure, or invisibility of the body in VR; I do not necessarily need to *see* my body because I very well *feel* my body.

There are countless tasks for which I do not need to have visual feedback of my body in order to succeed (e.g., touch-typing, walking, conversing with someone, etc.). In these contexts, I need only feel, see, or hear the progress of my action (e.g., the words appearing on screen, my destination moving closer to me, the reactions of my interlocutor). In some cases, my body might furnish me with other kinds of feedback which can inform my actions, but I do not need to see my body to understand these sensations and act accordingly. As far as these kinds of actions are concerned, visual knowledge of the body is not a necessary condition. In fact, Murray and Sixsmith remark that «in real life, for much of the time, the body recedes from awareness» (Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 327). On the contrary, the authors note that: «Only with various forms of corporeal breakdown do we pay attention to the body, and at these times the body appears to be “other”» (Ibid.: 323). If the body's absence from our attention in physical reality is the norm rather than the exception, it follows that the perceived (visual) absence of the body from a virtual environment should not take away from one's enjoyment of virtual reality. However, understanding this requires that we move away from either extremity of the reality-virtuality continuum and into the murky waters of «augmented virtuality».

Already in 1995, Milgram et al. defined «augmented virtuality» in terms of a «completely

graphic display environments, either completely immersive, partially immersive, or otherwise, to which some amount of (video or texture mapped) “reality” has been added» (Milgram et al. [1995]: 285)¹⁵. While Milgram et al. describe their project as «limited strictly to visual displays» (Ibid.: 282), I would like to borrow their concept to imagine more ways in which «some amount of reality» could be added to an otherwise fully immersive audiovisual experience. Since we cannot do away with the body, I want to argue that VR designers have much to gain from taking the body and its physical context into account as a tool for *augmenting* virtual reality¹⁶. In the remainder of this essay, I go over several projects which suggests ways in which physical reality can serve to augment virtual reality, rather than needing to be willfully repressed for the latter's benefit. More importantly, instead of relying on complex technical solutions (e.g., haptic suits, olfactive headsets, etc.), the following examples make use of the always already present physical body.

There is much that the (invisible) physical body can bring to the table in virtual environments. In my earlier review of Chalmers' criteria for the reality status of virtual entities, I argued that while some virtual object may appear real to the eye, they seldom appear so to the other senses. Similarly, while Chalmers suggests that «the virtual body is the locus of my perception», he overlooks the fact that current technologies merely allow for it to be the locus of my audiovisual perception; it is not the locus of tactile, olfactory, or kinaesthetic sensations. This is where the physical body can come into play. One solution toward the creation of augmented virtuality experiences

¹⁵ Augmented virtuality is to virtual environments as augmented *reality* is to the physical world: a step back from one of the continuum's extremities, leading to complex and productive interactions of both regimes.

¹⁶ Dalmasso hints at such a process when she highlights this passage from the presskit for *Carne y Arena*: «With *Carne y Arena*, Iñárritu turns the exchange between vision and experience into a process of osmosis in which the duality between the organic body and the artificial body is dissolved» (Dalmasso [2019]: 103).

comes from Murray and Sixsmith, who remark that narrative justifications can easily repurpose incursions of the physical realm into tools for but-tressing immersion into virtual worlds (see Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 325)¹⁷. In Assaf Machnes' *Borderline* (2018), for example, viewers are put in the position of an agent at the Israel-Egypt border, looking through binoculars at the surrounding desert. Here, the head-mounted display (HMD) becomes integrated into the story as a proxy for the binoculars, making its weight and position justified within the diegesis. The same can be said for *Virtual Virtual Reality* (Tender Claws, 2017), where players take on the role of humans who travel between virtual worlds by putting on different head-mounted displays. Rather than repurposing the HMD as a prop in the story, *VVR* uses the very way we enter VR as a game mechanic. In both examples, this lessens the feeling that the real (physical) HMD is a distraction within the virtual reality experience.

There are yet other ways in which the immutable presence of the physical body may be repurposed by VR creators. During Venice Immersive 2022, festival attendees were given a single grape to carefully touch, smell, and savour as part of the conclusion to *Okawari* (Landia Egal and Amaury La Burthe, 2022), an experience which deals with overconsumption. In *The Anticipation of Rain* (Naima Karim, 2022), visitors were handed two sticks which exuded odours designed evoke the scent of rain at key points in the narrative, thereby also tapping into the user's own memories. Perhaps the most recognizable use of the physical body as a tool for fostering immersion in virtual worlds is *Carne y Arena*, which asks visitors to walk barefoot in sand as a way of helping them feel grounded in its desert setting. Mathieu Pradat's ongoing project *Rencontres* echoes this last experience by having its users walk barefoot

in water. Finally, in the context of a film festival which hosted its collection of VR films next to a large fountain, I was pleasantly surprised that the smell and sound of the rushing water supported my immersion into a body of water in *Ashes to Ashes* (Steye Hallema and Jamille van Wijn-gaarden, 2016).

These examples show that the physical body is all but absent from virtual reality. More importantly, it need not be seen as a distraction: taste, touch, and smell can be borrowed from the physical body and added to the otherwise strictly audiovisual modern HMDs to augment the range of stimuli virtual experiences can use. That being said, it is just as easy for the body and its ability to perceive phenomena in physical reality to incur upon, and distract from, virtual reality. However serendipitous in the case of this last VR film, the same water fountain became a grating distraction when viewing the other pieces in the selection, including *Borderline*, whose desert setting was negatively impacted by the incursion of this physical element. While physical augmentations of the virtual are possible and potentially powerful, they remain to this day the exception, rather than the norm.

A much better appreciation of the body's ability to augment virtual reality experiences requires a shift to more complex forms of interaction, namely ones where flesh and blood actors are co-present with the user. Two examples come to mind in this respect: *The Machine to be Another* (MTBA) (BeAnother Lab, 2014) and *Eve, Dance is an Unplaceable Place* (Compagnie Voix & Omnipresenz, 2018). *Eve* has users watch a 360° video of dancers, which is precisely matched in the physical world by dancers reproducing the movements of the characters seen within the HMD. Every time a physical contact seen inside the headset is corroborated in the physical context, the body serves to augment the valence of the virtual world. *Machine to be Another* goes further still. In *MTBA*, two users are invited to put on head-mounted displays which allow them to see the world from the other's perspective. Each person is asked to follow the other's movements, instructions which usu-

¹⁷ Murray and Sixsmith write: «If there is a purpose for having peripherals, such as the dataglove, within the narrative of the virtual environment itself, then it may be possible that the dataglove becomes transparent in the same way that Heidegger's hammer and Merleau-Ponty's cane do» (Murray, Sixsmith [1999]: 325).

ally lead to slow movements of the hands, touching one hand with the other, touching one's legs, and so on. All throughout the experience, users *see* a body which is not theirs, but they also *feel* the tactile sensations that exactly match what their eyes show them. Not only do these hands appear real (both to the eyes and to touch), but they also function as you would expect hands to do in physical reality. That is, of course, because they are real physical hands, even though they are not yours. At key points during the experience, a pair of docents comes into play, touching each user's hands at the exact same time to further accentuate the functional realism of these «virtual» hands. Although it is far from your typical virtual reality experience, *MTBA* remains to date one of the most convincing uses of the user's body to augment the capacities of HMDs.

CONCLUSION

Far from being missing in action, the body is ever present in the experience of virtual reality. And while some experiences do make the physical body invisible within virtual worlds, and others depend on the «willful repression of the material body» (Balsamo [1995]: 123), others still have made use of the body as a way of mitigating the limitations of current VR technologies, both in terms of the appearance and functionality of the virtual worlds they offer. This «augmented virtuality», as I have called it here following Milgram et al. (1995), is not meant to discredit the reality status of virtual entities or to argue that the physical is «more real» than the virtual. Rather, its goal is to highlight the productive ways in which the physical and virtual can benefit from each other's affordances. It is also to underline how rich the zone between both extremes of the reality-virtuality continuum can be.

Already, VR experiences designed as physical installations in so-called LBE spaces (Location-Based Entertainment) have experimented with ways of including physical objects, room layouts, sounds, smells, and other «physical» elements as augmen-

tations to virtual experiences. *Carne y Arena* has users walking barefoot in sand, while *Okawari* introduces a real piece of fruit for users to enjoy. Contrary to the unpredictable context of at-home consumer VR experiences, the greater control over the experiential conditions afforded to LBE spaces makes them a more fitting candidate for investigating the potential of augmented virtuality. In particular, the possibility of using physical actors appears as a remarkably powerful strategy for expanding the currently limited capacities of virtual technologies. And since it is doubtful VR HMDs will ever reach market saturation, let alone more specialized olfactory headsets or haptic suits, it seems these alternative solutions based on the ever-present physical body are best suited at present.

Every experience of virtual reality is always to some degree an experience of physical reality. It remains at the discretion of VR designers and curators how the physical is dealt with, whether as a distraction from, or an augmentation to, the virtual.

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Intercorporeality in virtuality: the encounter with a phantom other*

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Abstract. We use phenomenology to reflect on the experience of being with others as mediated by screens through videoconferencing platforms, a phenomenon accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and social isolation measures. We explore two directions to explain the intersubjective experience of a videoconference. One direction introduces a conceptual background based on previous contributions in phenomenology, while the other one is more speculative: we introduce the novel idea of a phantom other. First, we understand this phenomenon either as a correlate of image consciousness or as a paradoxical perception. Then, we introduce the phantom other using ideas offered in phenomenological descriptions in which the phantom limb appears as a quasi-presence. The phantom other is the same flesh and blood body with whom I co-constitute senses of the world. In a videoconference, the other appears as a whole body with which I coordinate, although she appears as a phantom other.

Keywords: intercorporeality, phantom limb, quasi-presence, lived body, virtuality.

INTRODUCTION¹

The social isolation measures that were imposed by governments across nearly the entire globe due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused a worldwide acceleration of digital literacy and a migration

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of a good part of our social and community life to virtual environments². With unusual speed, elderly people who had never used a cell phone were making video calls, teachers at all levels were giving classes using online platforms, and some of us were taking virtual classes.

As phenomenologists living under such circumstances (i.e.: getting accustomed to using *Google Meet*, *Zoom*, *Skype*, and *WhatsApp* for communicating with family, friends, and students), countless questions and philosophical queries arose. In this context, we began to meet virtually, thereby combining philosophical reflection and lived experience. Taking into consideration the relevant aspects of this phenomenon (virtualization of the meeting space, technological mediation, geographical distance and temporal difference, reconfiguration of affectivity, among others), we searched for phenomenological tools that would allow us to describe and understand this unexpected phenomenon.

The phenomenal field broadened to encompass a series of new phenomena – or, more precisely, old phenomena in new contexts. These include otherness and empathy in virtuality (Ferencz-Flatz [2022]; Osler [2021]), extended cognition, agency through technological devices (Genusas [2022]), screen-mediated perception, mediated intentionality, etc. In short, we sought to apply Merleau-Ponty's thesis of intersubjectivity as intercorporeality to the encounter mediated by screens through videoconferencing platforms.

Our goal was to provide a phenomenological description of the experience of being with others as mediated by digital screens. We aimed to rela-

tivize apocalyptic forecasts which predicted that lack of affectivity would lead to a dehumanized present and a future of solipsistic egos secluded behind screens. As a result of this descriptive process, we arrived at the concept of the “phantom other”. In what follows, we propose to explore this concept by proceeding in two directions. Through a programmatic approach, we consider the relevance of conceptual and descriptive tools provided by phenomenological analysis to account for the phenomenon of the encounter with the other in a virtual situation. In so doing, initially we maintain that the intersubjective relationship mediated by screens seems a sort of a paradoxical perception that avoids any form of reductionism. In this sense, the givenness of my interlocutor in a video call cannot be explained using pairs of opposites such as actual-virtual, being-appearance, or presence-absence. Then, employing a more speculative approach, we focus on the definition of the phantom other as informed by phenomenological descriptions of the phantom limb (Merleau-Ponty [1945]; Morris [2004]; Umbelino [2019]).

1. THE ENCOUNTER IN VIDEOCONFERENCING PLATFORMS: IMAGE CONSCIOUSNESS OR PARADOXICAL PERCEPTION?

Our point of departure is twofold: first, the principle that «all consciousness is consciousness of something», and second, Merleau-Ponty's claim that consciousness is embodied and intentionally projected towards the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, «appearances are always enveloped in me by a certain corporeal attitude» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 356). For this reason, we do not limit our inquiry to the domain of consciousness, but rather start from the fact of embodiment. For example, when someone takes a cube and turns it over in her hand, the object is perceptually given to her as a perspectival object, with physical characteristics, values, etc. because she is an embodied subject. However, when the interaction occurs with human beings in flesh and blood (*leibhaftig*),

² By virtual environments, we refer to a milieu where people interact through technological devices of audio-visual communication and within the framework of the screen. The setting up of a virtual milieu or environment does not pre-exist the meetings *stricto sensu*. The milieu is motivated and generated by the interaction of individuals and their communicational exchange. The engagement with the virtual milieu does not imply a duplication or neutralization of reality. There is no conflict between virtuality and reality, but rather they coexist, and we dwell simultaneously in both milieus.

the subject identifies the other as a consciousness based on their gestures and linguistic expressions. Now, if the other is seen on a screen (a fact that changes the conditions of her appearance), what would be the intentional correlate of this consciousness in this case? In other words, what would be the object toward which consciousness is projected? Is it the computer, the screen, or the image of the other? The myriad of possible objects that are involved in this experience is only one dimension that our analysis can address. An adequate answer to these questions depends on analyzing all the aspects involved in the phenomenon.

We assume that during the interactions through digital platforms, we meet people rather than a computer or a screen. Nevertheless, the other does not appear in the same conditions and circumstances as in a face-to-face meeting.

This phenomenon can be usefully approached by using a phenomenological conceptual framework that is based on Husserl's reflections on image consciousness (see Álvarez Falcón, [2009]; Boyer, [2014]). Let us briefly recall Husserl's distinction between intuitive presentation (perception) and presentification (fantasy) as it appears in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (1980). When facing a photograph or a painting, it is possible to phenomenologically distinguish three strata – or, as Husserl says, three objects: 1) the physical thing or the thing-image (*Bildding*), 2) the representative object or the object-image (*Bild-Objekt*) and 3) the represented object or subject-image (*Bild-Subjekt*) (Husserl [1980]: § 9, 64). Therefore, in the perception of a painting, for example, it is possible to distinguish between the picture, that is, the material object made of wood that can be hung on the wall (physical thing), the (pictorial) image or copy of that which is to be represented (the representative object), and the subject of the picture (the represented object).

The picture (conceived as a material object) and the image belong to different domains. When the image appears, the givenness of the material object is displaced; the object represented is given to consciousness as an image. Nonetheless, although they are in conflict, they are intimately

ly related. In image consciousness, the distinction between the material object and the image becomes evident, whereas in perception, the intentional object coincides with the object that appears. Consequently, as Álvarez Falcón holds, «In the image we will find a strange unreal, fictitious, virtual support of something that does not appear, because rather than being present, it is represented, presentified» (Álvarez Falcón [2009]: 23-12, translation by the authors).

However, to compare an image with someone appearing on a screen is problematic: not only because there are remarkable differences between a drawing on a sheet of paper and a screen composed of pixels, but also because the other with whom I interact is more than an image on a screen. Looking at the image of my grandmother that appears on a photographic paper – a physical, immobile thing – is not the same experience that I have when I call her on *Zoom*. Something different occurs when I meet her through a videoconference platform. Through it, we share temporality, and I resonate and interact with her movements, facial gestures, and voice.

Even if the screen is the perceived object, the other – i.e., our interlocutor in audiovisual communication – is not reducible to an object-image in Husserlian terms. Strictly speaking, the other is not an image, but appears “in an image” by means of the screen. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that she is given through the pixels, and her appearance does not belong to the same domain as the screen or the image.

The Husserlian thematization of image consciousness can be enlightening, but it is an insufficient tool for addressing our problem. For this reason, we explore the possibility of considering this perception of the other on a screen as a paradoxical perception. The paradoxical perception: (i) oscillates between the visual capture of the object (the screen) and the perception of what appears on it (the interlocutor), (ii) is not reducible to the dichotomies between actual and virtual or presence and absence, and (iii) involves not only consciousnesses and objects but lived bodies, even if they are mediated by screens.

We rely on González-Guardiola's (2019) phenomenology of specular reflection to elucidate these three points. Relying on the Husserlian theory of image consciousness, González-Guardiola describes the ordinary action of looking into a mirror. In this action, both a body in a vertical position and a flat, perpendicularly placed mirror are involved: «the mirror replicates the movements of our body when the body is visually oriented towards it» (González-Guardiola [2019]: 256, translation by the authors). Thus, it is possible to distinguish four components of this experience: (i) the reflecting body that must comply with the conditions of verticality and perpendicularity, (ii) the image reflected on the mirror or reflected body, (iii) the mirror surface, that is, the material thing and (iv) the intentional consciousness that carries out the synthesis of these elements in the experience. González-Guardiola argues that we experience the synchronization of these heterogeneous aspects every morning when we groom ourselves.

For González-Guardiola, the Husserlian scheme of image consciousness does not explain the specular reflection because it is a discordant phenomenon that is difficult to conceive as an image. According to González-Guardiola, Husserl prefers to explain the specular reflection as an illusion-object (*Illusionäre-Objekt*) rather than as an image-object. The illusion-object is seen as the correlate of a perceptual act (instead of an act of image-consciousness). This is, undoubtedly, the most significant contribution to our work: «the specular reflection is constantly perceived as a reflection (illusion-object), which means that it is perceived as cancelled from the surrounding world of real bodies, but at the same time it is among them, it is relative to its background» (González-Guardiola [2019]: 260, translation by the authors).

Considering the specular reflection as an object that dwells among real objects despite its irreality seems more appropriate to characterize the corporeal presence of the other during a videoconference. The idea of specular reflection alludes to the non-present – that is, to what is

not corporeally present here and now, but which depends on the subject's corporeal presence. González-Guardiola adds:

What is intentionally aimed at by both objects (the image and the reflection) supposes absolutely different modalities of 'aiming' in both cases: the image will continue to exist as a spatiotemporal object that exists independently of the positionality and mobility of my body and of any other body, while the existence of the reflection depends on the positionality and mobility of the body (González-Guardiola [2019]: 261, translation by the authors).

To summarize, González-Guardiola's analysis offers us at least three significant elements to understand the phenomenon of intersubjectivity in virtual encounters: first, the comprehension of the particular object through which a specular reflection exists, i.e., as a perceptual non-real object; second, the overcoming of the presence-absence dichotomy; and third, the close link between specular reflection and the body.

Here we finally reach the central assumption that is necessary to understand what is given through the screen: as in specular reflection, the body plays a crucial role in videoconferencing. The orientation of participants' bodies in a video call as well as their gestures, movements and bodily intentionalities shape the entire experience.

The analysis of specular reflection shows that there is a close link between the body and the reflective object (the mirror). The subject's place and position determine the whole perceptual field: for instance, being in an upright position in front of the mirror. In addition, the perceptual field has a privileged visual direction (from the subject to the reflected image and the mirror that reflects her) because the body is a point of orientation. In the context of video calls, we can identify the same components interacting in a more complex manner. During a video call, we interact with another person (or persons) through a screen. Despite the fact that we can see our own image in the screen as in a mirror, the intersubjective experience, the engagement with another person, is more than a reflection or mirroring. However, we

also observe that the directions of attention – far from being reduced to the object seen within the limits of the screen – are multiple and manifold. Consequently, the perceptual directions are: from the subject to the other through the screen and vice versa, from the subject to the screen, from both participants looking at themselves while they look at each other, from the participants to the objects, landscapes or spatial horizons that stand in the background of the interlocutors, etc. The incorporation of a screen within an intersubjective experience increases the phenomenon's complexity. However, that is not only due to the technological device: rather, it is a consequence of the fact that we are, as Merleau-Ponty says in *Signs*, «an animal of perceptions and movements called body» (Merleau-Ponty: [1964]: 204). It is the body that shapes the world, and this implies that «[...] my experience opens onto things and transcends itself in them because it always accomplishes itself within the framework of a certain arrangement with regard to the world that is the definition of my body» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 317).

The arrangement of my body intentionally projected onto the screen contributes to the appearance of the other as a pole, as another “me” to whom I address myself and from whom I expect a response. Just as the action of grooming myself and the movement associated with it “vivifies” the reflected image (so to speak) while synchronizing it with the action of the real body, the movement of my body through meaningful gesticulation solicits the other, asks for a gesture from the other: not as imitation, but as creation –as the expression of an existence.

In the experience of being with others in a virtual situation, we recognize a different modality of attention and bodily intentionality that differs from our posture when engaged in the act of reading or writing in front of a screen. When we read or write, corporeal intentionality brings the object into existence through habits and as an extension of my being in the world. We can lose ourselves in reading or feel as if the ideas that we generate on the screen reside in our fingers. In both cases, however, the direction of attention irremediably

goes from the subject to the object: if we close our eyes or put our hands at rest, the interaction with the computer stops. Moreover, when we meet another, although we make use of the mouse or even the keyboard, these are hidden behind the expressive and communicative intention that takes place in the situation at hand. During the interaction with the other we watch and recognize her as the recipient of our voice, as an interlocutor of our ideas, as a correlate of our affectivity, as a threat to our intimacy, etc. In the intersubjective relationship mediated by screens, movements resemble the gestures of a musician. In this sense, the computer is more like a musical instrument than an object of technological use since it seems to elicit what Merleau-Ponty calls «gestures of consecration» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 147). These are the gestures that the musician performs in front of the instrument and which, far from any automatism, «[...] put forth affective vectors, they discover emotional sources, and they create an expressive space» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 147).

Although the gestures and movements carried out for another in front of a screen have the same anatomical or physiological constitution as those we carry out when writing or reading, they do not bounce off the illuminated surface of the computer, nor do they disappear into it; rather, they seem to extend beyond it to resonate with our own body. Gestures communicate, they express meanings and embody them – which is why video calls were a highly effective palliative during the pandemic (to the point that health professionals used them with patients in intensive care).

2. PHANTOM LIMB AND QUASI-PRESENCE

So far, we have referred to the specific characteristics of the intersubjective relationship in the virtual encounter. Through the screen, the other appears not as a simple image, but as an embodied subject, someone who interacts with me. However, this relationship requires further analysis since, although based on a “face-to-face” encounter, the body of the other is given in a peculiar way. For

this analysis, our premise is that intersubjectivity is intercorporeality; consequently, we must specify how the corporeal dimension of the other is given in the virtual encounter. We start with the notion of phantom limb as it is used by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, because we find the idea of a phantom body (or part of a body) to be illuminating for understanding intercorporeality in videoconferencing experiences³.

Merleau-Ponty turns to the phenomenon of phantom limb in his critique of the definition of the body as a collection of parts mechanically related to each other. His review of the principles of mechanistic physiology allows him to introduce the idea of a lived body. Instead of experiencing the body as a set of parts, the body is consciously given as a totality in which some sensitive areas are predominant or retained according to the tasks one performs and one's intentional projection towards a world that solicits them. Merleau-Ponty states that «my body is wherever it has something to do» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 260) – which is to say that the body is intentional, thrown into the world: it constitutes the world for itself, and in this it is itself constituted as a constitutive totality. Furthermore, the power both to attach instruments to oneself (with an existential significance through habit) and to mobilize oneself in situa-

³ The goal of this article is to conduct a review of the “phantom” in the phenomenon of quasi-presence, as analyzed by Merleau-Ponty. Notably, in light of the significant advancements in neuroscience over the last decades, a vast body of literature, particularly in the work of Vilayanur S. Ramachandran (1996, 1998), has emerged on this topic. Ramachandran's research focuses on the pain patients feel in their amputated limbs and the therapeutic discoveries he has made using a “mirror box”, which enables patients to “observe” their amputated arm. From a contemporary phenomenological perspective, this subject has been approached by several authors, such as Gallagher (2005), Breyer (2012), and Gallagher and Meltzoff (1996). In a previous work (see Battán-Horenstein [2016]), we have explored this approach to the phenomenology of the pain experienced in a phantom limb. However, in this article, we aim to address a distinct issue that is related to the phenomenology of the phantom limb: our perception of the other on the screen as a quasi-presence.

tions – whether they be actual, virtual – resides in this body that is projected towards its tasks:

The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein. (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 84).

So, what happens when a member of this organized totality is immobilized or amputated? Does the world mute its solicitation and things cease to be projects or tasks to be carried out for the subject? The answer to these questions leads to Merleau-Ponty's reflection on phantom limb – that is to say, on the limb that refuses to withdraw from the project, to be forgotten or to remain useless. Furthermore, this phenomenon confirms that the body is thrown into the world; or rather, that its existence depends on the solicitations of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the appearance of a phantom limb makes sense in the field of sedimentations by which the world is given. Because the lived body of an amputee relied upon the amputated limb to project itself intentionally upon the world prior to losing it, it continues to include the amputated limb as a part of itself. Now, what does it mean, phenomenologically speaking, to say that the subject continues to count on that amputated limb? If, as Merleau-Ponty says, the amputated limb appears insofar as the world continues to solicit it, then a name must be found for this modality of presence of the limb that has already been amputated and which now appears as a phantom. What allows Merleau-Ponty to escape from an ontological commitment to the irreducible presence-absence dichotomy is the notion of *quasi-presence*. As Umbelino holds, the phenomenon of phantom limb shows:

the mistake of accepting that there is a difference in nature between “phantom” and “real” [...] and the error of presuming that, in that aporia, the “real” always has primacy over the “phantom”. In this sense, there is an increased relevance of the certainty that the phantom of the absent limb is both the presence (which is not present) of the lost limb, and

the immemorial presence in the body of an unbroken spatial and temporal continuity [...] which is the pre-personal body of habit (Umbelino [2019]: 87 et seq., translation by the authors).

Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of quasi-presence to characterize the type of experience in which we still expect to see a recently deceased friend coming through the door, or when we hear his or her voice. Just like the expectation of a dead friend, the phantom limb enters the field of quasi-presence. This means that, on the one hand, its presence shares the realm of the reality of what it is here and now – that is, of physical objects – while, on the other hand, it is no longer a physical object.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenon of phantom limb overcomes the dichotomy of the "presence of a representation" and the "absence of a limb". In his reflections, the idea of quasi-presence emerges to the extent that the amputated limb is present, but not in the way that other parts of the body are present. This type of presence occurs in the field of possibilities, which is to say that it stands in direct relation to the meanings of the world in which the body is still in possession of the arm.

What aspect of Merleau-Ponty's notion of quasi-presence helps us to understand what happens in front of a screen? Is it possible to make an analogy between missing our deceased friend or an amputated limb and the intercorporeal relation that occurs in a video conference? In what follows, we will use the notion of phantom limb as a point of reference in order to develop the notion of the "phantom other"; in turn, this will allow us to elucidate intercorporeal experiences mediated by video conferencing platforms.

3. THE PHANTOM OTHER

Even in videoconferencing platforms, the intersubjective encounter presupposes lived bodies (*Leib*). In other words, intersubjectivity is not an encounter of pure consciousnesses; rather, all bodies project meaning into the world, even in vir-

tual spaces. As already mentioned, and following Merleau-Ponty, we conceive intersubjectivity as intercorporeality: we experience meaning through the movements, actions, language, and facial gestures of expressive bodies. There is a peculiar and unique style of interacting with the world that is inherent in the perception of the other in flesh and blood (*leibhaftig*). It follows that intersubjective and intercorporeal communication are not based on the givenness of the other as an object, but rather on ways that the other copes with and relates to the world, as well as his or her opening to new and unexpected meaningful experiences. A communal world is the result of encounters among lived bodies; it is the effect of intentional projections and openings of meaning developed by embodied subjects.

Intentional projections and openings of meaning carried out by the lived body that are modulated by one's situation also occur in virtual encounters. The screen does not restrict the lived body and what bodily intentionality constitutes. That is why we are not only spectators of an image projected in front of us; we are in intercorporeal communication with others. Through the platform, intersubjective exchanges have the following characteristics: (i) when the image is perceived, we solicit a body with which it is possible to interact. That means that the other's image has the power to affect my own experiences of the world and he or she can be affected by me. (ii) On the screen, the other's visual and audible⁴ appearance is relat-

⁴ Sound is an important aspect in "framing" and "off-screen" aspects of virtuality, but it would require a peculiar analysis that exceeds the framework of this paper. In this context, sound is a complex phenomenon. At the same time, it is not possible to completely control off-camera sound, and audio can be cancelled by muting the microphone. By virtual environments, we refer to a milieu where people interact through technological devices of audiovisual communication and within the framework of the screen. The setting up of a virtual milieu or environment does not pre-exist the meetings *stricto sensu*. The milieu is motivated and generated by the interaction of individuals and their communicational exchange. The engagement with the virtual milieu does not imply a duplication or neutralization of reality. Vir-

ed to what is “framed” and what is “off-camera”. In other words, the visual and audible image evokes a whole situation in which the other in front of me is embedded: for instance, a gesture by the other can be related to another person who is invisible to me but is visible to the other⁵.

The other appearing on the screen invites us to attend to the multiple and varied possibilities of corporeal-being-in-the-world. Through virtual interaction, we encounter a situated other who we recognize by his or her peculiar way of dealing with the world – however she is not given in flesh and blood, but according to the mode of a “phantom other”⁶.

We define the phantom other as the phenomenon of the other being given in quasi-presence. In the same way that one’s own body is not experienced as a set of parts but as a unity of consciousness, the other’s body, when viewed through a screen, is not experienced as a visible face or hands, but as someone who expresses intentional projections and ways in which the world appears. Furthermore, in the encounter, we do not find ourselves as mere spectators of a way of presenting the world that is inherent in the expressivity and gesturality of the other’s body; rather, we find ourselves affected by such intentionalities. Here, quasi-presence is the result of the body’s capacity for intentional projection through the screen: the

tuality does not dispute the field of meaning with reality, but rather they coexist, and we dwell simultaneously in both milieus.

⁵ The situation does not necessarily evoke the body in front of me in the image, but a body in this specific situation: although I may never have interacted with some particular students I meet through *Zoom* in person, I have interacted with other students in a university classroom. With those bodies, I have constituted the spatiality and temporality, but also affectivity, of having the experience of teaching a course at a university. Those experiences have sedimented, constituting the horizon of meanings I count on, and allow me to give the name “class” to a particular videoconference.

⁶ We have previously elaborated the notion of “phantom other” (see Battán-Horenstein, Garavito, Cohen [2021a] and [2021b]) to help us understand intersubjective encounters in virtuality.

appearance of the other, like that of the phantom limb, is solicited by the situation itself; the videoconference evokes the presence of the other body, a body with which I coordinate, resonate, and engage in experiences of co-constituting senses of the world (Zahavi [2001]). In a way, the other is given as an embodied subject – is in a “present body” – which implies that she is not experienced as absent. However, the presence experienced during virtual encounters is distinct from that of face-to-face interactions, and the analogy of the phantom limb is a useful way to comprehend that virtual experience. A patient recognizes that her phantom limb is not physically present in the same manner as her other limbs but is still perceptibly real; the phantom limb exists in the objective world, as Anabelle Dufont (2015) has suggested. The phantom limb is ambiguous, as the individual acknowledges a sense of ownership in the body schema, but simultaneously lacks the same level of control over it as she does with her physical body. The limb somehow escapes control: it cannot be moved in the same way as other limbs, and it cannot be healed like a wound on an actual hand.

We observe a similar ambiguity in the encounter with others. While the other person is present, the level of interaction I experience is not equivalent to that of someone sitting beside me, whose expressions are entirely perceivable and located within the same physical space as my own body. Furthermore, I do not possess the same sense of ownership over her body as I do over my own corporeality. Despite these restrictions, being in front of a screen to interact with others introduces experiences of lived space, time, and body. Interaction in a virtual context determines the modality of givenness in which others appear as perceptions.

As we have pointed out, the other who we are interested in interacting with in the context of virtuality is not given as an image but is more of a paradoxical perception. Through intercorporeal affective resonance, the phantom other is what appears in what is moving in front of me. In other words, he or she is reborn as another who we

recognize and in whom an affective stream finds its correlate. But how is it possible for such affective resonance to take place in a virtual exchange? According to Fuchs, affective resonance is a consequence of «the way emotions disclose the affective qualities or affordances of a given situation» (Fuchs [2020]: 77) and consists of «proprioceptive and interoceptive feelings» that are aroused in the perception of other subjects and their emotional states. Through the notion of resonance, we confirm Merleau-Ponty's thesis of a primary and original intercorporeality.

However, we disagree with the way Fuchs understands virtual encounters: for him, resonance seems to require a complete bodily (*leibhaftig*) mediation because intercorporeal resonance would be the consequence of a (synchronous and simultaneous) interaction of subjects through their gestures and expressions. For Fuchs, we experience the rage of another through both the perception of facial gestures and our intercorporeal resonance. And this resonance, which is felt deep inside of us, is limited in online interaction because we cannot access the expressiveness of the whole alien body; in other words, the gesture of rage in the face is only a part of what is an embodied and situated expressiveness. Osler (2021) has questioned this proposal, pointing out that screen-mediated relationships can be as empathic as offline environments. Unlike Fuchs, she points out that empathy occurs in interaction with a lived body rather than a physical body, and the lived body is projected through the screen: «the assumption that empathy only occurs face-to-face rests on an unjustified restriction of expressivity to the physical body» (Osler [2021]: 4). For her, an encounter with the other may be technologically mediated but “still direct”.

We understand intercorporeality through the screen differently: while Osler and Fuchs think about the conditions of the possibility of online empathy, we are more interested in the phenomenon of intercorporeality as a coordination of intentionalities that project and constitute senses of the world. Thus, intercorporeality results in more than empathic experiences. We are inter-

ested in understanding affectivity as a modality of the intentionality of consciousness instead of as a place of understanding the other as a fellow human being – that is why we see bodies as expressions of intentional projections, and thus as ways that the world appears in other bodies.

We hold that intercorporeal affective resonance also arises in virtual contexts despite the impassable limits imposed by the screen. Unlike the case of the face-to-face encounter in which the intersubjective situation is the effect or result of affective resonance, affective resonance in the virtual encounter is a condition of the phantom other. In other words, because there is affective resonance – because there is a bond developed in the habituality of previous encounters – the other can be given in his or her quasi-presence, that is, a presence which is neither properly real (in flesh and blood) nor a mere image, but rather a phantom.

Like Merleau-Ponty's notion of phantom limb, the phantom other is sustained by the habitual body. The phantom other is not a second nature, nor is it an impostor that vicariously replaces a lived body as an avatar. The phantom other is not the product of an intellectual operation, nor is it reducible to an image consciousness: the other appearing on the screen enjoys all his or her subjectivity and his or her bodily constitution despite being given to us without depth, just as a phantom limb is a quasi-presence that contributes to the practical interface that constitutes the consciousness of our own body.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we went in two directions to explain the intersubjective experience of a videoconference. One direction introduced a conceptual background based on previous contributions in phenomenology, while the other one was more speculative: we introduced the novel idea of a phantom other. First, we asked whether this phenomenon should be understood either as a correlate of image consciousness or as a para-

doxical perception. We recognized that a virtual encounter cannot be understood as a correlate of image-consciousness, since interaction through a video conference is not a static representation of the other as absent and imagined, but rather a dynamic phenomenon in which the other is experienced as present. Moreover, the other is not a paradoxical perception (such as, for example, the perception of a body's reflection in a mirror). In a video conference, there is no encounter of a self with its reflection, but of two subjectivities that relate intercorporeally. By attending to the case of specular reflection, we recognized that the appearance of the other through videoconferencing platforms cannot be understood in terms of dualities like actual-virtual, being-appearance, and presence-absence.

The second direction introduced our own approach to what occurs in videoconferencing encounters. We defined the phantom other using ideas offered in phenomenological descriptions of phantom limb in which that limb appeared as a quasi-presence. The phantom other is the same flesh and blood body with whom we coordinate, resonate, and co-constitute senses of the world. A limb appearing as a quasi-presence means that the lived spatiality of one's own body cannot be reduced to a sum of organs but is the result of habitualities through which one gives meaning to the world. If, following Merleau-Ponty, the body is a being-in-the-world, then bodily experiences are linked to forms of appearance of the world. The phantom limb is an example of how the world solicits intentional projections of the body. Quasi-presence occurs when the world solicits a bodily configuration that includes a non-existent body part, such as when it solicits an amputated organ. The phantom other extends the region in which the world solicits those intentionalities: sometimes it solicits intercorporeality. In a videoconference, the other does not appear as having something missing, or as a set of parts, but as a whole body with which we coordinate. However, this does not mean that this other appears in complete presence: being limited by the image, she is configured as a phantom other.

We have questioned two approaches to intersubjectivity mediated by screens: Fuchs and Osler treat intercorporeality solely as the empathic encounter with an alter ego and that is why they miss an important feature of intercorporeality as co-constituted sense-making. In the end, for us, the phantom other shows that affectivity is the key to intercorporeality because it participates in a coordination of bodies through intentional projections towards the world.

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Lost in communication: The relationship between hikikomori and virtual reality in Japanese anime

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Abstract. Nowadays virtual reality has gained extreme popularity among adolescents around the world, thanks to the possibility they offer to create a new life for their users. Especially for teenagers affected by the hikikomori syndrome, who experience struggles in establishing communication with others, virtual reality has become a tool to forsake their “adverse” reality, shaping fictitious safe environments and creating relationships with similar-minded users. This issue of virtual reality has been depicted in recent Japanese animation, whose country is mostly affected by this issue. I will show mainly two approaches to the phenomenon: the one given in the anime series *Sword Art Online* (2012), in which virtual reality is perceived as the only place where true communication can happen; the second is the interpretation given by director Hosoda Mamoru in his animated features *Summer Wars* (2009) and *Belle* (2021), where virtual reality is a tool to support real life’s difficulties.

Keywords: Virtual reality, Hikikomori, anime, communication, Mamoru Hosoda.

What does it mean to be lonely? When relationships start becoming meaningful and allow real communication and self-growth between its users?

In an epoque where an hyperconnected world requires people to enlarge their network of relationships and affections, the alienating way of life of the working metropolis paradoxically exasperates the feeling of loneliness. This twisted turn of the events has been caught in the narrative of contemporary anime, a medium that has always been very receptive to voice out the issues and discomfort of the Japanese people. The rise of the hikikomori syndrome, the rising of tax suicide among the young generations and a rejection of society are the results of this relentless social pressure. Therefore, to survive this kind of reality that demands to almost obliterate one’s inner struggles to better homologate in what is deemed to be a “proper life”, many people turned to virtual reality and gaming as coping

method (often choosing to get lost in them, forgetting the outer world), a dynamic that has been identified by Japanese animators as the *zeitgeist* of their time. Serving as an outlet from the daily-life stress and as a world to escape to when one feels overwhelmed, many anime protagonists turn to virtual safe havens to escape the public eye. In the first season of anime series *Sword Art Online*, by Itō Tomohiko (2012), the 15 years-old hikikomori protagonist Kirito comes to elect the virtual reality of the homonymous game as his “real” home; in the animated features by Hosoda Mamoru *Summers Wars* (2009) and *Belle* (2021), their young characters Kenji, Kazuma and Suzu are first introduced as their virtual avatars, and not as themselves, to symbolize how these teenagers feel free to express their true self only on the internet.

In this paper my intention is to highlight how the hikikomori phenomenon, the result of this escape of reality and difficulty in communication, is depicted in contemporary Japanese anime. I will show how it relates with the dimensions of virtual reality, illustrating the roles that this immaterial dimension plays in different anime and the different effects it has on the “real” life of the protagonists.

1. THE LOST GENERATION: THE HIKIKOMORI PHENOMENON

After the economic crisis of the Nineties, the Japanese government faced the challenge to reinvent the system of the Country to overcome the economic stagnation that put them on their knees. The response to this crisis was a revolution inside the structure of Japanese corporations – giving up the lifetime employment system while proceeding to a drastic cut on benefits, and the adoption of temporary workers as main workforce (Ozawa-De Silva [2021]: 54) – and the cultural campaign “Cool Japan” to expand the influence of Japanese soft power globally, relying especially on the anime industry (Yunuen, Mandujano [2016]: 78-81).

Twenty years later, the results of these efforts paid off: Japan is now the third economic glob-

al power in the world¹ and its anime market has been in constant growth for ten years straight up to the coronavirus crisis² (and it’s already regaining its previous numbers).

This recovery was an extraordinary feat accomplished by the Japanese system but, as a consequence of such an extreme pressure on its workforce, it gravely exacerbated some already existent problems that are becoming a major issue in society, such as urban alienation, the *hikikomori* phenomenon and, in the extreme, suicide (Ozawa-De Silva [2021]: 57). Anno Hideaki, in his masterpiece *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), had already reflected how the loss of identity, the economic crisis and distrust in politics had already affected the younger generation, and soon after that the issue of hikikomori became apparent for the first time. This problem now has become more and more compelling to our society, and many intellectuals started researching the causes that put such a strain on their youth (Plata [2014]: 4-5).

In 1998 Japanese psychiatrist Saito Tamaki published his research on “people who withdraw from society”, the hikikomori. It sparked a lively debate in the International scientific community, bringing to light a problem that was widespread, but still didn’t have a name of its own. By his definition, Saito described this phenomenon as the following:

A state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one’s own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal cause. (Saito [2013]: 25)

The main feature Saito identified regarding this extreme retire from society was a difficulty to have functioning relationships and communication with others and, in response to that, the tendency for self-preservation by withdrawing socially. This is typical of the adolescent mind-set.

¹ World Bank, GDP Japan (Ed.), World Bank, 16th March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZSUWjB>.

² The Association of Japanese Animations [2022]: 2.

Despite common beliefs, the adolescent mindset today continues until the late twenties, with a large number of adolescents not realizing adulthood until thirty (Saito [2013]: 25).

Exactly during this delicate time of personal growth, where the identity of the single is carefully built and they try to build their path to the future they envision, a sequence of emotional or independence related setbacks (failing one's academic studies, not being able to sustain yourself) can easily trigger the desire to withdraw from society. The hikikomori see as an unbearable task exposing himself to others to ask for help because of the feelings of self-hatred and shame. Afraid of further rejection, they stop having interpersonal relationships, even with their family, shutting off every communication and retiring in their rooms to create a safe environment (Saito [2013]: 85-86).

Recent studies have proved that, by 2020, 1.2% of young Japanese adults had become hikikomori (Hamanasaki et al. [2020]: 808-809), generally male, with interpersonal relationship issues, close dependency to the Internet, and a high risk of suicide (Yong, Nomura [2019]: 1). Moreover, if this phenomenon initially was deemed to be topical and developable only in Japan, subsequent studies have noticed how a hikikomori presence could be found, even if in lesser numbers than in Asia, in Western countries such as the Usa, Australia, Spain, Brazil and France (Yong, Nomura [2019]: 1). Italy in particular covers a special role in the active response to the issue, being the first European country to start treating this condition as a social issue and providing psychological aid to the Italian hikikomori (Saito [2013]: 6). Owing to this attention, several studies have assessed how many Italian adolescents, in particular students, are at risk (or already are) of becoming hikikomori, and that this situation necessitates immediate assistance and support. A national study carried out by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche in Pisa Institute of Clinical Physiology reported that, among students aged 15 to 19, 2.1% (54,000 students) identify as hikikomori, 1.7% are actual hikikomori (44,000 students), and 2.6% (67,000 students) are at high risk of becoming one (Gros-

so, Cerrai [2023]: 4). Another relevant element that has emerged from these studies is the close association of the hikikomori with a problematic use of the Internet, where the overuse of virtual technology may be viewed by the hikikomori as an effective surrogate to "real" human communication, alienating them from actual reality (Amen-dola et al. [2021]: 107). While this position still meets contrasting opinion in the scientific community (Hamanasaki et al. [2020]: 813), it is an undeniable fact how people suffering from this hikikomori syndrome perceive the virtual world of the internet and the endless possibilities it offers as a safe haven from a reality they have chosen to reject.

In the next section, I'm going to illustrate how Japanese anime, a medium that always took interest in the issue of its own society, portrayed this phenomenon in its production, displaying several points of view and outcome of this dependance of virtual realities in the everyday life of people who struggle to fit in society and full-fledged hikikomori.

2.1. A PLACE WHERE TO BECOME YOUR "TRUE SELF": SWORD ART ONLINE VIRTUAL REALITY AND ESCAPISM

As discussed above, when a person withdraws from society, they tend to create a safe, closed environment under their control. During the '90s and early 2000s, when the use of the internet was still limited, this action translated mainly in self-isolation and the occasional virtual interaction via blogs and forum. Nowadays, in the age of social media and augmented reality, this has drastically evolved into the idea of retreat into the virtual world to live through alter ego customized according to their desire, or to lose themselves in exciting virtual games to escape the traumas of societal pressure (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 7-9). The virtual space is therefore seen as a "pure land" where everyone has a chance to start anew and reinvent themselves, designing the kind of life they wished to have in the real world and achiev-

ing their dreams. In an interesting paper written by Ekaterina Kormilitsyna, this theme has been thoroughly analysed, and *Sword Art Online* and *Summer Wars* are again taken as example. The *fil rouge* between these two animated productions (that is then reprised also in the later production of *Belle*) is a common narration that see at its centre the co-existence of the real world with a virtual one, which deeply affects the daily life of the people. Yet, despite the seemingly similar setting, the nature by which these two digital realities are intended greatly differ one from the other, and the impact they have on the life of their protagonists lead them to opposite destinies.

In the first season of *Sword Art Online* (commonly referred to as SAO) Itō sets the story in the virtual reality of the homonymous VRMMORPG³ game. This platform, thanks to the cerebral helmet NerveGear, allows the users to use their own five senses and to control their virtual body with the mind to live adventures in a fantastical world. Yet, this promised land turns out to be a deadly trap, since its creator Kayaba Akihiko removed any possibility of log out from the game to players and projected the systems in a way that, if someone tried to be forcibly logged out from the helmet or died during the game, his real-life body would die too. Kazuto Kirigaya, known as his gaming avatar's name "Kirito", is a 15 years old hikikomori with a talent for technology, and was one of the beta testers who helped develop the game before its commercial debut. Disheartened by the coldness of his adoptive family (his parents died in an accident and he was taken in by his aunt and uncle) and unable to form new bonds, he rejects the world around him and finds refuge in the charming world of SAO.

What results surprising in the concept of this series is the fact that, setting aside the elementary goal of the protagonists to return to the physical world as to save themselves, many of the people trapped in SAO start thriving in it and to feel more alive than they did in the real world. As by Kirito's affirmation in the first episode, «in this

virtual world, a single blade can take you wherever you want. It is a virtual world, but I still feel more alive here than I do in the real one»⁴. Feeling free to express his own feelings and full potential, a possibility he felt negated to him in his ordinary life oppressed by society (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 9-10), Kirito discloses little by little his true personality, and starts forming relationships with people, a thing he avoided in the real world. This dynamic is not unique to him, and even other characters witness this change in them, making them wonder if it will be worth the effort to go back to their normal life, once they go back to physical reality⁵. As the story progresses, Kirito develops feelings for his partner Asuna, and they decide to marry in the in-game world: by taking this action, they acknowledge that the time and the feelings they are having in the virtual world are real, and that the virtual world of SAO has become their safe home, to the point that Kirito asks Asuna to renounce clearing the game (thus renouncing to go back to reality), when they have to face a deathly mission⁶.

Throughout the series, many times shots of the real life world (like Kirito's house and room) are sided right before the SAO sequences, making evident with the difference of meaning they both carry: giving grayish, gloomy palette to the real settings in the world (except to Asuna's hospital room) while conferring brighter tones and an endless variety of colours to the world of SAO, it is apparent how Itō himself wants to convey the message that the place where the protagonist Kirito has more chances to be happy and form meaningful, true human communication is the virtual world. In the end, the virtual world of SAO ends up being conceived as a substitute for the life in the physical world.

⁴ Itō [2012]: *Episode 1 - The world of Swords*, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures, 6.42-7.00.

⁵ Itō [2012]: *Episode 6, Illusionary Avenger*, 18.32-19-10; *Episode 13, Edge of Hell's Abyss*, 9.46- 12.30, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures.

⁶ Itō [2012]: *Episode 13, Edge of Hell's Abyss*, *Sword Art Online*, A-1 Pictures 14.15-15.20.

³ Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

2.2. THE TRUE POWER OF CONNECTION: THE WORTH OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN HOSODA MAMORU'S WORKS

Seemingly beginning from the same point of *SAO*, an evasion from reality, the virtual worlds created in Hosoda Mamoru's narrations are meant to lead their protagonists into a completely different path from the ones' of Itō. Hosoda was one of the first Japanese directors to actively use the digitalized realities as key elements in his works: starting from his first works in the *Digimon* franchise⁷ (1999-2000) he knew that the relation with the internet and virtual reality would have been a challenge for the new generations, with its possibilities and dangers (Solomon [2022]: 236). Yet, he never surrendered to a pessimistic view in which the only way humanity can feel free and accomplished is through a surrogate virtual life. Instead, he always viewed the digital world as a means of support to our daily life, designed to inspire us to become our best self and to be able to fully embrace our real dimension.

Both at the beginning *Summer Wars* and *Belle*, the narration starts with the voice of OZ and U, the meta-verses of the two movies, which present themselves and their essence to the viewers.

Summer Wars – 2009

Welcome to the world of OZ. OZ is a virtual world on the Internet that brings the people of the world together so they can enjoy themselves. You can easily access the world of OZ through your personal computer, cell phone, or television. [...] First, select your avatar. An avatar is your representative in the world of OZ. You can design however you want regarding clothes, hairstyle, tail, etc. [...] Your personal data is protected by OZ's impenetrable security system. Just relax and enjoy your time in this world. In the shopping mall, you can find music, movies, furniture, commodities, automobiles, real estate, vacation plans, and many other things from around the globe, as genuine as reality. [...] But

above all, what is necessary is communication. In OZ, all languages are instantly translated, enabling you to communicate with everyone in the world with ease. There are currently four million communities in the OZ community. [...] The world of OZ has a full range of support and services for business as well. [...] There are also many local governments and self-governing bodies represented in OZ. You can do your taxes or take care of any official business here in OZ. [...]. With open arms, we welcome you to the world of OZ⁸.

The world of OZ seems to perfectly embody a system where a clear-cut distinction from human to the technological world was no longer possible (Taylor [2008]: 3-6). Using a marketing-pleasing virtual platform, Hosoda designs a virtual reality that reunite in itself platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Google and Amazon, visually captivating and with pop atmospheres (Solomon [2022]: 55). Yet, in contrast with *SAO*, the attractiveness of OZ doesn't outshine the beauty of the physical world. Set in the countryside of the prefecture of Nagano, the protagonists live their virtual adventure in a traditional Japanese mansion, surrounded by vintage furniture and rusted samurai armours. Despite being ancient and outdated, the warm atmosphere of this family house, the disparate objects that witness myriads of heartfelt memories and the never-ending charm of Japanese heritage make the real world presented by Hosoda as desirable as the upbeat OZ world, and worth fighting for to live in it.

Yet, the focus the Japanese director chooses to emphasise is not the wonder of such potentiality, but the danger it carries within itself and the irreplaceable worth of human connection (Condry [2013]: 36). When a rogue artificial intelligence called Love Machine attacks OZ, its actions on the Web affects the real world and he even causes the death of Jinnouchi Sakae, the grandmother of the female protagonist (Solomon [2022]: 65).

Helped by the whole Jinnouchi family (27 members) it will be up to the three teenagers Kenji, Natsuki and Kazuma to save the world. Focusing on Kenji and Kazuma, these two boys not only

⁷ IMDb (ed. by), *Mamoru Hosoda*, IMDb, 16th March 2023, <https://imdb.to/3JM6UGs>.

⁸ Hosoda [2009]: 0:59- 3:34.

are not the so-called archetypal heroes, but could be even considered outcasts of society. If the first boy is presented as a math wizard who chose to spend all of his free time working in the virtual world, Kazuma became a champion gamer after the ordeal of being a hikikomori, being bullied at school. Both of them choose to retire in the virtual world to seek a safe place where to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation with society, but what propels true change in Kenji and Kazuma is the vicinity of their beloved ones and the dialogue with them.

Belle – 2021

“U” is the ultimate virtual community, created and governate by his five, wise architects, known as the Voices. With over five billion registered users, it is the biggest internet society in history, and it is still growing. Launching the U app you employ the latest body-sharing technology, which allows the users to come together, relax, or just have fun. Your avatar in U is called an “AS” and it is automatically generated based on your personal biometrical information. U is another reality, and AS is another you. You may not be able to start over in the real world, but you can start over in the world of U⁹.

Twelve years after *Summer Wars*, Hosoda reprises the theme of virtual reality in his feature animation *Belle*, a modern adaptation of the classic *The Beauty and the Beast*, presenting it to Cannes in 2021 and receiving a 14-minutes standing ovation¹⁰. As it is clearly seen from the above introduction, over the years Hosoda has witnessed how evolution of social media has moulded the world around him, and how the many virtual communities, like our Instagram, Tik Tok or Facebook have translated into the ultimate outlet and haven for our youth’s discomfort (even if many of the internet perils are displayed throughout the movie) (Solomon [2022]: 236).

⁹ M. Hosoda [2021]: 0:24-3:02

¹⁰ Steen, E., Japanese anime *Belle* receives a 14-minute standing ovation at Cannes, *Times Out*, 10th March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZXBToe>.

After the tragic death of her mother, the shy provincial teen Suzu can’t seem to be able to escape grieving for her, and over the years she shuts away her father and friends, spending her time in loneliness, if not for her pushy friend Hiro. Only when she joins the U community, thanks to the anonymity of the alter ego she adopts (the superstar singer Belle) Suzu is able to unleash her astonishing talent and embracing the passion she had locked away since her mother’s death¹¹.

In the real world Suzu is struggling with her feelings, unable to process and understand them. Yet, when she starts living through the persona of Belle, she experiences a kind of freedom she had never felt as Suzu (Solomon [2022]: 223). The Japanese teen feels free in this reinvented version of herself, and only as Belle she’s able to temporarily drop the emotional chains that constrict her, pouring out her true feelings in the texts of her songs. In an interview for BBC Culture Hosoda confirms Suzu’s feelings:

I think the fact that there is this other world where we can be another version of ourselves [helps to show] that we are not just what we show to society [...] Belle and Suzu are so different that they’re virtually different people, but they’re actually the same person. Sometimes we end up believing that we are only that one side of ourselves, but we actually have many dimensions. And learning that and believing that helps us to be more free¹².

In this feature film, differently from *Summer Wars*, it is evident how Suzu doesn’t feel at ease with herself in the real world, but she never totally rejects her real-life identity in favour of the virtual one. Although Suzu is reluctant in accepting her avatar in U, which doesn’t reflect at all her physical characteristics, she ends up accepting it because it displays freckles on its face, a fea-

¹¹ Lyons, A., *Mamoru Hosoda’s Beauty and the Beast riff Belle argues for optimism about the internet*, Polygon, 10th March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3JqqFTE>.

¹² Campbell, K., *The film changing how we see the internet*, BBC Culture, 10th March 2023, <https://bbc.in/3ZTLcW7>.

ture she's ashamed of in real life but that in U is a sign of her true identity. Moreover, right until before the end of the movie, is always her alter ego in the U world, Belle, who brings forwards the dramatic action, while Suzu is paralyzed by her inner wounds: all of Belle's outfits are extravagant and glamorous, and she is visually perceived as the rightful protagonist of the story. Yet, when she gets to know in U the Dragon (Kei's avatar, a boy victim of abuse), and their relationship progressively affects her, Belle's outfits become more and more modest, anticipating a switch of protagonist-ship to Suzu. In fact, the events Suzu experience as Belle changes her also in real life, helping her face her trauma and acknowledge her worth in her normal self.

3. THE FULFILLMENT OF THE SELF: THE ROLE OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION IN THE DISCOVERY OF TRUE IDENTITY

Starting from the interior sorrow of the individual affected by the hikikomori syndrome, passing to the desire of true interaction and self-recognition of Kirito in *SAO* and the need to understand one's own feelings in the works by Hosoda, all these people reveal through their life stories their intimate need of real communication with the ones they hold dear. Every one of them, oppressed by society or trauma, throughout their stories are desperately trying to find a safe place to interact with others where they can feel free to express their true self. The hikikomori and Kirito and Asuna from *SAO* experience too this overwhelming need, and in front of the stark obstacles and even rejects of real life, they can't help but to give up that side of reality to shield their psyche in a reality that can nurture them. In *SAO* Asuna and Kirito, while battling their way in the game to win their freedom from Kayabata, build their own home, starting their own family and even adopt the virtual AI Yui as their own daughter. This choice of leading a normal life in the augmented world, even after they break free from it, implies the choice of the protagonists to recognize that virtual real-

ity as their "true" place of belonging. Virtual reality becomes «a stable environment removed from the real world, and the technological universe has potential to become a true home» (Kormilitsyna [2015]: 16). Yet, this doesn't mean that any possibility of regaining the bonds of the physical world is abandoned by the protagonists, even though the pessimistic view of the director Itō makes it seemingly impossible to recover real human communication in the real world. In the second season of *SAO* Asuna tries in fact to mend the relationship with her mother, but it is only when she invites her in her virtual home that the distance between them is closed and interaction becomes possible¹³.

Despite the apparent victory for their new found identity of the protagonists of *SAO*, their liberation and emancipation from the harshness of reality is achieved through the rejection of it and a self-imposed recognition of their value. Missing out on the confrontation and the dialogue with outer reality and the people connected to it, the hikikomori of *SAO* (Kirito) and the hikikomori in real life miss their chance for real growth, cutting out every possibility of communication and further discovery of their worth.

In the movie of *Summer Wars*, the character who more faces this transition is Kazuma, the cousin of the female lead Natsuki. Bullied at school, he retreated into a hikikomori state and lived for a period only of online games. Yet, thanks to the relationship with his grandfather, he opened up to him and started learning martial arts from him. Because of this, he managed to face the bullies in real life and, in the virtual one, he became King Kazuma, the champion avatar fighter of the world of OZ. By choosing to rely on another person, and starting a dialogue with him about his weakness and fears, Kazuma fulfills the potentialities hidden in himself, not by renouncing his qualities in the virtual world, but by letting them strengthen his real-life self.

In a similar way, in the film *Belle* the protagonist Suzu is able to overcome her trauma only

¹³ Itō [2014]: *Episode 23, Beginning of a Dream, Sword Art Online II*, A-1 Pictures, 16.15-21.09.

when she reveals her true identity, destroying her virtual persona on U. When she discovers that behind the avatar of the Dragon hides Kei, a teen victim of abuse, she tries desperately to contact him in real life to help him, yet the boy pushes her away. Accusing her of being another hypocrite who will later abandon them after having showed their good deed to the world, he cuts her off. In the end, the only way Suzu will be able to reach out to Kei will be exposing her true self to the virtual world, finally winning his trust and thus enabling real communication. In the end, Suzu is able to put past herself her trauma and she finally re-owns her talent for singing and her relationships, including the potential love story with her crush Shinobu.

This was the message Hosoda meant for his movies, wanting to convey that “connection itself is our weapon”, and that’s why in his works he always takes the pains to create as many characters as detailed as possible (just in *Summer Wars* there are more than 30), in order to show the powerful deeds they could achieve together just thanks to their human interaction and collective effort (Condry [2013]: 36).

4. CONCLUSION

The presence of the augmented reality of the internet and virtual reality is an undeniable fact, and it won’t be long before it will become inextricable from our physical reality. Yet, as we progress towards this future, we must better understand that the infinite possibilities allowed us by the virtual reality are not meant to be seen as another dimension where to flee, but as a stepping stone to wholly fulfil ourselves in our everyday life. As Saito Tamaki remarks in his study, the only thing that will change our state of withdrawal and win our loneliness is to keep trying to communicate with our dearest ones and the world surrounding us (Saito [2013]: XII). The people affected by the hikikomori syndrome and Kirito and Asuna are also aware of this burning need for human contact, but because they have become so

powerless in a world they think rejected them, they chose to live a reality of their design. This choice doesn’t prevent them from having meaningful relationships of course, since it’s also possible to find true friendship via virtual communication (as happened to Kirito with Asuna), but by eliminating all their undesirable features and choosing to listening only to their voice (eliminating uncomfortable opinions), these people refuse an honest confrontation with themselves that, if done earnestly, would allow them to perceive their limits and overcome them. The characters from *Summer Wars* and *Belle* are obliged to face in the virtual world the limits they tried to escape to in the physical one and, supported by familiar and even unexpected people, they end up embracing their identity as a whole, managing to have a new start in real life.

When facing difficult times, it can be natural to retreat into a safe haven where to recover from our wounds of the psyche, and it can be therapeutic to do so for a moderate amount of time. The virtual reality has been conceived for this purpose, and there is nothing wrong with losing ourselves in the pleasure of fictional adventures. Yet, this retreat into a digital inner world must not make us lose hope in the outer world, and that even when things seem hopeless in life, keeping up the communication with the people around us can lead the way to find again your true self.

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Virtual Domes. Utopian architecture at the dawn of Virtual Reality*

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Abstract. This paper examines the theoretical and practical aspects of geodesic dome architecture in North America as part of an aesthetic of virtualization. Geodesic domes can be conceived of as virtual environments designed as alternatives to the contemporary world and its internal crises. They were originally a tool of the American counterculture of the 1960s to search for futuristic housing solutions which responded to ecological concerns. The contribution traces some of the most important phases of dome architecture, which crossed paths with the emerging technoculture linked to the rise of virtual reality. Indeed, the idea of the dome as a means of imagining new virtual environments, as was the case of Biosphere 2, intersects with the career of VR pioneer Jaron Lanier. Today, virtual reality technologies have merged geodesic architecture with visualization devices, as happens in the case of “virtual domes”, offering a unique way to experience virtual reality and connect with others in a shared environment.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, geodesic dome, 1960s American counterculture, virtualization.

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores some theoretical and practical trends related to geodesic dome architecture in North America, as part of an aesthetic of virtualisation. After briefly discussing the origins of recent geodesic architecture, attributed to inventor and theorist Richard Buckminster Fuller, I will outline some of the aesthetic and political dimensions of this kind of utopian – or dystopian – building. The

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main thesis is that geodesic domes are intended as worlds within worlds, like spaceships on SpaceShip Earth, to quote Buckminster Fuller's famous phrase. They form virtual environments that can be designed as alternatives to the present world and its internal social, ecological and ethical crises. In fact, dome architecture was a tool for the American counterculture of the 1960s, which gathered around revolutionary publications such as Steward Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*: it was a futuristic housing solution that could be a response to the gentrification of the metropolis, as happened in New York City with the CHARAS action group, or a modern way of repopulating the countryside or even the desert, seeking a new sustainable and rural lifestyle (Nelson [2014]). The idea of a dome as a tool for virtualisation may have found its realisation in the Biosphere 2 experiment, which will be briefly discussed. This colossal structure, built in Arizona in the 1980s, became a self-contained world, giving tangible form to the possibility of humans living on other planets or in enclosed environments in the event of ecological collapse. Unfortunately, the Biospherians' first mission failed, making it clear that these escapist hopes are likely to remain purely "virtual" for some time to come. It is notable that the concept of the dome as a means of imagining new ways of living intersected with the career of Jaron Lanier. Lanier, who is credited with coining the term "virtual reality", built and lived in a dome during his teenage years, immersing himself in the counter-cultural values of the hippie movement that would shape his ethical and theoretical approach to the emerging technology.

Today, geodesic architecture remains an old symbol of these now extinct political movements and the imagery associated with them. However, geodesic architecture has found new life in contemporary virtual reality technologies. One example of this is "virtual domes", which incorporate these structures into a shared virtual experience. Unlike head-mounted displays, virtual domes allow users to immerse themselves in the virtual world without feeling enclosed. By fusing geodesic architecture with virtual reality technologies, vir-

tual domes offer a unique way to experience virtual reality and connect with others in a shared virtual environment.

1. GEODESICS BASICS: FROM BUCKMINSTER FULLER ARCHITECTURE TO DIY COOKBOOKS

In geometry, geodesics are curves that represent the shortest path between two points on a surface. This concept forms the basis of the geodesic dome, a lightweight hemispherical structure that is both autonomous and habitable. The father of the contemporary geodesic dome, and of much of the theoretical and practical discussion surrounding it, is undoubtedly the theorist and inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983). Buckminster Fuller developed his idea of geodesic architecture in an age marked by fears of ecological collapse due to overpopulation and nuclear apocalypse. He envisioned the dome as an enclosed space that could facilitate a "circular economy" of air and liquids, effectively acting as an "environmental valve".

Geodesic architecture is an intellectual enterprise that began with the project for the Dymaxion House, accompanied by the manuscript *4D Time Lock*, and culminated in the United States Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, which is actually a monumental geodesic dome.

The Dymaxion House is «the most important failed architecture project of the twentieth century» (Brennan [2017]: 189), since it was never mass produced and distributed as sustainable "dwelling machine", as Buckminster Fuller had wished. Developed between 1927 and 1946, the project centred on the formulation of the Dymaxion "credo". This phrase, a fusion of "dynamic" and "maximum", describes a structure designed to achieve maximum dynamics with minimum energy. Aesthetically and ideologically, the Dymaxion House was made from the raw material of aeronautics, aluminium. The only functional Dymaxion house ever built was converted into a holiday home in Wichita and lived in for twenty years. In 1992, after a further twenty years of neglect, the struc-

ture was carefully dismantled and moved to the Henry Ford Museum in Detroit.

In Fuller's thinking, the dome would be a means of transforming existing anthropic environments into sustainable and protected systems, saving energy and resources. This tendency to find the shortest and smartest route can be traced in many of his visionary projects: the most interesting, in terms of our thesis regarding the virtualisation of dome architecture, are those that deal with the knowledge of planet Earth. In this regard, the Geoscope project (Buckminster Fuller [1982]: 161-197) represents a unique synthesis of architecture and epistemology, and can be considered a precursor to digital virtual globes such as Google Earth. Originally developed as an educational tool, akin to a planetarium, it also served as a predictive instrument. The Geoscope was intended to offer an interactive and captivating representation of the Earth, allowing users to simulate scenarios, observe long-term changes, and predict future developments using simulations, tactics, and historical data. The Geoscope would be linked to a comprehensive global database, which would transform it into an exceptional platform for increasing personal engagement and global education. It would provide an opportunity for people from all over the world to work together to experiment with solutions to global problems and develop plans to tackle the world's most intractable issues.

As we have just seen, Fuller devoted an enormous theoretical and architectural effort to providing a rich conceptual framework for this design. Indeed, the idea of a closed, autonomous, yet entropic environment in dynamic equilibrium, always in motion, seems to be central to the architect's intellectual challenge. In the architect's words, «All the system's paths must be topologically and circularly interrelated for conceptually definitive, locally transformable, polyhedral understanding to be attained in our spontaneous-ergo, most economical geodesicly structured thoughts» (Buckminster Fuller [1969]: 67).

The image of the geodesic dome is more than just a visually striking object: it represents an ideal

and a model that underpins the utopian aspirations we will explore in the following pages. In fact, according to Fuller, our planet can be seen as a spaceship – a self-contained and autonomous environment travelling through the emptiness of space. In Fuller's view, all earthlings are actually unaware that they are astronauts on “Spaceship Earth”: a constantly moving, enclosed environment that travels through space and survives thanks to energy exchanges and consumption. Buckminster Fuller's striking imagery was destined to leave a lasting mark on the counterculture of the time. Here is his fascinating description:

Spaceship Earth was so extraordinarily well invented and designed that to our knowledge humans have been on board it for two million years not even knowing that they were on board a ship. And our spaceship is so superbly designed as to be able to keep life regenerating on board despite the phenomenon, entropy, by which all local physical systems lose energy. So we have to obtain our biological life-regenerating energy from another spaceship - the sun. (Buckminster Fuller [1969]: 50)

Domes are actually planets within our planet, spaceships on Spaceship Earth, virtual worlds where we can imagine alternative ways of life. That was the focus of the do-it-yourself dome movement, which, as we shall see later, represents a convergence between the popular culture associated with the rise of VR in the United States and the revolutionary thinking of Buckminster Fuller. This movement used domes as light and sustainable ecological architectural structures, modelled on the idea of creating a self-contained environment. Domes were seen as the perfect structure for this purpose because of their lightness, flexibility and ease of construction. They offered a creative lifestyle free from conventional constraints, embodying a sustainable and self-sufficient way of living.

For instance, the New York-based community action group CHARAS provides an illustration of how dome architecture and utopian political social movements can intersect. Named after the acronym of its founders, ex-gang members in the

Lower East Side, Chino Garcia, Humberto Crespo, Angelo González Jr, Roy Battiste, Anthony Figueroa, and Sal Becker, CHARAS envisioned dome structures as a potential solution for affordable housing in disadvantaged urban areas or as an escape from the frenzied downtown lifestyle. Photographer and Buckminster Fuller's consultant Syeus Mottel documented CHARAS' journey during the five months in which they worked on the dome, from September 1972 to January 1973, collecting testimonies from members. The CHARAS experience is grounded in a holistic approach to community action in response to bureaucracy and pessimism. In James Echevarria's words «CHARAS is more of a lifestyle. [...] What I have learned down at the loft hasn't been about domes and geodesics, it's been more about people. What people can do when they feel it is their friendship that is being called on» (Mottel [1973]: 73).

The experiences offered by the do-it-yourself (DIY) dome movement would have been impossible without the efforts of those who propagated Buckminster Fuller's ideas and provided practical instructions for actually building domes. As we will see, many of these utopians played a significant role in the development of "dome thinking". They contributed greatly to the movement by sharing their knowledge, expertise, and ultimately philosophy.

DIY dome culture and utopian aesthetics are perhaps best reflected in the project of the counter-cultural magazine *Whole Earth Catalog*, founded by Stewart Brand and modelled on Buckminster Fuller's insights. This intriguing intellectual and socio-political endeavour is a sort of «internet before internet» (Cadwalladr [2013]). With a subheading that read «access to tools», it aimed to provide its readers with useful and accessible material: an instruction manual for reimagining society. The catalogue contained several types of objects, from theoretical books to dome-construction manuals, which could be useful for those who tried to pursue the dream of alternative ways of living. Especially in its first issues, it was very much shaped on Brand's personal experience: there it was in fact «virtually impossible to find an

item offered that is not intimately linked to a community to which Brand belonged, if only somewhat marginally, between 1960 and 1968» (Turner [2006]: 82).

Its holistic, and also geodesic, character was made patent by its covers, which were almost always photographs of the Earth seen from Space. From a theoretical point of view, this image and its imagery in a way merged with dome philosophy, transforming these structures into "lifeboats", rather than spaceships. This convergence has been recently clarified by Douglas Murphy in his book about contemporary utopian architecture. As he explains, «Throughout the era, again and again the notion of the spherical environment, the dome or the bubble, came to represent the new-found sense of the earth as a small, vulnerable globe in the vastness of space, and the quest, for some, was to expand that protective interior zone to encompass ever-greater aspects of life» (Murphy [2022]: 2). Its influence on what would become the Silicon Valley community (Markoff [2022]: 3-4) is evident in the famous quote «Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish», which became Steve Jobs' motto in his influential Stanford commencement speech, but which originally appeared on the back cover of the 1974 issue of the catalogue, with a photograph of dawn seen from space and a Wild West landscape promising adventure and discovery (Brand [1974]: 3). In Jobs' words, *The Whole Earth Catalog* «was sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along: it was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions» (Jobs [2005]). Contributors to the *Whole Earth Catalog* focused primarily on developing tools and technologies for sustainable living, rather than engaging in the political and protest strategies of the New Left. However, the *Whole Earth* community embraced a wide range of values, including both liberal and conservative perspectives. The *Whole Earth Catalog* was in fact modelled on dome culture, not only because Buckminster Fuller was a major inspiration for its founder, Stewart Brand, but also because the catalogue included numerous instructions for building domes, such as *Domebook 1 and 2* (Kahn [1970 and 1971]) and David

Kruschke's *Dome Cookbook of Geodesic Geometry* (1972). These resources were intended as practical tools for building the dome, which was seen as a small version of the earth within the earth. The dome was not only a symbol of an alternative society, but also a concrete way to build it. As we shall see, the utopian and escapist aspects of dome culture can be read as a potential form of virtual reality in the flesh, as is the case with the ambitious undertaking of Biosphere 2.

2. BIOSPHERE 2: A MODERN-DAY ARK OF GLASS AND STEEL

The curious case of Biosphere 2 is a perfect example of this dome-oriented utopian (or dystopian) framework from an ecological, architectural, theoretical and ethical point of view. Located in Oracle, Arizona, Biosphere 2 is a site where many of the tensions of dome theory and practice were brought to a critical point. As we shall see, geodesic architecture can be understood here as a virtualisation device: a technique capable of reconstructing a simulation of the world based on an elaborate network of vital exchanges between apparatuses, people, biomes, animals, insects and plants. As recently noted, «As a kind of utopian spectacle to sell a techno-optimistic future, [Biosphere 2] was engineered to draw attention to possible solutions for the coming environmental apocalypse – itself a *dystopian* spectacle» (Koch [2021]: 36).

Developed in the 1980s by Space Biospheres Ventures, with financial support from philanthropist and oil tycoon heir Ed Bass, in collaboration with the University of Arizona, Biosphere 2 is a 12,000 square meter structure that houses the largest artificial ecosystem ever built. Biosphere 2, so called to distinguish itself from Biosphere 1, the Earth², includes the technosphere, which consists of a microcity and a farm, and the “wilderness”: a rainforest, a savannah, a marsh, an ocean

and a desert. As a «miniversion of the real thing» (Gentry, Liptak [1991]: 25), it was designed as a closed and sealed environment, autonomous and sustainable, to experiment with ways for humans to survive on other planets (or on Earth in the event of ecological collapse). In 1991, expectations about its anthropological value were at their highest point: even though not perfect «just as Biosphere 1», Biosphere 2 appeared as a «modern-day ark of glass and steel» which will «teach everyone a great deal about protecting our home planet and preparing for Mars and beyond». (Gentry, Liptak [1991]: 84) Only two missions were eventually carried out: the longest was the first, where a crew of eight carefully selected Biospherians lived inside the dome complex for two years between 1991 and 1993.

The engineer and adventurer John Allen, who founded the Institute of Ecotechnics in 1973, is considered the inventor of Biosphere 2. The “mini-world” of Biosphere 2 was designed to provide the opposite of the “overview effect” experienced by the first astronauts to see the Earth from the outside: an “innerview” effect that would raise awareness of the fragile and endangered equilibrium of “Spaceship Earth”. The idea of building an enormous geodesic dome, which would replicate Planet Earth’s ecological complexity, is credited to Buckminster Fuller himself. During the Galactic Conference, organized by the Institute of Ecotechnics at *Le Marronniers* Conference Center in Provence in September 1982, Fuller said «“I didn’t think you could do it, but what you’ve proposed here does make sense.” Addressing the members of IE, Fuller continued, “If you don’t build the biosphere, who will?”» (Nelson [2018]: 12).

In fact, as architect Peter Pearce has shown, the design of Biosphere 2 can be seen as an advanced and syncretic version of Buckminster Fuller’s dome architecture. According to Pearce, Fuller «was focused on the singular-key-to-the-universe idea and I think that the dome was a manifestation of that. Whereas I have been known to say that the key the universe is a combination lock» (Allen [1991]: 62). The overall look of the structure ended up being a sort of cultural and

² The word “biosphere” was first used by the Russian sage-geologist, crystallographer and cartographer Vladimir Vernadsky [1926].

exotic mash-up «that paid homage to world architecture: barrel-vaulted space frames inspired by Babylonian forms, stepped pyramids like those of the Middle East and the Americas, and geodesic domes as a nod to the modern architectural masterpiece invented by Buckminster Fuller» (Nelson [2018]: 32).

The less scientific aspects of the enterprise provide interesting clues to our virtualisation hypothesis: for example, the Biospherians who completed the first trials in the test capsule were given nicknames such as Vertebrate X, Vertebrate Y and Vertebrate Z, as if they were to transform themselves into “avatars” of specimens of the human race – while remaining Western white Anglo-Saxons, of course. To reinforce the metaphor of Biosphere 2 as an almost virtual Eden, each biome was managed by a captain who compiled a wish list of animals to be included, following aesthetic and even childish desires: «Dr. Ghillean Prance, the captain of the rainforest, had hoped to have a monkey. But they eat too much». (Gentry, Liptak [1991]: 38). The ideology behind the project was heavily influenced by aesthetic values: beauty was a fundamental criterion in the design of the entire experience. (Gentry, Liptak [1991]: 40). The first and longest mission mentioned above is generally regarded as a failure³, although reading the enthusiastic later memoirs of Biospherian Mark Nelson [2018] it does not seem so: the crew left the biosphere malnourished and weakened by the progressive oxygen decline in the domes, which was later explained by the imbalance between photosynthesis, soil respiration, and the oxidation of concrete.

Leaving aside for the moment many of the cultural and ethical implications of this curious and

partly forgotten human endeavour, I would like to emphasise its virtualising character. As its creator, John Allen, has stated, the ultimate goal of the enterprise – which takes on a form similar to that of the starship of the same name in the Star Trek series (Murphy [2022]: 185) – was to «change the coordinates of reality» (Allen [1991]: 153). Biosphere 2 can thus be seen as part of a current of thought surrounding the emerging technology of virtual reality, particularly that developed by the computer scientist Jaron Lanier, whose path crossed several times with Biosphere 2 itself (Markoff [2022]: 294) and with dome architecture.

3. FROM JARON LANIER'S DOME TO VIRTUAL DOMES

Jaron Lanier is considered the father, or grandfather, of virtual reality as we know it today. In the late 1980s, he had a clear vision of what virtual reality would look like in the decades to come, which made him a prominent figure in the political thinking around information technology. His critical views on social media (Lanier [2018]) and artificial intelligence (Lanier [2023]) represent an important voice in a debate that today risks being silenced by a dangerous, almost religious enthusiasm. Far from being a technophobe, Lanier's clear thinking advocates a humanistic approach to shaping our relationship and ideologies towards new immersive media, since «It is impossible to work with information technology without also engaging in social engineering» (Lanier [2010]: 4). The ultimate goal is to restore the centrality of the individual, to prevent the anonymous model of Wikipedia from triumphing over the entire internet, while users' data is effectively given away for free to companies (especially social networks) that use it for profit.

Let's go back to a time before Lanier became the founder of VPL, where he started developing virtual reality technologies and data gloves. As he recalls in his atypical autobiographical memoir *The Dawn of the New Everything* (Lanier [2017a]), his intellectual path crossed the *Whole Earth Cata-*

³ The University of Arizona took over research at Biosphere 2 on 26 June 2007, saving the structure from demolition. Private donations and grants enabled the university to cover research and operating costs for three years, with the possibility of extending funding for ten years. The funding was extended, and Biosphere 2 is currently owned by the University of Arizona and involved in research projects including the study of the terrestrial water cycle, ecology, atmospheric science, soil geochemistry and climate change.

log experience, the cultural cluster that found its synthesis in the Silicon Valley movement. When Jaron was only 11, he and his father Ellery, who supported the family by writing science fiction for New York magazines, found themselves alone and impoverished after Jaron's mother died in a car accident (Lanier [2017a]: 22-32). After buying an acre of land in New Mexico and finding a job as a teacher, Ellery allowed his son to design and build their house from scratch: the beginning of a therapeutic and highly symbolic work to eventually build a geodesic dome⁴. The resulting complex merged the "traditional" DIY geodesic dome with more irregular and strange designs. In the end, Lanier's dome house was reminiscent of the Starship Enterprise from the Star Trek saga, but also of a soothing female body (Lanier [2017]: 28). The experience of spending a significant portion of his teenage years designing and living in a dome, which presented him with a multitude of technical challenges⁵, left a strong impression on Lanier. In his words: «Having grown up in such an odd environment, I found it quite a challenge to live in a normal place. I had a hard time adjusting to orthogonal walls, and normal schedules. I spent much of my thirties forcing myself to live more conventionally, without clutter» (Lanier [2017]: 32).

Interviewed by Dave Eggers about *The Dawn of the New Everything*, Lanier explained one of the possible links between the basic structure of virtual reality and the design of geodesic domes. Speaking about the geodesic dome complex he and his father built, he said that «The house was made of triangles, including geodesic domes. The computer graphics objects that one sees in VR are usually made of triangles in the same way, even though the triangles are often obscured, so there is a similarity» (Lanier [2017b]). This similarity in

the composition of geodesy and digital design is echoed in the concept of "geographical metaphor", which Lanier used in a widely quoted interview he gave to *Whole Earth Review* in 1989. Here is the full passage:

Virtual Reality is conceived of as an expansion of reality, the provision of alternate realities for people in mass in which to share experiences, and so the types of metaphors that come up are things like cars, travel, different countries, different cultures. For instance, you might very well have a virtual car that you ride around even though physically you're in one place. It would go through different territories in Virtual Reality so that you could get around them – or transporter booths, perhaps. So you could have geographical metaphors. There might very well evolve a new geography, let's say – a fictitious planet with new continents that you can dive into to find new realities (Lanier [1989]: 112).

Geodesic architecture can thus be seen as a flesh-and-blood "geographical metaphor" that stands for some of the potentials that virtual reality seemed to have. If we look at another prophetic early interview from 1990 in the cyberculture magazine *Mondo 2000*⁶, we find an interesting parallelism between virtual reality and architecture:

The weird thing is, if you look at modern buildings, they look like they're in Virtual Reality already. They look like they're a computer rendering, because they're all made out of pre-fab parts, they have these funny proportions that naturally come out of computer modelers that weren't designed by artists, and they have these textures that are straight from a Garould shading engine (Lanier [1990]: 48).

As Lanier argues, virtual reality and architecture, particularly geodesic architecture, have a symbiotic relationship. Lanier's appreciation of the

⁴ Among the young Lanier's sources, he cites *Plants as Inventors* by Raoul Heinrich Francé [1920] and *Domebook 1 and 2* (Kahn [1970 and 1971]).

⁵ In this regard Lanier recalls: «About ten years later I'd meet Stewart Brand for the first time, and my first words to him were, "I grew up in a geodesic dome." His first words to me were, "Did it leak?" "Of course, it leaked!"» (Lanier [2017a]: 29).

⁶ In the same issue there is another interesting sci-fi fantasy about domes by Nick Herbert entitled *The Proposal for a Pleasure Dome* (1990), curiously inspired by the "politics of pleasure" of Ilona Staller and her Party of Love.

utopian ideals of geodesics serves as evidence of the potential for virtualisation inherent in this cultural project. Conversely, tracing this genealogy of virtual reality space can shed light on some of its political and social implications. By understanding this historical development of virtual reality, we can gain insight into how it was intended to impact society, and culture generally.

CONCLUSION: VR AS A VIRTUAL DOME AND VICE VERSA

As we have just seen, Jaron Lanier's humanistic approach and political awareness paint a stimulating picture of some of the social and historical features of VR. Indeed, examining the cultural context of VR's emergence, at least in the United States, may prove useful in understanding some of the meanings that the virtualization process can take on. In this respect, Lanier's fascination with geodesic domes signifies more than his affiliation with the cultural movements that have shaped the cultural and technological landscape of Silicon Valley.

It has significant implications for understanding the meanings of virtual reality from both a historical and philosophical perspective. This point of view can present an idealistic, epistemological, and aesthetic interpretation of virtualization through VR. Perhaps, but it is only a hypothesis, this could provide a different framework to that offered by the monopoly of the Menlo Park company. A potential alternative to this latter is the fusion between VR and dome architecture through the creation of VR domes. These structures are an adaptation of the CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment). As VR requires 360-degree vision, the curved surface of the dome becomes the projection surface, allowing users to be positioned at the centre of the virtual environment and share it with others in real-time. Unlike VR headsets, the VR dome provides a shared experience where users are not confined to their

individual fields of view⁷. Ironically, therefore, it could be argued that the philosophical and political model of virtualization that Lanier promoted is perhaps best embodied in an environment, the virtual dome, which paradoxically resembles the precursors of virtual reality more than the head-mounted displays that he personally contributed to developing.

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⁷ For a recent example, very technologically advanced and refined in terms of design, see the DomeLab designed by Sarah Kenderdine, as part of her experimental museology proposal (Kenderdine [2019]).

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Cinematic street art? Exploring the limits of the philosophy of street art¹

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Abstract. As artforms, film and street art seem incompatible. Contra this incompatibility, I investigate their combination: *cinematic street art*. Two promising cases are the artworks *MUTO* and *Repopulate*, but I argue neither is suitable. *MUTO* only counts if I accept the transparency thesis, the claim that photographs allow us to literally see their depicta. *Repopulate* only counts if we reject Noel Carroll's requirement that a cinematic performance token isn't itself an artwork. However, these imperfect cases demonstrate what is required in order to have cinematic street art: the artwork is a 1) a consensual artwork that 2) does not merely use street art as imagery or 3) merely use the street as a performance space. I introduce two hypothetical artworks inspired by this approach and discuss their merits, as well as their pitfalls relevant to my own desiderata. As such, this article serves as the foment for broader discussion within the philosophy of street art.

Keywords: film-philosophy, street art, experimental film, transparency.

PRESS PLAY

On July 25, 2019, Twitter was ablaze as independent entertainment company and hipster darling A24 cryptically tweeted a video with six of their films each listed with a respective set of coordinates. Entitled *Public Access*, A24 led a campaign that brought a select few of their acclaimed films to the places they were set in via massive white billboards, all free of charge (Sicurella [2019]). The creative publicity stunt not only capitalized on the unique sense of space that many of their films are imbued with, the films were situated in such a way that it is reminiscent of an adjacent artform: street art. Yet, philosophers of street art, the few that there are presently, have neglected discussing the intersection between street art and film.

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The disparate methods of production for these artforms might feel incongruous, given that we often associate street art with graffiti, stencils, and sculptures and film with site-specific projection and two-dimensionality. Despite their appearances, I argue street art and film are not incompatible. On the contrary, the combination of street art and film yields a *sui generis* artform that I term *cinematic street art*.

The concept of cinematic street art is motivated by three conditions. First, street art is an essentially aconsensual artform, or artform wherein the artist does not seek consent from the property owner where the art is placed. Furthermore, street art makes the street internal to the artwork's meaning, such that removing an artwork from the street undermines its artistic integrity. Second, the street is not merely imagery in our analysis of cinematic street art. One may say that films about street art like *Murs Murs* or *MUTO* count as cinematic street art, but underlying this analysis is the assumption that photographs are necessarily transparent objects – which they are not. Third, cinematic street art does not *merely* use the street as a performance space. These conditions are the basis for a few cinematic street artworks that I propose, though my putatively ideal candidates become contentious upon closer inspection. My theoretical foray is thus an outline, inspired by the discourses on the philosophy of street art and film, of a *sui generis* artform that we may have yet to encounter.

I begin by evaluating what philosophers have said about street art so far.

THE ESSENCE OF STREET ART

Riggle contends that «an artwork is *street art* if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning» (Riggle [2010]: 246; italics original). The definition joins two claims: street art must make *material use* of the street and this material use is *internal*, or essential, to how the artwork functions in space. An artist utilizes the material street by binding the very existence of the

artwork to the street, such that its removal would compromise the artwork's integrity. The most obvious examples of this are graffiti artworks, which literally adhere to the street that the artist paints them on; the same may be said of wheat-paste, ceramics, and wallpapering. By contrast, a painting produced in a studio on a canvas and subsequently hung in an alley would not satisfy either of Riggle's requirements, since it would not make use of the street nor make meaning from it. If this painting were removed from the street and hung instead in an art gallery, it would retain its meaning and effect; the same can be said of commercial art and advertisements (Ibid.). A prominent and paradigmatic example of street painting, according to Riggle, is Invader, the Paris-based street artist who has now *invaded* 65 cities and 33 countries (<https://urban-nation.com/artist/invader/>). The remarkable art he produces is not always located on the physical street, yet it is generally uncontested as street art².

Of course, street art encapsulates more than conventional media. Seed-bombing, the practice of planting packets of flower seeds into neglected spaces, is widely considered by aestheticians to be street art (see e.g. Bacharach [2016]; Willard [2016]). Its titular cousin, yarn-bombing, similarly beautifies unappealing spaces with knit fabrics (e.g. bike rack cozies). In each of these approaches, the artwork makes use of the *material* street rather than simply being placed on it. The street itself becomes a potent source of meaning for the artwork, hence satisfying Riggle's internality requirement. This also entails that when an artwork created for the street is removed from it, then a portion of its effect is lost, for artwork in the street «outstrips the power of its manifest aesthetic properties» (Riggle [2010]: 250). The term «street» itself, however, has been obscured by the presence of street art not spatially located in the

² A quick search on Google of the «top 10 most famous street-artists» consistently yields Invader, among others. This in itself is not indicative of their philosophical status as street artists, but it demonstrates that there is a consensus among the general public on what street art looks like.



Banksus Militus Ratus on display at the London Natural History Museum. Source: <https://banksyexplained.com/issue/banksy-rat-business-and-pest-modernism/>.

street. Banksy, the most well-known working street artist, epitomized this conundrum with his 2004 piece *Banksus Militus Ratus*, placed inside the London Natural History museum without permission. *Banksus Militus Ratus* is undoubtedly street art in the eyes of aestheticians for its activist functions and subversive properties (Bacharach [2016]), but it poses a problem for those who rely on street art existing in the street. Riggle himself is aporetic when defining the notion of street. He explains that, in order for a space to count as the street, «people must treat it as the street» (Riggle [2010]: 255). This is intuitive enough, but Riggle muddies his own waters by adding that treating a space as the street presupposes «maintain[ing] a vague constellation of practical attitudes toward [the street]» (Ibid.)³. Riggle identifies, as it were,

³ Public approbation also plays a key role in defining the relationship between public and street art. When the public enjoys the effect of a given piece of street art, they are much less likely to remove it from the space it is presented in. Conversely, if the public dislikes what has been created, people may be motivated to seek its removal through the local agencies or take it upon themselves. On the street, an artwork's impact or resonance with the surrounding community is measured by the length of time it stays up. This is a marked contrast from public art, which, ironically, cares not for the public's initial or continued approval. Since public art is usually commissioned by bureaucratic authorities and protected by law, its effect cannot be predicated on its ability to remain unscathed –

the constellation of street art but not the constitutive stars. To obviate such vagueness, Sondra Bacharach (2016) looks to an attendant phenomenon of street art.

Bacharach posits *aconsensuality* as the determinant of street art. *Aconsensuality*, unlike *consensuality* or *non-consensuality*, refrains from seeking consent from a party (Bacharach [2016]: 486). A party, *x*, commits *aconsensual* act *z* when they do not ask the other party (or parties), *y*, for their permission to engage in said act. By contrast, if party *x* was denied permission from party *y* to engage in *z* act, but proceeded to engage in *z* act, this would be *non-consensual*. According to Bacharach, *aconsensuality* is the framework that we employ for measuring the status of a street art artwork, as well as how we delineate public art from street art⁴. Artworks that go through the bureaucratic authorities in government and receive funding from those sources have been publicly sanctioned, whereas street art circumvents this entire process and often exploits it. Bacharach explicates her taxonomy further through a four-step method of street art production that integrates *aconsensuality*:

- (1) These works are subject to alterations and destruction, and hence street artists accept the resulting ephemerality of their works;
- (2) these works are often illegal;
- (3) street artists have a strong incentive to remain anonymous...
- (4) if street artists strive to make defiant and subversive art, art that falls outside of the mainstream, then it should come as no surprise that their work is often deeply antithetical to the art world. (Ibid.: 487)

To illustrate this method, Bacharach turns to the case of Barry McGee, a street artist that the city of Sydney commissioned to produce public art. Accused of being a sell-out, McGee created both

it is expected to be.

⁴ Chackal observes that illegality and illicitness are just as, or even more so, integral to the function of street art as is the street. Chackal's account marks these two variables as «co-constitutive» since illegal street artworks are *de facto* contradictory to social conventions (Chackal [2016]: 363).

the commissioned artwork as well as an aconsensual one, reestablishing his *bona fides* as a street artist in the community (Ibid.: 488). Bacharach does not believe aconsensual art is inextricably linked to illegality (Ibid.: 481); in other words, one could theoretically make street art that is aconsensual but not illegal⁵. There is reason to be concerned about the epistemic conditions of such a concept. If I judge an artwork to be street art because of its apparent context but later ascertain that it was commissioned by the local government, then should it be incumbent upon me to revise my belief about what type of street art it is? Though one may find it undesirable to do so, I will bite the bullet for the sake of argument and assert that we should.

While the contextual definition of “the street” may remain obscure, undoubtedly borne of the ever-expanding canon of street art, taken together Bacharach and Riggle provide a sturdy enough foundation on which we can build out the case for cinematic street.

ACONSENSUALITY AND PHOTOGRAPHIC TRANSPARENCY

Ask people interested in street art what they envision if you say “cinematic street art” and likely

⁵ The proposition that aconsensuality and illegality are individual is contentious. Baldini points out that the assumption is oxymoronic since aconsensuality conceptually implies de jure regulatory violations of a given space (Baldini [2018]: 14). Private property is designated in legal documents, so to produce an aconsensual artwork, which Bacharach says occurs on private property, entails that the artist violates the city’s regulations for private property (Bacharach [2016]: 486). But there is a response to this criticism. In 2009, the Brazilian government passed legislation that legalized street art in cases where consent by the property owners was given to the artist (Young [2012]). We can imagine a similar case wherein a city or state level government passed a law sanctioning all street art, but forewent the consent proviso. Street artists would now be empowered to produce artworks in any space, including private properties, without legal repercussions; this does not have any bearing on aconsensuality. In effect, an artist could still produce the artwork aconsensually but not violate the legal statutes of the city.

all will mention *MUTO*. *MUTO* (2008)⁶ is a short-film by the street artist Blu, a renowned street artist famous for his intricately painted murals and animated shorts⁷. These shorts all utilize the street in the same way – that is, the street becomes an individual frame of animation for the video⁸. Blu individually paints an image, photographs it, paints over it, and paints the same image a few inches ahead of the previous. The tedious process yields an astonishing reward for viewers but poses a dilemma for philosophers. First, encountering street art *in the wild* is an intuitively distinct phenomenological experience from encountering street art on Instagram. What Riggle (2010) articulates as an «unsolicited aesthetic injection» – that moment of happening upon street art on an otherwise ordinary walk – is incomparable to the phenomenological event of finding a picture of street art on the internet. The short-film is also not located in physical space. Each example supplied herein or in the extant street art literature assumes *a priori* that street art begins and ends on the street. For if the conception of a street artwork was not the street, then its genealogical essence would be of another kind. Components of a street artwork (such as stencils for spray painting, knitted fabrics for yarn bombing) may be created beforehand, but the product is only realized in the street. The converse is true of *MUTO*. The street artwork paintings in Blu’s short-film are components analogous to stencils, *ad hoc* tools for the creation of an artwork. *MUTO* brilliantly utilizes one medium, street art, to generate a product in another, film. But, dissimilar to street art, *MUTO* does not become a film until *after* it has been on the street. Not until all of the still frames are organized chronologically in editing software is the film realized. If street art is conceived in the street, then cinematic street art is as well. Since *MUTO* does not become a film until *after* the

⁶ *MUTO* is available here: <https://youtu.be/uuGaqLT-gO4>.

⁷ Blu’s body of work is available here: <http://blublu.org/b/category/news/>.

⁸ Street artists, such as the Broken Fingaz collective in Israel, have since reused Blu’s technique for their own artworks: <https://vimeo.com/10555187>.



Two stills from Blu's short film *MUTO*. Source: *MUTO* (2008). Screenshots by the author.

street, the cinematographic element of it cannot be a component of a street artwork. This might account for why Riggle (2010) and Baldini (2021), who identify *MUTO* as street art, make a conflation in labelling *MUTO* as street art when it is a film *about* street art⁹.

But *MUTO*'s status is much more precarious viewed through the lens of Bacharach's framework. Should we accept Bacharach's view that

⁹ My choice of wording here may provoke some criticism. *MUTO* is not necessarily *about* street art in the same way that Varda's *Mur Murs* (1981) or Silver's *Style Wars* (1983) is. In those documentary films, street art is the subject that the filmmakers choose in order to engage broader discourses about society. By contrast, street art is the object in *MUTO*.

street art broadly is aconsensual, we would have to accept that each individual artwork must be aconsensual. Given this, *MUTO* would need to itself be an aconsensually-produced film. What is the issue with this? I could necessarily concede that Blu produced his individual artworks, the frames of each painting, without consent from the property owners, therefore each artwork is street art in itself. This is irrelevant, however, since the aconsensuality of these artworks does not apply to the film – aconsensuality is not a transferable property as elucidated by Bacharach. The aconsensuality of an artwork is inextricably linked to it and cannot apply to any other artwork by proxy, such as a photograph taken of an aconsensual artwork.

A natural solution to this may be to invoke Kendall Walton's transparency thesis. The transparency thesis holds that photographs uniquely enable viewers to see objects as they exist in the space they inhabit. Unlike paintings, where the artist acts as an intermediary between an object and the image, the photograph's contents are unimpeachable (Walton [1984]: 261). If I take a photograph of cars I see passing by on the freeway, then the photograph will represent the cars passing by on the freeway as they are – it counterfactually depends on it (Currie [1996]: 53). Now, if I were to paint the same image that I previously photographed, I have the liberty to modify how the cars appear as much or as little as I like. Perhaps I wish to paint each car blue in my scene, even as the assortment of car colours in the freeway is more varied. My intervention in this instance, a freedom that any artist may exercise in their artwork, indicates that we are independent of the situation we are representing when painting. Therefore, according to Kendall Walton's transparency thesis, when I see a photograph of cars passing by on the freeway, or of my great-great-grandmother who is long deceased, I am seeing those objects themselves (Walton [1984]: 251). The argument as such is that if photographs are transparent, then there is no aconsensuality to be transferred between Blu's street artworks and *MUTO*: the photograph, by virtue of being seen through, is aconsensual.

This is a tempting solution, but it necessitates that I back a theory proven dubious. Neither photographs nor the moving image contains the necessary spatial egocentric information, or knowledge about the location of objects in space and time ascertained through our perception, to be transparent (Currie [1995])¹⁰. Unlike a prosthetic seeing device (a telescope), photographs cannot give us the same spatial egocentric information any bodily or prosthetic seeing device can (Ibid.: 65; see also Cohen, Meskin [2004]). Without such information, photographs cannot be transparent and are therefore not things we merely see through. Here the distinction I wish to draw is not that cinematic street art is ontologically transparent, for this would require a far deeper exploration of the subject, but that cinematic street art is not transparent in *our analysis* of it¹¹. Artworks themselves, such as *MUTO*, do not presuppose the transparency thesis, thus any stipulation that cinematic street art must not presuppose transparency is irrelevant. However, what I glean from this line of inquiry is that cinematic street art involves more than imagery. We cannot reliably individuate cinematic street art from cinema if use of imagery is the sole condition, therefore I need further conditions. These conditions will become evident as I continue to analyze other street artworks.

PERFORMANCE IN STREET ART

At first glance, the most intuitive and parsimonious solution for cinematic street art would be to project a film onto the street. Far from the unwieldy devices they were a century ago, projectors are now a highly compact and generally affordable means to watch video on any space. Why could I not project Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* onto an alleyway in Queens and label that cinematic street art? Similar to a knitted yarn-piece

that is then attached to a street pole, someone skeptical of my argument thus far could say that *Ikiru* is an ingredient of the artwork but not yet the artwork until it is placed in the street. If this were the case, then *voila* – I have achieved cinematic street art! The problem here is that this counterargument assumes that *Ikiru* is meaningful by virtue of being projected outside of the cinema. In fact, no unique artistic work occurs because projecting *Ikiru* itself does not make the street internal to the film's function. You have repurposed pre-existing art without meaningfully utilizing it, rendering it vapid as a unique artwork. Any film not produced with exclusively with the intention of internalizing a site into the film's meaning thus cannot be street art.

This negates the preceding A24 Public Access case as street art. Let's disregard for the sake of argument that the Public Access screenings are permitted and therefore consensual; that that granted, the films themselves do not make the street essential to their meaning. In an interview with Forbes, an A24 marketing executive stated that the decision was made in part because A24 films «are rooted in a sense of place» (Dawson [2019]). Showing A24's films on billboards in their respective environments democratizes the art, similar to street art, and engenders immersion. Yet, the environmental complementarity is just that: a compliment. Their films in and out of the billboard projection spaces utilize the same template. Cinematic street art requires that we find a film that transforms the space it inhabits akin to the methods that other street artworks do, or more broadly that we find a means to transform a space cinematically.

In 2009, the art collective Sweatshoppe premiered a new technology that allowed them to create the illusion of painting with video¹². With each stroke, a piece of the image emerges from the surface it is placed on, eventually coalescing into a single image or video. The technology behind their work involves a tracking software project-

¹⁰ There are other refutations to the Transparency thesis that I will not discuss for my limited purposes, including Carroll's (2008) argument against aesthetic disinterest.

¹¹ I wish to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this distinction to my attention.

¹² My thanks to Sondra Bacharach for bringing this collective to my attention.



A Sweatshoppe video painting performance. Screenshot captured by author.

ing prefabricated images when certain movements occur. Take, for example, Sweatshoppe's *Repopulate* (2013) in the occupied territory of Palestine¹³. Sweatshoppe member Blake Shaw travels to various historical locations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Jaffa, and *paints* videos of refugees, symbolically «return[ing] the image of the refugees to their ancestral homes». The spatiality of the *Repopulate* video paintings gain purchase in the artwork's meaning. Only by situating these specific films in these specific locations do the video paintings become a compelling symbolic protest. They are also placed aconsensually, even if they incur no material consequences for the spaces they are placed in.

So far, this seems to be the ideal candidate for cinematic street art – until I reference Noel Carroll's ontology of film. Carroll enumerates five requirements for determining how a film must function to exist as film: (1) as a detached display, (2) to give the impression of movement, (3) be a performance token generated by a template, (4) performance tokens are not themselves artworks, and (5) be two-dimensional (Carroll [2008]: 73). Sweatshoppe's approach fulfils (1), (2), (3), and (5), but is antithetical to (4). Let us elaborate on

¹³ A video of Sweatshoppe's work available here: <https://vimeo.com/65691265>.

this definition piecemeal. The notion of *detached display* is an intuitive extension of spatial egocentricity. When we perceive an object in space normally, we ascertain spatial egocentric information about said object in relation to us that we use to orient ourselves toward it. Film is «phenomenologically detached», even if the camera interacts with the space around it (Ibid.: 57). When we watch a movie, we anticipate movement to occur in the film; this expectation is rational for a viewer to have given the nature of the *moving* image itself. However, it is perfectly reasonable that a filmmaker may exploit this human inclination for their own ends. Because we must account for static films, Carroll's second requirement presupposes that we *anticipate* movement when watching a film, rather than categorically assume it (Ibid.: 61).

Though it evolved into a distinct artform by the mid-1910s, theatre and film both belong to the «multiple-instance» type of art (Ibid.: 64). Each instance, or performance, of the art is designated as a token experience; however, these token performances are produced entirely differently. Motion picture *performance* is a referent for the use of a *template* – DVD, Blu-Ray, film reel, VHS, streamed video – to show a movie, whereas a token performance for the theatre is an *interpretation* of a play, a «recipe» as Carroll insightfully describes it (Ibid.: 66)¹⁴. When a theatregoer witnessed Laurence Olivier performing in a rendition of *Hamlet* at the Globe Theatre, they witnessed the performance token of Shakespeare's text as interpreted by Olivier; in this instance, the interpretation is the artwork. When a moviegoer witnessed a performance token of Olivier as Hamlet in his film adaptation of the play, the performance token was generated from a film reel template; in this instance, the film

¹⁴ Arthur Danto discusses the significant role that actors play in delineating a film from a theatre performance. He writes: «In a movie, a role belongs to the person who plays it in the sense that were another to play the so-called same role, it would be in a different *work*. So the fact that films use actors ought not to mislead us into thinking of film as an essentially performative art inasmuch as nothing counts as a different performance of the same work» (Danto [1985]: 107; italics original).

reel was the artwork. Thus, requirements three and four acknowledge that film «performance tokens» (a screening of a film) are generated from a template (DVD) and, unlike theatrical performance tokens, these tokens are not artworks unto themselves. Yet, one class of counterexample, the mechanical figurine, appears to fit all the requirements (Ibid.: 72). Something like the mechanized Jack Sparrow that peeks out of a barrel on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride in Disneyland still fits the bill, yet no one acquainted even in the most tangential way with film would defend mechanical figurines as film. To avoid this objection, the final requirement enumerated by Carroll stipulates that a motion picture must be *two-dimensional*.

The videos of Palestinian refugees in *Repopulate* are each performance tokens from a template, the template being a projection or light transmission that is tracked by the sensors in the paint roller. What then negates (4) is the interjection of the painting performance itself. Part of the video painting's aesthetic value is that the video is revealed through an unpredictable combination of strokes. In *Repopulate*, Shaw pushes his roller at random, eventually coalescing into a painted block that reveals the face of a refugee. In order for video painting to conform with (4), each performance token would need to be an exact replication of the previous – this is infeasible in Sweatshoppe's approach. Moreover, a hypothetical performance token of this variety would betray the core experience of video painting as an unpredictable multimedia spectacle. Such as it is, I need not be committed to Carroll's ontology wholesale in order to clarify the point. Insofar as one grants each performance token is not in itself an artwork, the point stands and leaves room for the acolytes of Cavell, Danto, and Bazin, among other prominent film philosophers and theorists, to hash out the finer details of film art.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CINEMATIC STREET ART

I have stipulated thus far that the constitutive stars of the cinematic street art constellation

include, but are not limited to: an 1) aconsensual artwork that 2) does not merely use street art as imagery or 3) merely use the street as a performance space. If we concede the desiderata of cinematic street art that I have laid out, then I have suggestions for two feasible, and practical, approaches for cinematic street art: site-specific projected films and primitive moving image devices. I conclude by addressing some criticisms of my argument stemming from these hypothetical approaches.

Suppose that rather than projecting an existing film on the street, like *Ikiru*, I projected a film intentionally created for a specific space. Say, for example, that there is a brick apartment building in Queens that I choose to make an artwork for. Every night, I notice that the man living in apartment 4A opens his window to get some fresh air. For a week, I project a video that I have made onto the window of apartment 4A. In it, a man falls out of the apartment and towards the ground, and the token is repeated in a thirty-second loop from the template movie I created; call this *Falling Man*. The street is internal to the cinematic artwork's meaning in this scenario, both in its temporality and its dedicated use in the street, it checks every one of Carroll's boxes, and it can be produced aconsensually. However, even in this example it is not clear that the street is transformed in the relevant sense. Indeed, LED throwies or sugar art, artworks that do not alter the surface, still hang from the street or adhere to it. Such artworks supply a fair counterpoint to concerns that street art necessarily transforms the space it inhabits, but do not account for the breadth of street art practises. In protest of defence contractors developing laser weapons, the legendary collective Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) designed a laser projection device called *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* (2007)¹⁵. In layman's terms, a high-powered projector recreates images that a person draws with a laser by tracking the movements of the laser with a computer program, creating the illusion of draw-

¹⁵ Their artwork and website is available here: <http://www.graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/projects/laser-tag/#video>

ing with a laser. Street art of this variety reworks our concept of the medium with cutting-edge technology. If one denies that GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* is street art just because of its methods, they risk dispensing of the avant-garde ethos of street art. To push the point further, I make the projection *even more* site-specific. Imagine that a man had actually jumped out of apartment 4A five years ago, thus the projection invokes the cultural consciousness and memory for its artistic ends¹⁶. Though I do not see this proviso as mutually exclusive to cinematic street art, the thought clarifies the myriad ways that I render cinematic street art creatively without abandoning my desiderata.

The remaining candidates for us to consider are two primitive forms of film: the zoetrope and the Mutoscope. Both devices rely on a manual crank that the operator spins in order to imbue still images with a sense of motion. The zoetrope is a cylindrical device inserted with images or 3D models that is viewed through a slit, while the Mutoscope is a coin-operated device that plays a reel of images in succession, like a flip book, viewed through a private window. A zoetrope created for and installed on the street fits the bill for cinematic street art. Although a sceptic may counter that the zoetrope is three-dimensional and therefore contradictory to Carroll's requirement (5), the image produced from the zoetrope itself is two-dimensional. A movie playing in the cinema is witnessed in a three-dimensional space, yet we do not say that the film itself exists three-dimensionally. Mutoscopes could similarly be installed in the street. The sceptic might also offer the concern that neither of these artworks are subversive, one of the vital characteristics of street art that Baldini (2018; 2021) observes. Subjectivity plays a serious role in subversiveness. What is subversive is contextually-dependent, Ásta (2013) tells us, but something as antiquated and rare as a zoetrope or Mutoscope, especially located in the street, is generally unconventional. To what extent placing these devices in the street is subversive is up for debate, but I find it intuitive and uncontro-



Wheel of Life (1870) Zoetrope at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

versial to claim that a zoetrope on the street subverts norms. Of pertinence to our discussion is Bill Brand's *Masstransiscope*, a 1980 public artwork installed in the New York subway tunnels. The artwork consists of 300 feet of individual frames placed on the tunnel wall opposite the train, with a barrier in between that has 228 individual slits and fluorescent lighting to illuminate the frames. As the train moves through the tunnel, the gorgeous metamorphosis of shapes animates and brings aesthetic value to an otherwise mundane subway ride¹⁷. Had *Masstransiscope* not been funded by government programs and permitted,

¹⁶ My thanks to Nicholas Riggle for making this point.

¹⁷ Brand thoroughly documents the making of *Masstransiscope* on his website here: <https://www.billbrand.net/public-art>.

it would accord with the standards I set forth for cinematic street art.

Setting aside these minor concerns, a much graver one threatens the theoretical integrity of *Falling Man* and street zoetropes. Carroll designed his fourth requirement, a performance token must not be an artwork unto itself, in order to delineate theatre and film. A film retains its phenomenal meaning in spite of its placement, whereas the venue of a theatre performance token bears on its phenomenal meaning. In the same vein, street artworks make phenomenal meaning from the street, indicating that street art appears more allied with theatre than film. But if this is the case, then it is unclear how *Falling Man* and the like do not run afoul of Carroll's fourth criterion¹⁸. The desiderata are also in tension because of this. As the transformation of the street and site-specificity of an artwork increases, the less cinematic it can be, for these phenomena make the work more obviously a performance¹⁹.

¹⁸ My thanks to an anonymous referee for illuminating this point.

¹⁹ Andrea Baldini here might suggest I endorse his performance-centered ontology of street art. His theory holds that we appreciate not so much the product of the street artist's action but instead their «generative actions», an application of Davies' (2004) theory of art as performance (Baldini [2021]: 290). I may notice a tag placed at the highest point on a bridge or behind heavily secured barriers and wonder, how did someone manage to get up there? Perhaps I witness an intricate tag conspicuously placed in a populated location and ponder, how did this artist manage to avoid arrest? Tacit in each of these queries is an appreciation of the performance involved in the production of an artwork. Contra Baldini, performance-based ontology regards the street art work-product as ancillary to the performance and favors a narrow breed of the diverse medium. In virtue of endorsing an ontology that assumes that appreciation is derived from the performance, the work-product simply becomes the manifestation of this performance. Baldini himself labels street artworks as «traces revealing a street artist's activity», traces of an activity that «an appreciator can imaginatively reconstruct» when viewing an artwork (Ibid.: 291). Theorizing street art artworks as traces accommodates those street artworks that are unconcerned with the aesthetic value of their product, viz. graffiti. Conveni-

The tension between my desiderata indicates that we still have much to discuss when it comes to the philosophy of street art. But rather than lament this tension as the downfall of my argument, I see it as the foment for a refined theory of street art and its theoretical limits. In endeavouring to answer one question, what film's place in street art is, many more have taken its place. I have suggested multiple hypothetical and actual examples of cinematic street art that heretofore were not conceptualized as such, and disputed other examples that one may have initially demarcated as cinematic street art. But the paucity of examples that I can reference may indicate that this artform is just nascent. The particular approach I set forth, combined with the recent advent of consumer film technologies, create a high bar for artists to clear before they have cinematic street art, which is why this article best serves as a springboard for further discussion.

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ently, Baldini often supplements his ontology with myriad examples of graffiti, rather than a broad selection from the medium. When we introduce Blu's monolithic murals or Shelly Miller's breathtaking sugar paintings into the discussion, there is unmistakably an aesthetic appreciation working in tandem with performance appreciation. Therefore, Baldini's ontology is predisposed towards a genus of street art, not the species itself.

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Evolution and palaeoanthropology in Hans Blumenberg's *Nachlaß*

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Abstract. Hans Blumenberg wrote, in an unpublished manuscript entitled *Ein Betrug? / Der böse Dämon* (UNF 532-534), that «the whole world and human intelligence were hidden beneath the earth, where the relics of the precursors of life rest». The German philosopher was not a palaeoanthropologist in the strict sense but dedicated much of his life to *excavating* in the ground, in search of replies to the great questions about the human condition. This paper is the result of a work compiling and classifying a series of unpublished texts about palaeoanthropology to be found dotted throughout his *Nachlaß*. The aim is to show the interest that disciplines such as palaeoanthropology aroused in the German thinker, and that his understanding of the matter, reflected in part in his anthropological-philosophical theses, has not yet been systematised.

Keywords: philosophical anthropology, Blumenberg, evolution, *Nachlaß*, palaeoanthropology.

1. INTRODUCTION: HANS BLUMENBERG AS A PALAEOANTHROPOLOGIST (FROM THE *NACHLAß*)

In the unpublished manuscript *Ein Betrug? / Der böse Dämon* (UNF 532-534), the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) declared that «the whole world and human intelligence were hidden beneath the earth, where the relics of the precursors of life rest». I choose to open the paper with this quotation because it perfectly summarises the topic here discussed, namely this thinker's interest in matters concerning human evolution and his understanding of palaeoanthropology¹.

¹ This paper combines different sections of my doctoral thesis *El aburrimiento como presión selectiva en Hans Blumenberg* (2017, Complutense University of Madrid), directed by Professor José Luis Villacañas Berlanga. All discussed here may be found at length and in detail there. My Doc. Diss. was funded under the FPU-MECD 2012 programme of the Spanish Ministry of Educa-

Blumenberg had no formal training in palaeo-anthropology, and never practised the profession. He was nonetheless passionate about this discipline, and such other related fields as ethnology and zoology. He was very familiar with discoveries and advances in such matters, drawing on them in order to offer a response, from an anthropological-philosophical perspective, to the great questions of the human condition: *What is mankind? How has it become what it is? How did such a weak creature achieve such evolutionary success? Is the human being in truth a weak creature?*

Over the course of at least two decades, from 1968 to 1988, Blumenberg became an expert in palaeoanthropology and human evolution, selecting, underlining, annotating and compiling studies by such well-known researchers of the era as the German zoologist and ethnologist Hans Krieg, the Swiss Adolf Portmann and the Austrian Konrad Lorenz, the German palaeontologist Rudolf Bilz, the Austrian sociologist Justin Stagl, the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, and the German anthropologists and philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Helmuth Plessner, among many others.

His working routine involved producing indexes of readings, classified on record cards (*Karteikarten*) by thematic discipline, such as *Entwicklung*, *Anthropologie* (Figure 1), *Biologische* or *Ethnologisch*². He then photocopied those excerpts from the texts that most interested him, and studied them before filing them in folders (*Mappen*)³. He entered notes about these texts

tion, Culture and Sports, and undertaken within the context of the *Biblioteca Saavedra Fajardo de Pensamiento Político Hispánico (IV)* and *Biblioteca Saavedra Fajardo de Pensamiento Político Hispánico (V)* (FFI2012-32611 and FFI2016-75978-R) research projects, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Innovation and Economy. The study presented here is a beneficiary of the *European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement* (No 847635).

² These indexes may in particular be found in the Konvolut Karteikarten zu den Themen: Entwicklung, Anthropologie, Eschatologie.

³ These folders are now located in the case (Schuber) Konvolut Materialsammlung Anthropologie I-II. For example, one particular text to be found here is a section of the

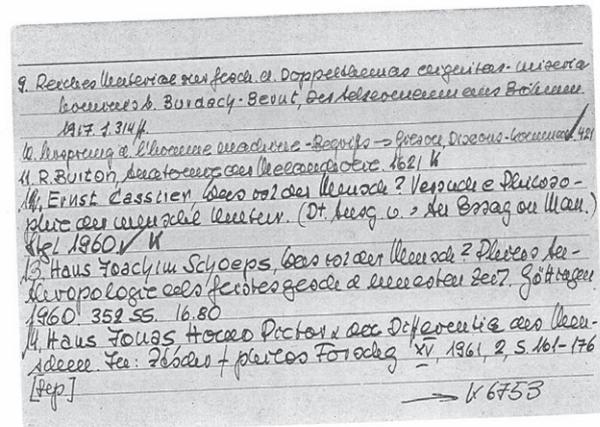
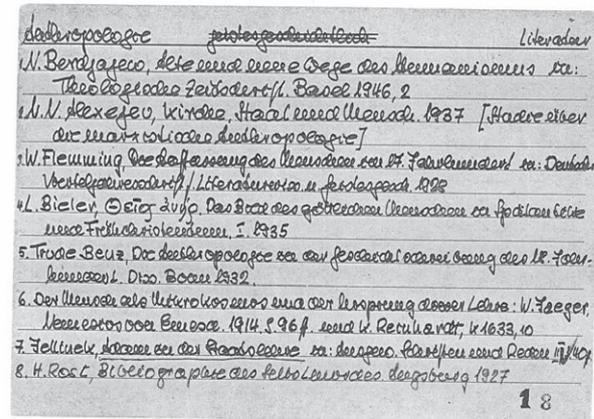


Figure 1

on other cards stored in thematic card indexes (*Zettelkasten*) – Zettelkasten 01: Anthropologie, Konvolut Karteikarten zu den Themen: Entwicklung, Anthropologie, Eschatologie or Konvolut Materialsammlung Anthropologie, among others. He would typically note down the relevant quotations from these readings on his cards, accompanying them with comments which he later organised into brief manuscripts (UNF), which would ultimately become the foundations of his works⁴.

Even before his interest arose in academic readings on palaeoanthropology, Blumenberg had

work *Offene Systeme I. Beiträge zur Zeitstruktur von Information, Entropie und Evolution*, by Ernst von Weizsäcker, father of the physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, published in 1974.

⁴ This is not a specific working methodology for the topic of palaeoanthropology, but the approach that Blumenberg typically adopted.

already, since 1965, set about clipping, studying, commenting and archiving numerous publications from such newspapers as the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” or “Die Zeit” and from journals of the stature of “Nature” or “Science”, concerning our most distant past as a species. He maintained this habit up until at least 1990⁵. He even collected a number of large-format posters, featuring our evolutionary family tree, which these journals issued for their readers (Figure 2).

During the year I spent at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv of Marbach am Neckar (2013-2014), in Stuttgart, where the unpublished texts and manuscripts of Blumenberg reside, I had the opportunity to familiarise myself with his palaeoanthropology-based work. I in fact found that the philosopher was entranced by matters connected with human evolution, and had gradually built up an array of knowledge reflected in anthropological-philosophical work of great significance, such as the *Description of Man* (2006).

However, I then realised that the apparent thematic order which may be inferred in the classification of unpublished documents and manuscripts, conducted by means of their arrangement in endless folders and card indexes catalogued by subject (*Entwicklung, Anthropologie...*) was merely superficial. While it is true that work concerning the disciplines can *easily* be located in certain *Mappen* and *Zettelkasten* on the basis of their title, there is no internal consistency among the contents of these groupings of material in accordance with the different sub-topics of a paleoanthropo-

logical nature. For example, in one *Zettelkasten* concerning anthropology, one may find a record card with notes about craniometry in hominids, while on the next card we find an entry about the extinction of dinosaurs.

In some cases, Blumenberg marked the record cards and brief manuscripts (UNF) with abbreviations of the topic to which they corresponded: ENTW, ANTHR... But this likewise proves insufficient to establish an internal thematic order within each of these disciplines which were of such great interest to him, about which he learned, and from which he drew inspiration for his anthropological-philosophical theses. The task of classifying his unpublished manuscripts about palaeoanthropology, and methodically systematising them in accordance with different sub-themes, is a challenge which is unquestionably worth the effort, but which no one has yet ventured to take upon themselves.

This would also need to be combined with the exercise of establishing the connection between the sub-thematic syntheses derived from unpublished paleoanthropological texts, and the known theses set out in his published work. The philosopher wrote countless notes which were not subsequently included in published manuscripts, and which prove of great interest not only in order better to understand the paleoanthropological philosopher, but to understand the background to his anthropological-philosophical conclusions. One could analyse at length what Blumenberg in truth drew on to give shape to his anthropological-philosophical postulates, and what he decided to keep to himself, and then venture the reasons prompting him to take these decisions.

This would, in short, involve *excavating* in the subsoil of Blumenbergian philosophy, to find ourselves face-to-face with his veiled relics. Many may see no sense in digging into the depths of the thoughts of a philosopher some of whose most fundamental propositions we are still trying to digest: metaphorology, the theory of myth, or phenomenological anthropology. It strikes me as an unprecedented challenge for studies of Blumenberg, which would specifically result in a mature

⁵ The titles of the news items and journal articles he selected would include, by way of example: *Zeichen der Menschheit* (“Zeit Magazin”, unknown authorship); *Frühmenschen in Israel neu datiert* (unknown source, with the initialled byline G. P.); *Wo beginnt der Mensch?* (“FAZ”, written by the zoologist Hans-Joachim Wasserburger); *Pliocene footprints in the Laetoli Beds at Laetoli, northern Tanzania* (“Nature”, jointly published by the anthropologists Mary Leakey and Richard Hay); *Der älteste Europäer? Ein 700000 Jahre alter Frühmenschen-fund in Griechenland / Werkzeug und Feuerbrauch und Neue Vor- und Frühmenschen-Funde* (“FAZ”, both of unknown authorship). These and others are gathered in Konvolut A I-II.

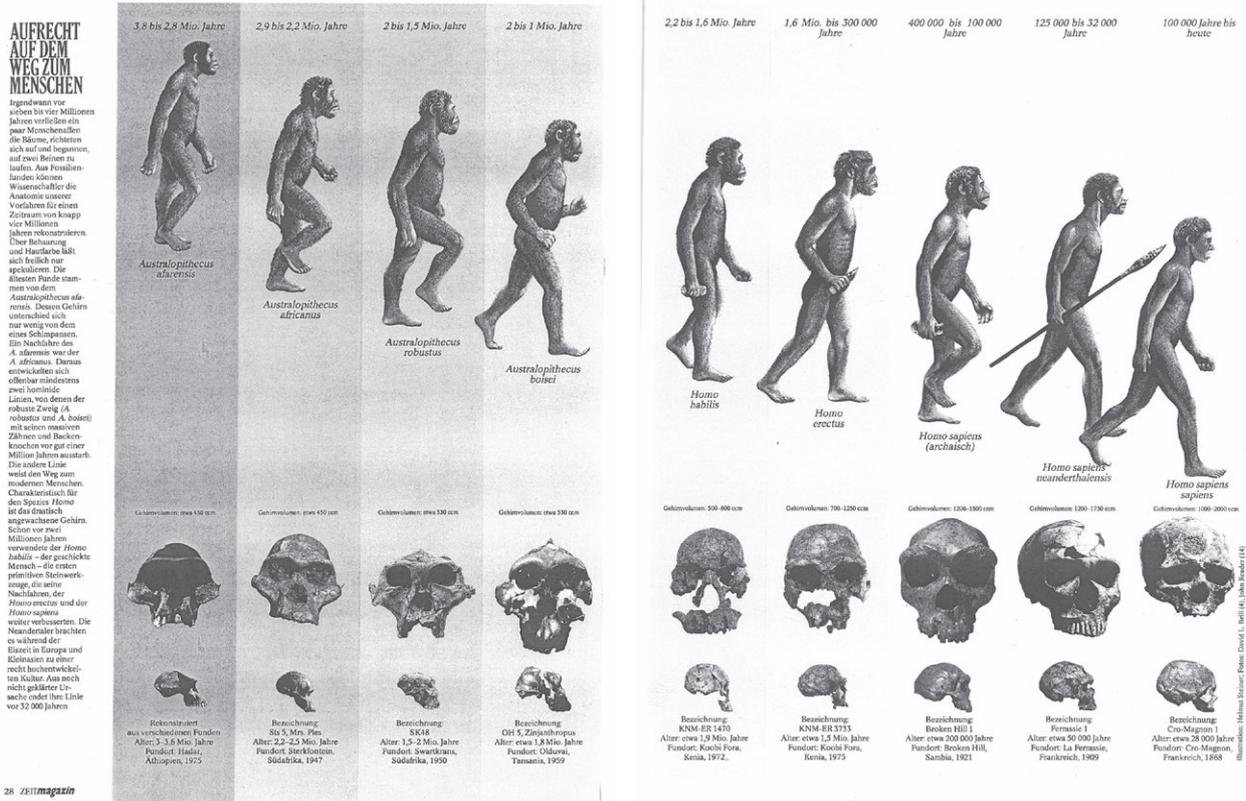


Figure 2

understanding of those other more popular philosophical expressions.

I have not been so bold as to succumb to such an invitation⁶. However, as part of my doctoral thesis – *El aburrimiento como presión selectiva en Hans Blumenberg* (2017) – I conducted a brief exercise of the thematic synthesis regarding some of the paleoanthropological nodes which attracted Blumenberg’s attention, on the basis of the unpublished manuscripts that I had the chance to consult at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. As for the rest, I will set out a brief presentation of the keynotes comprising those which strike me as

⁶ It is now quite some time since I diverted my attention towards the Studies of Boredom, and have since then returned to Blumenberg only to retrieve his original (and equally unknown) ideas as to this incommensurable state which affects all beings with the slightest cognitive development (see Ros Velasco [2017, 2019, 2022]), with the exception of this paper.

the most important and appealing, in all cases in my humble and *non-exhaustive* approach to the paleoanthropological material of the *Nachlaß*.

My aim with this brief introduction is simply to offer an outline sketch and arouse the curiosity of the reader as to this Blumenberg who remains, in part, buried beneath tonnes of unexplored paper.

2. SAMPLE OF PALEOANTHROPOLOGICAL THEMES IN THE BLUMENBERG NACHLAß

Palaeoanthropology or human palaeontology is a branch of physical anthropology and palaeobiology which studies human evolution and its fossil record, in other words deals with the hominids of the past. It is a discipline intrinsically linked to palaeontology, geology, palaeoecology, biology, genetics, archaeology and primatology, which aims to explain the emergence and evolu-

into two large families: the monkeys of the Old World (represented today by the colobi, the langurs, the bonobos and macaques) and the simians, and that the latter began to dominate the Old World during the subsequent period of 20-25 mya. Blumenberg assumed, following a diagram cut out of "Der Spiegel" (Figure 4), that the species *Ramapithecus*⁷ had been the first ancestors of mankind some 15 mya. From this moment up until approximately 4 mya, the date established for the emergence of the species *Australopithecus*, the "Tier-Mensch Übergangs Phase" apparently occurred, in other words the transition from animal to human.

Neither Blumenberg nor his contemporaries (all of whom were mistaken, in accordance with the database available to them at the time) could have imagined that in fact the first shared ancestor would prove to be *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* (Toumaï), discovered in 2001, five years after the philosopher's death, in the Djurab Desert. The remains are estimated to be aged between 6 mya and 7 mya.

One may imagine that his information as to the course of the evolutionary tree beyond *Australopithecus* was more complete (although not more correct) thanks to his work on the poster that "Zeit Magazin" offered its readers at some point in the 1970s (Figure 2). Here, *Australopithecus* (*afarensis*, *africanus*, *robustus*, *bosei*) dominates the landscape between 3.8 mya and 1 mya, up until the leap to *Homo habilis* (2.2 mya - 1.6 mya). This is subsequently followed by *Homo erectus*, early *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, coexisting with one another for a time prior to each extinction, before arriving at *Homo sapiens bonisai* some 100,000 years ago.

Whichever tree one follows - the version from "Der Spiegel" or from "Zeit Magazin" - neither of them shows how the step occurs from the last of the *Australopithecus* species to the first *Homo*

⁷ *Ramapithecus* is no longer recognised as a likely precursor of humans, but of the modern orangutan. The specimens that were once associated with this genus are now considered to belong to one or more species of *Sivapithecus* - an extinct genus of hominid primates of the Miocene, whose fossils were found in the Siwalik Hills.



Anthropologe Richard Leakey*
Neuer Vorfahr entdeckt?

FORSCHUNG

URMENSCH

Zottiger Adam

In störrisches Kamel hat sich um die Abstammungsgeschichte des Menschen verdient gemacht.

Auf einer wissenschaftlichen Patrouille am Rudolf-See im ostafrikanischen Kenia, bei der Suche nach Vorfunden, hatte das Reittier des Anthropologen Richard E. Leakey, so, mit knarrendem Blöken seine Müdigkeit kundgetan. Der Expeditionstrupp beschloß, in der Einöde zu bivakieren.

Vor dem Aufbruch am nächsten Morgen - an einem Augusttag letzten Jahres - sammelte der junge Forscher am Rasplatz noch einige uralte Tierknochen auf. Da, im Sand eines ausgetrockneten Bachbettes, sah er einen bleichen, steinverkrusteten Schädel.

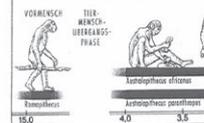
„Der knöcherne Scheitelkamm, die gewaltigen Brauenbögen, das flache Gesicht und die kleine Hirnkapsel“ so berichtet Leakey in der neuesten Ausgabe des amerikanischen „National Geographic Magazine“ (das seine Ex-

* MIT DEM SCHÄDEL EINES AUSTRALOPITHECUS.

IRRWEGE DER EVOLUTION

Die Entwicklung des Homo sapiens

Vorsichtige Skelett-Funde stützen die Annahme, daß sich die Entwicklung vom Urhomo sapiens nicht gradlinig vollzogen hat. Die Anthropologen fanden einen Stammbaum mit vielen noch unüberprüften Verzweigungen und toten Ästen - frühen Menschenarten, die weder ausgestorben sind diese Vorfahren der jetzt lebenden Menschen sind auf insgesamt 35 Millionen Jahre entspannende Abwärtslinie für die letzten Jahrhunderte nachvollziehbar. Man ging Anthropologen haben jedoch in möglich, daß vom kühn behaupteten „Mystery Man“ der vor 2,6 Millionen Jahre lebte, eine direkte Fortwähnung zum Homo sapiens, existiert.



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Figure 4

habilis. In fact, the version in "Der Spiegel" even marks an unknown period, from between 2.7 mya and 2.4 mya, when the "Mystery Man" lived, man's famous missing link from the early and middle of the last century, who actually turned out to be a woman (see 2.2).

On the basis of these rudimentary and obsolete chronologies, Blumenberg ultimately learned in detail not only the supposed dating of the specimens that predated us in the evolutionary tree, but also the particular examples that had been discovered, the form and size of their skulls and bodies, as well as where and how they lived.

2.2. The Australopithecus species

The *Australopithecus* species attracted Blumenberg's interest in particular because of how dif-

pedition finanzieren half, „sind alle samt Merkmale des Australopithecus.“ Der Zufall ist eines der Blösten und besterhaltenen Zeugnisse jenes affrikan-menschlichen Weisens, das länger als alle anderen bekannten Vor-, Ur- und Frühmenschen die Erde bevölkert hat.

Ein Alter von 2,6 Millionen Jahren haben britische Experten dem Reittier inzwischen zugesprochen. Schon vor der Wende von der Brunnenkohlen- zur Eiszeit muß mithin der gedrungene Zweibeiner Australopithecus über die afrikanischen Steppen gestreift sein.

Beim systematischen Graben stieß Leakeys Team an der Schädel-Stätte, die in diesem Jahr weiter durchforstet wird, auf fast ebenso altes Steinwerkzeug im primitiven Faustkloß-Stil: Schaber und Klängen aus grob behauenen Basalt. Sie sind 850.000 Jahre früher entstanden als alle vorderen gefundenen Geräte.

Die überraschendste Entdeckung aber machte der afrikanische Expeditionsteilnehmer Mwongeta Mooko - er fand Bruchstücke eines weiteren, merkwürdig modern anmutenden Schädels. Für „durchaus möglich“ hält es Leakey, daß dieser „Mystery Man“, dieser geheimnisvolle Mensch, ein direkter Vorfahr der Art Homo sapiens gewesen sei.

Noch an etlichen Dutzend Stellen östlich und nördlich des Rudolf-Sees haben Leakey und seine Mitarbeiter sowie französische und amerikanische Wissenschaftler fossilienreife Ablagerungsschichten ausgekundschaftet. Sie fanden dabei sogar vier Millionen Jahre alte Zähne und Kieferbruchstücke, die wahrscheinlich ebenfalls vom Australopithecus stammen.

So könnte diese Region an der Grenze zwischen Kenia und Äthiopien, wie die Forscher meinen, das inheritance-Bedruck der Vorgeschichte werden. Es scheint noch reichhaltiger zu sein als die berühmten, weiter südlich gelegenen Fundplätze in der Oldoway-Schlucht am Rande der Serengeti-Steppe. Dort fuhren Richard E. Leakeys Eltern - der renommierte britische Anthropologe Dr. Louis S. B. Leakey und seine in der Vorzeit ebenfalls bewanderte Frau Mary - schon seit Jahrzehnten nach Spuren des Urmenschen.

KULTUR

ANTHR

Doch erst in jüngster Zeit ist die allmähliche Entwicklung des Menschen verständlich geworden. Nur spärliche Belege - so den Schädel eines Neanderthals - hatten Naturforscher wie Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley und Ernst Haeckel vorweisen können, als sie vor einem Jahrhundert die Abkunft des Menschen aus dem Tierreich postulierten.

Daß auch dieser Teil der Darwin'schen Abstammungstheorie in den Grundrissen stimmt, haben Ausgrabungen in Afrika, Asien und Europa erwiesen. Allerdings: Statt einer geradlinigen „Generationsfolge“ vom primitiven Affen zur höchsten Entwicklungsstufe des Homo sapiens rekonstruierten die Anthropologen inzwischen einen Stammbaum mit noch unübersichtlichen Verzweigungen und vielen toten Ästen (siehe Graphik).

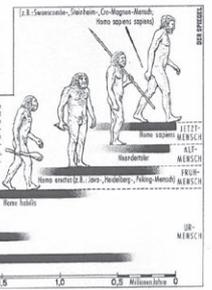
Vor allem konnten an neuen Funden die verdorrten unerschlichen Zettspannen der menschlichen Evolution ermittelt werden:

▷ Vor etwa 35 Millionen Jahren trennten sich die Entwicklungslinien von Menschenaffen und Affenmenschen.

Die Vorfahren der Orang-Utans, Gorillas und Schimpansen gerieten durch ihre Lebensweise als Hangelkletterer im tropischen Regenwald gleichsam in eine entwicklungsgegentliche Sackgasse. Bei den Vorfahren des Menschen hingegen war durch ihre Lebensweise als Steppenläufer, die sich aufrichten und Waffen und Werkzeuge verfertigen mußten, eine Weiterentwicklung möglich.

Der letzte bislang bekannte gemeinsame Verwandte dieser beiden Gruppen ist ein langarmiges, schwanzloses Kletter- und Laufftier. Relikte dieses des Gibbon-Affen ähnelnden Propliopithecus wurden schon 1911 in einer Gasse südlich von Kenia gefunden.

Als erster Vertreter der Affenmenschen-Gruppe gilt der Ramapithecus;



difficult it was at the time to establish the age of the specimens as the discoveries were made. He wrote about this in *Umdatierungen von Australopithecus africanus und Afarensis*, as a result of an article in the "FAZ" on 5 January 1983 (023884). The *Australopithecus* phenomenon was surrounded by mysteries, including the *missing link* and the dating of the specimens, until explorations began to focus on the hominids that lived in Hadar, Ethiopia, including in particular the famed Lucy (Figure 5), who provided the *female link*, and those from Laetoli, Tanzania.

The notes written by the philosopher concerning this moment of uncertainty reveal more than a merely superficial interest in the matter:

The reconstruction of the family tree of our ancestors not only depends on the variety of fossils available, but also the accurate dating of these finds. Information as to the age of certain specimens of *Australopithecus afarensis* and *Australopithecus africanus* still fluctuates considerably. According to a recent analysis, it was not clear whether the hominids from Hadar in Ethiopia, such as "Lucy", lived shortly after the hominids from Laetoli, in northern Tanzania, or much later. A more recent dating of the specimens from Hadar and comparison of the fossil fauna with that from Lake Turkana (formerly Lake Rudolf) in the north of Kenya, has now confirmed that "Lucy" is much younger than her relatives from Laetoli (Nature, vol. 300, p. 633). According to biostratigraphic studies, the fossil remains of *Australopithecus afarensis* from Hadar have an age of between 2.9 and 3.2 million years. The Laetoli hominids, meanwhile, have been dated to between 3.5 and 3.75 million years ago. It is stated that a hominid fossil found this summer in the valley of the River Awash in Ethiopia is even 4 million years old (see the FAZ of 30 June 1982). This would thus result in a gap of a few hundred thousand years. [...] But if the Hadar fossils are not the oldest, then these hominids from East Africa could have existed at the same time as *Australopithecus africanus*, because just as the Hadar finds are now again being post-dated, efforts are also being made to establish an earlier age for the *Australopithecus africanus* from Makapansgat in South Africa. This is also suggested by the biostratigraphic comparisons. We must nonetheless await further evidence of all this. (023884)

Wissenschaft und Technik

Anthropologie: Haben amerikanische Forscher den ältesten Ahnen des Menschen entdeckt

Urdame „Lucy“ ging aufrecht

Von Gerhard Taube

Die Männer sprangen wie ausgelassene Kinder umher, umarmten sich schwitzend und atemlos, tanzten begeistert auf dem heißen steinigen Boden und stürten immer wieder ungläubig auf ihren Fund: keine braune Knochenstücke, völlig unscheinbar. Zeit und Ort des aufgeregten Gebarens, das eher an fröhliche Goldgräber denken läßt: 30. November 1974 am Ufer des Flusses Awash in der Region Hadar im Afa-Dreieck von Äthiopien. Die tanzenden Männer: US-Paläoanthropologe Donald Johanson und eine Gruppe von Wissenschaftlern, die nach versteinerten Überresten ausgereifter Vorfahren des Menschen suchten.

Glanzpunkt ihrer Expedition: Die Entdeckung jener 3,5 Millionen Jahre alten Knochen: eines zu 40 Prozent erhalten gebliebenen fossilen Skeletts eines weiblichen Wesens, das offenbar schon aufrecht ging, aber nur 1,07 Meter groß war und dessen Gehirn nur Affengröße besaß. Das Exklusivum an „Lucy“, wie die Forscher ihr Vorkind-Mädchen taufen, ist, daß es das älteste, vollständigste, am besten erhaltene Skelett eines sechs- bis achtjährigen menschlichen Vorfahren darstellt, das je gefunden wurde.

Ihr Entdecker Johanson: „Ihre Knochen waren nicht angefragt oder angepöbelt, wie das der Fall gewesen wäre, wenn ein Löwe oder ein Säbelzahnträger sie gessen hätte. Auch waren Kopf und Glieder nicht in verschiedene Richtungen fortgetragen worden, was geschehen wäre, wenn Hyänen sie angefallen hätten. Lucy hatte sich ganz einfach an der Fundstelle, im Uferand eines längst verschwundenen Sees oder Flusses, hingelegt und war dort gestorben. Nach meiner Schätzung im Alter von 25 bis 30 Jahren. So hatte Lucy, allmählich von Sand und Schlamm zugedeckt, Jahrmillionen lang gelegen, bis der Regen bei Hadar sie wieder ans Licht brachte.“

Wer war Lucy? Wie ist sie einzuordnen in den Stammbaum der Menschheitsgeschichte? Als Johanson im Januar 1979 mit der „offiziellen“ Bekanntgabe seiner sensationellen Entdeckung an die Öffentlichkeit trat, sah sich der junge, noch relativ unbekanntes Wissenschaftler, kontroversen Stellungnahmen aus der etablierten Fachwelt gegenüber. Die Diskussionen nahmen mit der Herausgabe seines Buches „Lucy – Die Anfänge der Menschheit“ im Jahre 1981 noch zu. (Die deutsche Ausgabe erschien 1982 im Piper-Verlag.) So soll Lucy nach jüngsten geologischen Schichtuntersuchungen jedenfalls 3 Millionen Jahre alt sein. Weitere Belege müssen aber abgewartet werden.

Ein Neandertaler, in einen Straßenanzug gesteckt, würde in einer U-Bahn nicht besonders auffallen. Er gehört, wenn auch grobknochiger als wir, immerhin zur Spezies *Homo sapiens*, war also ein Mensch. Vor ihm lebte der weniger hochentwickelte Typus des *Homo erectus*. Würde der in die U-Bahn steigen, würde man ihn mit einigen Mißtrauen beobachten. Vor dem *Homo erectus* lebte ein recht primitiver Typus, der *Homo habilis*. Bei seinem Erscheinen in einem öffentli-

chen Verkehrsmittel würden die Insassen höchstwahrscheinlich aufspringen und sich in die äußerste Ecke des Wagens setzen.

Vor dem *Homo habilis* wiederum existierten Hominiden, aufrecht gehende, menschenähnliche Geschöpfe, die als *Australopithecus afarensis* beschrieben worden sind. Es ist der Typus, dem Lucy angehört. Sie ist bereits eindeutig menschenartig und vielleicht der Vorläufer aller übrigen nachfolgenden Hominiden, von denen etliche ausstarben. Andere hingegen, zum Beispiel *Homo habilis* und *Homo erectus*, stellen die letzten Sprossen auf der Leiter zum *Homo sapiens* dar.

Lucys wahrscheinliches Aussehen nach wissenschaftlicher Rekonstruktion: Ein weitgehend behaartes Gesicht mit vorstehendem breitem Mund (Waldzähnen) und Kinn, platte breite Nase, dicke Augenbrauenwülste, extrem flache Stirn, große fleischige Ohren, starke Halsmuskulatur, dunkle Haut und mächtige Körperbehaarung. Führe sie Straßenbahn, würden die Leute vermutlich an einen entropungten Zoo-Besucher denken.

Die Autoren belassen es nicht bei Lucy, so einzigartig sie auch wegen ihres hohen Alters von 3,5 Millionen Jahren sein mag. Oben Beziehung zu den in den letzten Jahren ausgewaschenen hominiden Fossilien läßt sich ihre Bedeutung nicht begründen. „Ihre Entdeckung wird bedeutungsvoll, wenn sie sich nicht in die Evolution der Hominiden und die wissenschaftliche Logik einfügen läßt, in ein System, das Hunderte von Experten aus vier Kontinenten über einen Zeitraum von mehr als hundert Jahren in mühevoller Arbeit entwickelt haben.“

Und so lassen Johanson und Edey die Leser teilhaben an Expeditionen, Diskussionen, an ihren Zweifeln und Bedenken sowie teilweise Neuschreibung der Stammesgeschichte des Menschen, die jetzt ganze Bibliotheken zu diesem Thema in Makulatur zu verwandeln drohen. Seit Darwin, Huxley und Haeckel ist begründet nachgewiesen und damit kein Streitpunkt mehr, daß der Mensch zur Ordnung der Primaten gehört und ein Produkt der spezifischen Primatenevolution ist. Heutige Forscher versuchen zu klären, an welcher Stelle das Übergangsstadium zwischen Menschenart und Affenart anzusetzen ist, welche Hominiden vor vier bis drei Millionen Jahren die Basis bildeten für die so vielfältigen Menschengruppen danach. Vor allem aber die Zeit vor acht bis vier Millionen Jahren ist noch ein dunkles Kapitel in der Anfangsgeschichte des Menschen.

Die Anerkennung des hominiden und noch tierischen *Ramapithecus* aus der Zeit vor 13 bis acht Millionen Jahren als sogenannte „Basisgruppe“ ist im Rahmen des sich zunehmend ändernden Stammbaums des Menschen ebenfalls ins Wanken geraten. So meinen Molekularbiologen neuerdings, daß unter anderem die genetische Substanz bei Mensch, Schimpanse und Gorilla so ähnlich sei, daß diese drei Arten sich erst vor vier bis sechs Millionen Jahren getrennt haben müssen. Fossilien aus der Zeit davor dürfte man nicht länger als hominid einordnen, egal, wie sie aussähen.

Diese Auffassung vertritt auch Anthro-

loge-Professor David Pilbeam, für den *Ramapithecus*, der lange als „Stammvater“ der Hominiden galt, nicht mehr der Star aus den Anfängen der Menschheitsentwicklung ist. So sei es auch möglich, noch länger nach dem fehlenden Zwischenglied zwischen Mensch und *Ramapithecus* zu suchen. Vom *Ramapithecus* gehe es nur mehr zum Orang-Utan weiter. Und auch Autor Johanson meißelt angesichts der primitiven Erscheinung form von Lucy, daß „eine späte Trennung“ von Menschenaffen und Mensch als „Möglichkeit“ ersicht werden muß.

Die Aussagen zweier Autoritäten kennzeichnen augenfällig den derzeitigen Standpunkt. Richard Leakey: „Man könnte Lucy als einen späten *Ramapithecus* ansehen.“ C. Loring Brace: „Zu glauben, Lucy sei ein *Ramapithecus*, ist lächerlich.“ Johanson am Schluß seines Buches: „Der *afarensis* (und damit Lucy) ist augenscheinlich einer der allerfrühesten Hominiden. Aber was wird man zu einem sechs Millionen Jahre alten Fuß oder einer sieben Millionen Jahre alten Becken sagen? Das sind die Probleme, die mich bedrängen, und sie werden es tun, bis wir sie gelöst haben.“

Was die Paläoanthropologie und Geologie nicht allein mit alten Schichten, Gebeinen und Werkzeugen belegen können oder auch gar nicht wollen, nämlich Beantwortung der Fragen nach den Ursachen plötzlicher Entwicklungen und unverständlicher Aussterbungen, nämlich Kreativität, Sprache, Gemeinschaftsformen, Sexualität, Gedankenreichtum, Zauber vorstellungen, Kultur und Geistesbildung, das beobachtet Hermann Schöberle in seinem Buch „Auf den Spuren der frühen Menschen“, erschienen im List-Verlag.

Was, so fragt Schöberle, muß ein frühes menschenähnliches Lebewesen an Schöpferertum vorweisen können, damit ihm Wissenschaftler die Silber-„Mensch-zubilligen“ ist es der aufrechte Gang? Das Gehirnvermögen? Das Benutzen natürlicher oder die Herstellung künstlicher Werkzeuge? Das Umgang mit Feuer oder erste selbstergzeugte Funken? Was immer der „Mensch“ tut in diesen frühen Phasen seiner Existenz, das muß er tun, das wird ihm überleben. Es ist nicht die Frucht stüßer Mühe, sondern die Antwort auf Angst, Not, Hunger und Überlebensstreben.

Es vergehen viele, viele Jahrtausende, aber ein Stein auch nach eigenem Willen zu einer zweckdienlichen Form wird. Das Feuer erweist sich als ein zentrales Element des Aufstiegs. Anfangs konnte der „Mensch“ es nicht selber erzeugen. Aber er sah es vom Himmel zucken, nutzte die kostbare Gabe zum Wärmen, Verbessern der Nahrung und als Schutz vor wilden Tieren.

Schon damals irrte die Menschheit die Überzeugung gewonnen haben, daß der Himmel das irdische Geschehen mitgestaltet. „Auch hinter dicken Augenbrauenwülsten konnte man denken...“ Das Feuer hob sie von allen Tieren weit ab. Die Hüter des Feuers hoben sich überdies aus dem Rudel heraus. Diese Hüter müssen Fe-Sonderrecht genossen haben, wurden vielleicht die ersten Priester. Wer das Feuer hatte, hatte das Leben – ganz besonders in den lebensfeindlichen Eis-

Figure 5

Blumenberg also thought, having read and annotating an article from the "FAZ" of 23 January 1935, untitled and of unknown authorship, that some specimens of *Australopithecus africanus*, with an estimated age of between 2.2 mya and 1.2 mya, could even have coexisted with the earliest *Homo habilis*, descended from the young *Australopithecus afarensis* such as Lucy.

Among these last specimens we see a phenomenon, Blumenberg clarifies, which means that it makes sense to establish a link between *Australopithecus* and *Homo habilis*: the lengthening of early childhood and the increase in neuronal plasticity

ty in the early years of life. In *Australopithecus*, the completely bipedal posture forced mothers to give birth to highly immature offspring who required considerable attention, and were born into the world with a brain that was a veritable *sponge*.

Although the small brain of the specimens «remained the only characteristic linking them to the ancestral monkeys» (untitled card with Blumenberg's notes on the "FAZ" article from 23 January 1935), premature birth and the extension of early childhood led to an increase in cognitive capabilities, by forcing mothers to provide more extended care, while their offspring had a longer learning period (019519: *Es kann zwei Gründe dafür geben [...]*; 8678-8679: *Der Möglichkeiten der Anthropogenese*).

As a curious detail in this regard, Blumenberg subscribed to the idea set out by the anthropologists Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox in *The Imperial Animal* (1971) that the learning and cognitive development times in *Australopithecus* varied by gender: the males would take longer to mature than the females, because their brain systems were «more complex and demanding, whereas those of the females were spatially more limited» (019591: *Säugetiere sind Lerntiere, der Mensch ist dazu noch ein Leehrtier*). We now know that in this case, size does not matter.

2.3. Bipedalism

Taking his lead from the biologist and zoologist James D. Watson, Blumenberg stated that «a biological theory is sound to the extent that it makes reproductive behaviour the criterion for the success of the processes it explains» (023868: *Biotopewechsel, aufrechter Gang, generatives Verhalten*). He argues that «the proximity to the reproductive function determines the functional significance of any ability» (UNF 1088-1090: *Sprachlosigkeit*)⁸. This is why theories such as the traditional reasoning that bipedalism was the result of a change of habitat runs into difficulties, since it does not

fulfil this requirement, as it has no connection whatsoever with reproductive behaviour (023868).

The theme of bipedalism was one of those which most dazzled Blumenberg. This may clearly be seen in *Description of Man* (2006), among other works, but he still had plenty more to say about the matter. Regarding the last shared link between animal and man, which for Blumenberg was *Ramapithecus*, the Lübeck-born philosopher believed that «it was specialised in brachiation [and] could swing over a distance of between nine and twelve metres» (*Der Umweg über das Baumleben als bdgg d neuen Bodenlebensform [sic]*). This excessive specialisation gave it «full competence in the forearms, leading to a relative shortening of the legs» (*Ibidem*). He then goes on to point out that the upper limbs remained so long, even in those hominids that would walk in a fully vertical position sometime later.

The degree of bipedestation of this first relative and those which followed was known, as Blumenberg himself indicates, through the observation of the «opening of the occipital hole»:

In an organic system that walks in a vertical position, the base of the skull must necessarily point forward, in other words towards the lower part of the face, as this is crucial for the skull to maintain its balance above the spine in a vertical position. The degree to which the upright posture is maintained depends on this, which explains the almost arbitrary increase in the weight of the skull. (020139: *Die Wanderung des Foramen magnum*)

However, Blumenberg was also aware that bipedestation was dependent on the anatomy of the foot. The philosopher had read, cut out and underlined the article by Mary Leakey in volume 278 of the journal "Nature" (1979), about certain footprints that had been found in Laetoli, in northern Tanzania, of a specimen of *Australopithecus*, in which the curvature of the sole and position of the toes indicated that, around 3.6 mya to 3.7 mya, beings with a completely bipedal gait had passed through the region. He annotated some of these matters on card 020912: *Aufrechter gang vor Fortentwicklung des Gehirns?*, in which he placed on

⁸ A version of this brief manuscript appears in *Vor allem Fontane* (2002).

record his conviction that the practice of bipedalism had begun, for whatever reason (probably connected with reproduction) with *Australopithecus*. We today know almost for certain that Toumaï was already fully bipedal before *Australopithecus*.

Blumenberg also indicated in his notes that the adoption of bipedalism had brought with it a significant change in sensory functions compared with life in the trees. As he explains, primates that lived in the trees had perfected their sense of smell to search for food and detect danger. However, once their way of life moved onto the steppe, forced by climate change, it was the sense of sight that became dominant (*Der Umweg über das Baumleben als bdgg d neuen Bodenlebensform [sic]*). This process triggered changes in both brain and anatomy, giving rise to «the transition to colour vision [and] stereoscopic vision» (*Ibidem*).

Following which, bipedal walking also facilitated the loss of body hair and the emergence of sweating: «life on the savannah was more intense than in the jungle, and functions of heat regulation were not maintained through the hair» (019230: *Zweimaliger Biotopwechsel*). This meant that the build-up of heat became excessive, with the sweat glands fulfilling the function of dissipating heat, as Blumenberg the palaeoanthropologist clarifies.

2.4. Tools

At around 3.9 mya, *Australopithecus* already had sufficient mental capacity and coordination to produce lithic flakes, in what would become a pre-Oldowan industry. This was already presumed in the era of Blumenberg (Figure 4). He underlined in his notes that they would have been capable of distinguishing between what he called «essential and secondary useful components» (17803: *Kerngeräte [Core Tools] & Abschlaggeräte [Flake Tools] Als anthr differenz [sic]*).

Blumenberg paid attention to paleoanthropological discoveries connected with the lithic industry in prehistory, as they allowed him to infer a degree of capacity for symbolic thinking in our ancestors. He above all focused on findings to

determine which of our relatives were capable of simply *using* a flint as a tool to dig up an edible root and fulfil a need, and which could «produce utensils with the desired properties from a particular natural element» (*Ibidem*). The latter was a sign of intelligence, of cognitive development: «It is an entirely different process, because if the piece is to be given the desired shape, this requires a series of acts to eliminate certain parts so as to ultimately obtain the desired form, incorporating the functions and the requirements to be fulfilled from the outset, entailing a process comparable with the act of sculpture» (*Ibidem*).

Drawing on the theses of the German zoologist, anthropologist and geneticist Gerhardt Heberer, in *Der Ursprung des Menschen: Unser gegenwärtiger Wissensstand* (1975), Blumenberg establishes that *Australopithecus* was perfectly capable of developing a conceptual idea to direct the expected results, and each step taken to achieve this (17803). In the eyes of the philosopher, they were ultimately not so far removed from *Homo habilis*.

2.5. The first migrations

Blumenberg likewise compiled information and wrote notes about the first move away from the African continent by *Homo habilis*. Some 1.9 million years ago, some specimens left signs of their journey through two key points: Dmanisi (Georgia) and Ubeidiya (Israel). Some of the groups settled at the start of the Calabrian Pleistocene, 1.8 mya, coinciding with the end of the Tertiary Period and the start of the Quaternary, in various parts of Asia, giving rise to what would evolve into the species *Homo erectus*⁹.

At the time when Blumenberg was addressing these issues, it was not at all clear where they had

⁹ Blumenberg stored a great amount of information from newspapers regarding those specimens, to which he attributed great importance in the process of evolution. He knew that they had lived in bands of 50 individuals, and mainly obtained their sustenance from hunting, that they used caves, and had probably, sometime later, managed to make use of fire.

emerged from: whether from the African continent to Asia, or *vice versa*, as may be seen in one of the cuttings he took of an article published on 11 October 1978 in the newspaper "FAZ", written by the German anthropologist Hans Meyer (020917, Figure 6). The footprints in themselves did not allow one to infer the direction of travel in the migration in question.

However, we now know that it is fairly certain that they left Africa for Asia, and that over time some of those who embarked on this expedition returned and occupied north Africa, together with those who never left the continent. The latter, less adventurous group, are probably those who made up the population from which our mitochondrial DNA is derived.

Blumenberg knew that they embarked on a second migration from the African continent, from the south towards central Europe, after they had already evolved into what may be seen as the *first modern humans*, around 100,000 years ago. He read this in an article published on 17 May 1989, with the byline G. P. in an unknown publication entitled *Frühmenschen in Israel neu datiert* (Figure 7).

2.6. Caves

For Blumenberg, the point at which caves were first regularly frequented to sleep is as important as the emergence from the steppe (18162: *Der bleierne Tiefschlaf ist ein Zivilisationsverhalten [...]*). This means that our ancestors began to rest at ease, without the need to worry about predators, «delegating tasks of surveillance and protection» (022198: *Übersprungeinschlafen*), which facilitated the «culture of sleep» (*Kulturschlaf*) (*Ibidem*)¹⁰.

Blumenberg spoke of the cave as the quintessential place where our ancestors developed their lives, as he asserts in a number of his best-known

¹⁰ He owes this idea to Rudolf Bilz, who presented it in the chapter *Schlaflosigkeit und Traum* of his work of several volumes *Paläoanthropologie: der neue Mensch in der Sicht der Verhaltensforschung* (1971), from which the philosopher took both notes (Figure 8).

Euro Doppelmigration Afrika & dovee?

Hans Meyer, Beginn die Evolution des Menschen in Afrika? Die bisherigen Fossilfunde reichen noch nicht für die Klärung der Herkunft der Hominiden aus. In: FAZ 11. Oktober 1978:

Keineswegs reicht die derzeitige hominide Fossildokumentation Afrikas für die Behauptung aus, allein von hier sei die Evolution des Menschen primär erfolgt: Man denke nur an den umstrittenen miozänen Kenyapithecus ("Ramapithecus"). Zwar sind bis heute weder Australopithecinen noch progressive Homo-("habilis"-)Formen - wie wir sie aus dem plio-pleistozänen Grenzabschnitt Afrikas kennen - in Asien zweifelsfrei nachgewiesen worden. Jedoch läßt das nicht den Schluß zu, daß diese Formen in bestimmten Regionen nicht existent waren, was natürlich für beide Kontinente gilt. Findet sich beispielsweise in Afrika eine eindrucksvolle Bereicherung der Fundsituation bei den Australopi-

020917

thecinen, so präsentiert Asien eine solche mit dem pliozänen Ramapithecus aus dem indisch-pakistanischen Raum und den pleistozänen bis zu 1,9 Millionen Jahre zurückreichenden Homo-erectus-Formen aus Java und China. So alte Homo-erectus-Formen sind übrigens in Afrika bis heute nicht entdeckt worden.

Es ist nach wie vor ungeklärt, ob aus Asien oder aus Afrika die menschliche Evolution primär erfolgte; sie könnte ebensogut unabhängig voneinander in beiden Kontinenten erfolgt sein. Auch über die stammesgeschichtlichen Beziehungen der Hominiden aus Asien und Afrika ist noch keine gesicherte Aussage möglich. Durch die vielen Neufunde stehen zum Stammbaumschema der Hominiden, das in Einzelheiten immer Veränderungen unterworfen sein wird und deshalb nur ein Jeweilsbild vermittelt, heute mehr offene Fragen als klare Antworten. Die Tatsache, daß der Mensch aufgrund seiner gesamten physischen und psychischen Organisation ein Produkt der spezifischen Primaten-Evolution ist, wird davon nicht berührt.

Figure 6

Frühmenschen in Israel neu datiert 17.5.89

Gemeinsame Existenz mit Neandertalern / Sprachliche Verständigung?

Die Höhlen im Gebiet des heutigen Israel sind für die Erforschung des Frühmenschen und seiner Umwelt weit bedeutsamer, als man noch bis vor kurzem hätte ahnen können. Anfang vergangenen Jahres fanden französische und israelische Forscher heraus, daß Überreste des frühen modernen Menschen („Proto-Cro-Magnon“) aus der Höhle Gafzeh bei Nazareth etwa 92 000 Jahre alt sind. Sie hatten dafür gebrannten Feuerstein aus derselben Erdschicht mit dem sogenannten Thermolumineszenz-Verfahren analysiert. Das Ergebnis war überraschend, weil die frühesten Spuren des modernen Menschen, die aus Südafrika stammen, auch nicht älter als etwa 100 000 Jahre sind. In Europa tauchte der Homo sapiens erst vor rund 40 000 Jahren auf.

Daß die Höhlen in Israel tatsächlich schon so früh von modernen Menschen aufgesucht wurden, bestätigt jetzt eine neue Datierung. In der Höhle von Skhul am Mount Carmel waren vor etwa 50 Jahren fossile Knochen entdeckt worden, die denjenigen aus der Höhle Gafzeh gleichen. In der Nähe dieser Menschenknochen hat man auch zwei Rinderzähne gefunden. Eine Datierung mit dem Elektronenspin-Resonanzverfahren hat nun gezeigt, daß die Rinderzähne etwa 90 000 Jahre alt sind („Nature“, Bd. 338, S. 756). Dieses neue Ergebnis bestätigt, daß der moderne Mensch in der Region etwa 60 000 Jahre vor dem Verschwinden des Neandertalers aufgetaucht ist. Einige Wis-

enschaftler hatten daran trotz der Funde von Gafzeh gezweifelt. Nach der neuen Datierung stellt sich die Frage, ob der Neandertaler und der moderne Mensch im Gebiet der Höhlen längere Zeit gemeinsam gelebt haben oder ob der moderne Mensch nur durch die Region hindurchgezogen ist. Das würde erklären, warum die fossilen Knochen aus den Höhlen von Gafzeh und Skhul praktisch aus ein und derselben Zeit stammen.

Sollten die beiden Hominiden parallel existiert haben, wäre es interessant herauszufinden, wie sie sich gegeneinander verhielten. Eine sprachliche Verständigung zumindest hatten die Wissenschaftler bis vor kurzem ausgeschlossen. Einige Knochenfunde ließen nämlich vermuten, daß der Neandertaler sich gar nicht wie der moderne Mensch artikulieren konnte. Dies ist möglicherweise ein vorliegender Schluß gewesen. In der Höhle von Kebara am Mount Carmel haben die Forscher einen bestimmten Halsknochen des Neandertalers entdeckt, der erst jetzt gründlich analysiert worden ist („Nature“, Bd. 338, S. 758). An diesem Knochen hängt gewöhnlich die Muskulatur, über die Zunge, Kiefer und Kehlkopf bewegt werden. Das fossile Stück gleicht dem entsprechenden Knochen beim Menschen von Form und Größe her so sehr, daß der Neandertaler vielleicht doch Laute erzeugen konnte, wie man sie für die Sprache braucht. G.P.

Figure 7

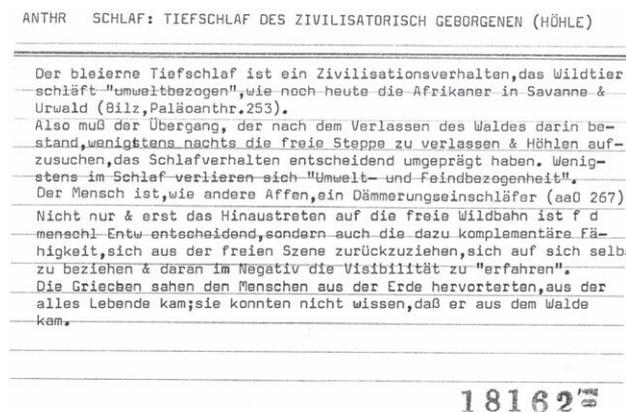


Figure 8

works, as well as other unpublished texts from the *Nachlaß*. From his perspective, at some point from the earliest *Homines* onwards, «the cave became a vital alternative to the jungle» (020141: *Vorher-sage möglicher Fossilfundstätten* [...]), although it would always remain necessary to continue governing the planet from the outside. He saw caves as homes which guaranteed «the inestimable advantage of untroubled reproduction» (*Ibidem*).

Blumenberg probably used the term *cave* as a mere generalisation of *dwelling*, which would include other shelters, such as rudimentary cabins and huts. He knew that caves were not used as homes *per se*, and that no *Homo* had continuously occupied caves prior to the arrival of *Homo sapiens*. He had read and annotated the work by German zoologist and ethnologist Paul Leyhausen *Vom Ursprung des 'handelnden Wesen'* (1974), in which he warned that «we cannot presume that the ancient human inhabitants of the caves settled there, adopting them as the permanent home for the same group» (16634: *Übergang vom Nomadentum* [...]) [*sic*].

Leyhausen had compared hunter-gatherer societies and earlier forms of social organisation to the current bands in Pavia, extrapolating the habits of the former to the first of these. He thus understood that our ancestors, in the same way as those bands, would have made prudent use of the caves found in cliffs by means of occasional incursions, using a different one each day simply to spend the night (*Ibidem*).

Given this clear understanding, we may assert that Blumenberg spoke of caves in reference to any shelter. In short, the fact that our ancestors did not live in the caves to which Blumenberg commonly refers in his writings does not in any way affect the development of his hypotheses, since, for the philosopher, the importance of caves lay in the peace of mind they provided, which would have been achieved through some other type of shelter, such as that provided by different forms of base camp in which *Homo ergaster* spent much of their lives.

2.7. Fire

By the time of *Homo ergaster*, says Blumenberg, fire came to alleviate the great tragedy that night meant for our relatives, since «its length exceeded the organic need for sleep» (UNF 963: *Künstliche Beleuchtung*). Blumenberg was enthusiastic about the matter of fire. He even noted where exhibitions focusing on the matter would be held, probably with the intention of attending¹¹.

As in the case of tools, Blumenberg was interested in the origin of the *use* of fire, its properties and functions, but was above all attracted by the question as to when fire was first controlled and *produced*. As now, however, this stage of our relationship with fire is impossible to reconstruct. Pre-historic humanity had tamed fire, but we do not know exactly how or when this event occurred for the first time (020396: *Das Feuer als Kennzeichen der menschlichen Entwicklung problematisch*). All we know for certain is that the production of fire «was not genuinely in our culture» (020573: *Regression als evolutionsbeleg?* [*sic*]).

One of the first signs of deliberate fire in this period may be found in the Swartkrans cave, located in the province of Gauteng in South Afri-

¹¹ One example may be seen on card 023874, where he wrote that the "FAZ" had announced that on 30 December 1981 a gathering would be held at the Museum of Mankind in Paris, presenting a display about the earliest human inhabitants of Europe and the development of their skills, emphasising mastery of fire by *Homo erectus* 400,000 years ago in southern France.

ca, as published in an article on 28 August 1990 in "Deutschland", which Blumenberg added to his collection (Steinert [1990], Figure 9). Experts made out what appeared to be a circular hearth bounded by basalt rocks, where bones had been deliberately placed after the meat had been eaten, not for the purpose of cooking them.

Up until then, fire was only used for eating: «it would not for them [our ancestors] have had any value other than the heat it gave off. There was no known cooking of food, and we can scarcely imagine that they would have been tempted to experiment with this» (020396). Blumenberg agrees that «anyone might place bones in the fire after the meat had been removed, or if it was charred and no longer edible» (Steinert [1990]).

The value of fire had lain mainly in its capacity to provide lighting, allowing its users to leave behind «the lack of light in which humanity had spent most of its history» (UNF 2271: *Kindeswohl und Lichtbedürfnis*; see footnote 9). From that point onwards, nights would be longer, but would be spent telling stories as a pastime to alleviate boredom (Ros Velasco [2017]).

2.8. Cannibalism

Cases of cannibalism among our closest relatives have been known for some decades now. When fire was not yet being produced, it may be that the cold in certain regions of Europe and the shortage of food could have driven our ancestors to eat their fellow beings. Or perhaps they performed such practices as a way of venerating the organ from which all their peculiarity as a species derived.

Whatever the case, Blumenberg left us a record of his knowledge of such practices through certain news articles on which he worked. Thanks to this compilation, we know that some of the most important signs of cannibalism were found in the Fontbrégoua Cave in France, where the bodies of certain forefathers had had their skulls removed. And the skulls themselves showed signs of scratches caused by stone knives (*Hinweise auf Kannibalismus in der Steinzeit*).

Wann entzündete der Mensch zum erstenmal absichtlich ein Feuer? Entdeckungen in der „Knochenhöhle“ von Swartkrans / Waffe im Konkurrenzkampf? / Von Harald Steinert

KIEL, 27. August. Die ersten Feuer, die Menschen entzündet haben, blühten vor rund einer Million Jahren in Südafrika in der Höhle von Swartkrans, einem berühmten Fundplatz von Urmenschenberesten. In dem Gebiet leben zugleich affenähnliche Urmenschen der Gattung „Australopithecinae“ und Frühmenschen – „Homo erectus“ – aus der Verwandtschaft des Javamenschen. Diese Frühmenschen wanderten später nach Europa. Von ihnen stammen die ältesten Menschenspuren auf unserem Kontinent. Es sind die des Heidelbergmenschen aus der Kiesgrube von Mauer bei Heidelberg.

Die Nutzung des Feuers ist die wichtigste Erfindung des Menschen. Seit Jahrzehnten suchen Archäologen, Anthropologen und Paläontologen nach den Spuren dieses größten Schrittes auf dem Weg zur Menschwerdung in der Erdvergangenheit. Die ältesten sicheren Spuren stammen bisher aus Europa, wo es in der Höhle von Vertesslöss in Ungarn vor rund 400000 Jahren Feuer gab, in denen Tierknochen verbrannt wurden. In Südafrika hat man einen Platz entdeckt, an dem möglicherweise ein Herd benutzt wurde, eine kreisförmige Anordnung von Basaltblöcken, die offenbar durch Hitzeinwirkung gesprungen sind. Doch ob es sich bei diesem Fund, der rund eine Million Jahre alt ist, wirklich um das Werk von Menschen handelt, ist nicht ganz sicher. Ein „Feuerfund“ aus Ostafrika, fast anderthalb Jahrmillionen alt, rothgebrannter Ton mit Tierknochen untermischt, liegt im Freiland und kann von einem natürlichen Buschfeuer stammen, wie es immer wieder in den afrikanischen Steppen gibt.

Sicherlich werden diese Buschfeuer eine wichtige Rolle in der Historie der Feuer-Entdeckung gespielt haben. Irgendwann werden Urmenschen erkannt haben, daß das Fleisch im Buschfeuer verbrannter Tiere – gegart oder geröstet – nicht nur eine bequemere Beute war, sondern eine Geschmacksvariante bot und zudem bequem verzehrt werden konnte. Dafür, daß das Buschfeuer auf dem Fundplatz in Ostafrika absichtlich entzündet worden ist, gibt es jedoch keinerlei Beweise.

Vor kurzem haben zwei südafrikanische Wissenschaftler – Professor Andrew Sillen und Professor Bob Brain – ein von Menschen absichtlich unterhaltenes Feuer eindeutig identifizieren können. Es brannte vor mindestens einer Million Jahren in der seit vielen Jahrzehnten berühmten „Knochenhöhle“ von Swartkrans. In dieser Höhle sind immer wieder Knochenreste in großer Zahl aus der Früh-Eiszeit – mit einem Alter zwischen vielleicht 1,8 bis einer Million Jahren – gefunden worden.

Es sind Reste einer ertümlichen Steppenfauna, die wälschlich zum Teil heute der dort jagenden Urmenschen, des „Affenmenschen“ und des „Heidelbergmenschen“, wurde. Bei Grabungen wurden rund 270 Knochenbruchstücke entdeckt, die teilweise rubeschwarz und teilweise zu Asche verbrannt waren.

Die Wissenschaftler untersuchten diese geschwärzten Knochen mit dem Mikroskop, um nicht einem blamablen Irrtum zum Opfer zu fallen wie einer ihrer Kollegen, der einige Jahrzehnte zuvor geschwärzte Tierknochen ähnlich hohen Alters der Tätigkeit eines feuerfindenden Affenmenschen zuschrieb. Später erst erkannte man, daß diese Knochen durch Manganoxydblecken geschwärzt waren, die bei Gesteinsverwitterung entstehen. Mineralsammler kennen diese Manganoxyde auch als Pseudopflanzensossilien, wenn sie als zarte schwarze Blüme – „Dendriten“ – auf einer Gesteinsoberfläche blühen.

Doch die verbrannten Knochen von Swartkrans waren allen Tests gewachsen. Um zu erproben, bei welchen Temperaturen sie ins Feuer gerieten, legten die beiden Forscher Knochen eines Hartbeests (einer südafrikanischen Antilope) in ein

Lastwagenstauungen nach Sperre der italienischen Grenze

INNSBRUCK, 27. August (AP). Stauungen am Grenzübergang Thörl-Maglern und schleppe Abfertigung am Brenner waren am Montag die ersten Folgen der Sperrung der italienischen Grenzen für den Schwerverkehr im Alpenraum. Nach Angaben der österreichischen Zollbehörden dürfte am Übergang Thörl-Maglern kein Lastwagen nach Italien einreisen. Am Grenzübergang Brenner standen in den Vormittagsstunden zwanzig Schwerverfahrzeuge auf der österreichischen Seite. Es wurde kaum Einreiseverkehr bei Lastwagen aus Italien registriert. Wegen der Sperre stauten sich in Thörl-Maglern in den Vormittagsstunden etwa 60 bis 70 österreichische Lastwagen.

Der österreichische Zoll hatte den Führerunternehmern empfohlen, auf Fahrten in der gegenwärtigen Situation zu verzichten. Italien hatte die Sperre für den Schwerverkehr am Freitag bekanntgegeben, nachdem Österreich auch die Afberg-Schnellstraße für Lastwagen über 7,5 Tonnen gesperrt hatte. Der „Transitkrieg“ war nach dem Ausfall der beschleunigten Intal-Autobahnbrücke in Kufstein ausgebrochen und führte inzwischen zu einer Blockade fast des gesamten Alpenraums.

Experimentierfeuer. Es erwies sich, daß sie bei etwa 250 Grad verrotten, bei 400 bis 500 Grad verkohlten und bei noch höheren Temperaturen veraschten. Damit war bewiesen, daß diese Knochen nicht in einem der vom Blitz entzündeten Buschfeuer verbrannt und dann in die Höhle geraten sein konnten. In der Buschfeuerzeit wird es kaum über 200 Grad heiß. So hohe Temperaturen, wie sie auf die fossilen verkohlten Knochen einwirkten, können nur in einem mit Holz oder anderem Brennstoff, etwa den Knochen selbst, genährten künstlichen Feuer geherstet haben. Diese Knochen sind deshalb die Reste von Lagerfeuern, die Urmenschen in der Swartkrans-Höhle entzündeten. Wozu sie das Feuer nutzten, darüber kann man nur Vermutungen anstellen. Sicherlich werden sie an dem Feuer gekocht oder gebraten haben – beweisbar ist das nicht. Entweder wurden die Knochen ins Feuer gelegt, nachdem das Fleisch entfernt worden war, oder es war verkohlt und ungenießbar.

Die Nächte in Transvaal – dem Teil Südafrikas, in dem Swartkrans liegt – sind vor allem im Winter sehr kalt. Jedes Feuer wird von den Menschen jener Zeit als Wärmespende willkommen gewesen sein. Vor allem aber hielt es Leoparden fern, die nach anderen Indizes die gefährlichsten Feinde des Menschen der frühsteinszeitlichen Steppen waren. So warfen sie wohl die abgemagerten Knochenreste in die Feuerstelle nur ins Feuer, um ihrer Umwelt sauber zu halten, sondern vor allem um sich Wärme und Sicherheit zu verschaffen.

Die Nutzung des Feuers wurde jedoch nicht gleich entdeckt, als Menschen sich in der Höhle niederließen. Nur die jüngsten Kulturschichten – maximal 1,3 Millionen Jahre alt – enthalten die verkohlten und veraschten Knochen. Vorher kamen die Urmenschen wahrscheinlich ohne Feuer aus – was bedeutet, daß man jetzt die Zeit der Erfindung des Feuers offenbar fixiert hat – so genau, wie es nach dem Fundumständen in der Höhle möglich ist. Nicht eindeutig klar ist, welche der beiden Menschenarten es war, die zuerst absichtlich diese Feuer auf der Erde entzündeten. Die Wahrscheinlichkeit spricht dafür, daß es der „Homo erectus“ war – dem ältesten Menschen – die Höhle und mit relativ großem Gehirnvolumen ausgestattet – der das Feuer zu beherrschen lernte, und nicht der „Affenmensch“. Vielleicht wurden auch verbrannte Knochen des Affenmenschen aufgesammelt – möglicherweise, so spekulieren die „Urfeuerforscher“, war das Feuer Werkzeug oder Waffe zugleich im Konkurrenzkampf der beiden in dieser Landschaft lebenden Menschensorten.

Figure 9

He thus wrote his own reflections following on from this, explaining that cannibalism would represent «the fatal stigma of the peculiarity of human civilisation» (UNF 2507: [*KANNIBALISMUS*]). From his perspective, this fossil evidence of cannibalism in palaeolithic caves could be doubtful, and might instead involve funeral rites in which the flesh was stripped from the skull to be offered to demons and idols, since the delicacy of the marks did not seem to be that of an act of cannibalism (*Ibidem*).

Given the doubt, one may only venture the position of consideration for the fact that the relatively civilised world «has always emphasised the practice of not eating animals that look too much like us [and] learns to experience a sense of disgust towards this practice in relation to food» (*Ibidem*).

2.9. Neanderthals

Blumenberg was fascinated by the Neanderthals as he was by *Australopithecus*, undoubtedly because they represented the species that had until now most resembled the *other human race*¹², with less fortune than our own, driven to extinction by immediate but slow decline courtesy of *Homo sapiens*.

Paleoanthropological signs indicate that the number of Neanderthal settlements declined as the demographic density of *sapiens*, which at the time had a life expectancy of around 45 years, increased to around one million individuals (019005: *Tiger-Fox, Herrentier, 41*). This population growth not only led to the extinction of the Neanderthals, but also brought problems for «a being intended to live in bands of some 50 individuals» (*Ibidem*).

Blumenberg made efforts to learn all about these siblings of ours. According to his belief, following the research by one G. Haaf for the article published on 19 January 1979 in “Die Zeit”, Neanderthals manufactured tools, used caves and made huts from animal skins, where they set up hearths and to cook and to prepare leather.

Given these skills, the philosopher often wondered what could have prompted the extinction of beings of such cultural and cerebral development. Following on from the article *Frühmenschen in Israel neu datiert* ([1989], Figure 7), he concluded that the impossibility of developing symbolic language and the paucity of communication and understanding with *Homo sapiens* would have been the main cause of the disappearance of this human race (020137-020138: *Entwicklung und Sprache*).

For Blumenberg, there could not have been more than minimal linguistic comprehension between Neanderthals and modern humans, despite the fact that they undoubtedly coexisted for a lengthy period of time, and simultaneously

visited a number of caves, such as those in Gafzeh and Skuhl. Although the brain size of the Neanderthals was even greater than our own (it should here be recalled that size does not truly matter, although Blumenberg did not know this), the former species ultimately became extinct after «successfully surviving the last glaciation of Europe» (019687) because of «their inability to articulate language, caused by the unfavourable anatomy of their oral cavity» (*Ibidem*; 17609: *Die Evolution d Menschen geht nicht über die Spitzenformen [sic]*). This, the philosopher argues, must have significantly undermined the opportunities for exchange between the two species.

2.10. Prehistoric art

The artistic expression attributed to the first *Homo sapiens* is for Blumenberg the best example of the superior conceptual capacity of our species, since ancient times. On the basis of the records found over the course of the last century, the philosopher notes that prehistoric art has often been associated with ritual aspects. Although most efforts made by groups focused on the fundamental activity for the survival of the species – hunting – those who did not have the capacity to assist in this physical activity would have made attempts to achieve a successful hunt by performing mainly pictorial rites (020972: *In den Höhlen des Jungpaläolithikums tritt eine Spezialisierung [...]*).

However, Blumenberg argues, in agreement with the Australian archaeologist Gordon Childe¹³, that many of the animals found represented in the paintings of the caves differ from those that were actually caught: «Although reindeer bones predominate, the bison was the animal most commonly represented» (*Ibidem*). The representation of those animals could therefore be attributed to rea-

¹² The discovery of the third human race, *Homo denisoviensis*, as extinct today as the Neanderthals, took place in the year 2010, when Blumenberg had already been dead for over a decade.

¹³ On card 020972, Blumenberg refers to a work by Childe which he names *Evolution*. Childe did not write any text with that exact title, and Blumenberg is therefore presumably referring in abbreviated form to *The Forest Cultures of Northern Europe: A Study in Evolution and Diffusion* (1931) or otherwise to *Social Evolution* (1951).

sons other than supporting the hunt. They might correspond to totemic activities, because the totem represents those animals that it was forbidden for members of the group to kill, explains Blumenberg:

If remnants of reindeer are found in the cave, but the representations prioritise the bison, it is thus possible, with regard to the specialisation of hunting, that the representations magically denote the negation of this, in other words the prohibition against killing a certain animal, perhaps because of an agreement established among the different cave-dwelling populations as to the division of the woodland population. The origin of totemism could thus be explained by the ban on hunting as a requirement of the accords among alliances. (*Ibidem*)

Meanwhile, the oldest artistic figure as an example of representative art and symbolism could date from 233,000 years ago, although the articles that Blumenberg compiled as to the discovery of the earliest figurative paintings indicate a date of around 40,000 years ago (“FAZ”, *Zeichen der Menschheit*). Blumenberg refers to this moment as «the first Cultural Revolution» (Rademacher [1986]).

3. RECAPITULATION AND RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Over the course of this paper, I have aimed to present and exemplify the reasons why I believe that the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg had a particular interest over more than two decades in the discipline of palaeoanthropology and other related fields such as zoology and ethnology. His dedication to the study of the sciences led him to systematically compile information from academic studies and journalistic articles, in order to subsequently write his own notes on the subject. Much of this knowledge is reflected in his anthropological and philosophical works, such as the famous *Beschreibung des Menschen* (2006).

However, no systematic work to catalogue and summarise the materials that Blumenberg drew on in the field of palaeontology has yet been per-

formed, nor have the existing links been established between these and other notes, and the theses of an anthropological and philosophical nature proposed in his published works. This is a venture that I would like to take up at some point as the guideline of a pre-doctoral or post-doctoral project, which I would encourage young academics studying Blumenberg’s philosophy to pursue, following on from the sample provided over the course of these pages.

In embarking on a task of this scale, one must nonetheless take into account some limitations. It is not even possible at first glance to fully trace the texts contained in the *Nachlaß* which address palaeoanthropology. Much of his unpublished work in this field is to be found among the Handschriften of the Katalog Kallias of the DLA by entering in the search engine text field such terms as *Anthropologie, Paläontologie, Ethnologie, Entwicklung, Vorgeschichte...* These are what I have chosen to refer to as *visible unpublished texts*. However, there are also those I have considered to be *hidden unpublished texts*, documents eagerly concealed beneath titles that offer no hint of the subject in question.

This makes it impossible for anyone to broach the Blumenberg *Nachlaß* with the aim of tracing all references to palaeoanthropology that an absolute search could generate, since there are likely to be texts hidden under misleading titles that would be inaccessible unless one were to explore the *Nachlaß* in its entirety (Ros Velasco [2016]: 55-56).

The same often applies to Blumenberg’s published works. His erudition is such that we may find a definitive sentence about metaphors amidst an anthropological text, just as one may come across a decisive note about the evolution of *Australopithecus*, in a card index about boredom in the *Nachlaß*.

Despite all of this, I believe that it is still worthwhile to make the effort. This is a topic that has received little attention from Blumenberg scholars, and which could on the surface enrich our understanding of the thinker’s philosophical corpus. Those who have discovered in the *Description of Man* (2006) the pleasure of learning about

Blumenberg's love of Darwinism, self-conservation and human evolution, cannot forsake the opportunity to visit the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach in Stuttgart, in order to continue what I began in my doctoral thesis *El aburrimiento como presión selectiva en Hans Blumenberg* (2017), and which is presented in summary in this text.

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I tre volti dell'ironia nel mito della "fine" di un mito. Hans Blumenberg lettore del *Prometeo* di Kafka

The three faces of irony in the myth of the "end" of a myth. Hans Blumenberg as a reader of Kafka's *Prometheus*

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Abstract. The purpose of the paper is to show how the reading of Kafka's *Prometheus* offered by Hans Blumenberg in *Arbeit am Mythos* authorizes a re-understanding of this short story as a device within which the *meta-representative moment* and the *questioning moment* are configured as two indissolubly linked aspects. In this perspective, starting from the recognition of the key role played by the mechanism of irony in the construction of the Kafkaesque short story, the article aims to highlight the three different levels of articulation of such a mechanism, with particular reference to its ability to exhibit – at the same time – the transcendibility of the datum and the need to think the sense as «infinite deferral».

Keywords: myth, irony, Kafka, Prometheus, Nexus "metarepresentation-interrogation".

1. «MA SE DOPOTUTTO CI FOSSE ANCORA QUALCOSA DA DIRE?»: IL PROMETEO DI KAFKA COME MITO DELLA "FINE" DI UN MITO

Com'è noto, il cammino speculativo compiuto da Hans Blumenberg in *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979) si conclude con una celebre lettura del *Prometeo* di Kafka. Ed è quantomai significativo che le parole scelte da Blumenberg come *explicit* della sua trattazione, le parole dunque alle quali l'autore affida la chiusura dell'intero percorso fin lì compiuto, assumano una forma apertamente interrogativa. Dopo aver infatti mostrato come il *Prometeo* di Kafka sia in qualche modo leggibile nei termini di un tentativo di «portare a termine, se non il mito, almeno un mito», Blumenberg ironicamente scrive: «ma se dopotutto ci fosse ancora qualcosa da dire?» (Blumenberg [1979]: 761). Col che a essere allusa è l'idea di una fine che *non è veramente*

tale. Quelle stesse parole infatti con le quali – sia pure soltanto pragmaticamente e provvisoriamente (come sempre accade nel fare filosofia) – si decide di “chiudere” sono l’indizio di un contromovimento che rovescia la “fine” nella possibilità di un nuovo “inizio”. A venire in chiaro, insomma, è la consapevolezza che quanto è *sempre e ancora da dire* non si lascia estinguere da quella parola che pure sembra sancire il conseguimento di un “punto d’arrivo”.

Tenendo anche conto di questi elementi, è allora possibile formulare l’ipotesi interpretativa avanzata nel presente articolo. L’obiettivo, cioè, è mostrare come, e in che senso, la lettura blumenberghiana del *Prometeo* di Kafka autorizzi una ricomprensione di questo racconto in quanto dispositivo all’interno del quale il momento *meta-rappresentativo* e il momento *interrogativo* vengono a configurarsi come due istanze inestricabilmente intrecciate. Da un lato, dunque, l’idea di un mito che “mette in scena” se stesso (che tautologicamente, cioè, si “dà a vedere” *in quanto* “mito”) e, dall’altro lato, l’idea di un mito che “si mette in questione” dal suo stesso interno (che *problematizza*, cioè, il suo “essere” mito). E a rendere plausibile una tale ipotesi, come vedremo, è innanzitutto l’insistenza di Blumenberg su un motivo estetico-filosofico, quello dell’“ironia”, che oltre ad essere di per sé cruciale, finisce addirittura per assurgere, nella densa tessitura del discorso blumenberghiano, al rango di istanza idealmente unificante, rispetto ai diversi tagli prospettici via via affioranti al suo interno.

Da questo punto di vista, sono in particolare due gli snodi testuali in corrispondenza dei quali la riflessione sviluppata da Blumenberg suggerisce la percorribilità della traiettoria di analisi appena indicata. E cioè, da un lato, l’affermazione secondo la quale le quattro varianti del mito narrate da Kafka possono essere considerate come la «parodia formale di una collazione filologica» e, dall’altro lato, quella secondo la quale «il testo di Kafka non è *una* ricezione del mito», e non è «neppure l’esito delle sue ricezioni lungo un osservabile percorso temporale», ma «la mitizzazione proprio di questa storia della ricezione» (ivi: 760). Quello

composto da Kafka, infatti, è un racconto a proposito del quale si può affermare che «la ricezione» del mito «ha consumato interamente la storia» (*ibidem*), volendo qui intendere con la nozione di “storia” il passato costituito dalle molteplici possibilità di variazione del mito che vengono rammentate, o che sono appunto raccolte nella forma di una “collazione filologica” ironicamente intonata, all’interno del racconto. In questo senso, l’«esibizione dell’ultima possibilità di accostarsi al mito» (ivi: 757), possibilità che sarebbe incarnata proprio dalla narrazione offerta da Kafka, finisce per apparire come il «condensato della stessa complicatezza mitica» (ivi: 760).

Non solo, ma di considerevole importanza è anche il fatto che una tale “complicatezza”, precisa Blumenberg, non venga «raccontata nel mito», ma sia «semplicemente eseguita su di esso». Con ciò, infatti, si sta alludendo alla circostanza che, in Kafka, la sedimentazione storica immanente al mitologema di Prometeo – la “storia” della sua “ricezione” – è qualcosa che affiora non già attraverso una tematizzazione esplicita, ma solo in modo obliquo e indiretto, e cioè solo per il favore di una ennesima messa in esercizio di quel “lavoro *sul* mito” nel quale, da sempre, il “lavoro *del* mito” consiste. Questo vuol dire che, nel racconto di Kafka, la “complicatezza” del mito – la sua *Umständlichkeit* – non viene ridotta a oggetto di constatazione e di documentazione, non si lascia cioè tradurre in termini predicativi e protocollari (di qui, tra l’altro, il carattere “parodico”, o “ironico”, della “collazione filologica” offerta dal *Prometeo*). Ciò che troviamo, invece, è l’esibizione in atto, o il *farsi figura*, di quella medesima «complicatezza»: il suo implodere nella materialità di una compaginazione che innanzitutto “incarna” (o che “presenta”, senza “dirlo”) il suo referente.

Nel sottoporre dunque il materiale mitico a una particolare pratica elaborativa, Kafka ci induce a riflettere sul fatto che, sempre, il mito non in altro consiste che nel modo in cui, di volta in volta, operativamente, si entra in relazione con il già-narrato: con il già-rappresentato, con il già-configurato. Il che avviene sempre in funzione di vissuti, orientamenti o spinte motivazionali (bis-

gni e desideri, aspettative e interessi) che appartengono alla sfera del pre-categoriale: a quel terreno opaco e semanticamente densissimo, nella contraddittorietà del suo spessore pluristratificato, che è il "mondo della vita" (*Lebenswelt*)¹. Di qui, allora, l'affermazione di Blumenberg secondo la quale «il mito fondamentale», ossia il *terminus a quo* del suo *poter divenire* ciò che di volta in volta esso effettivamente diviene, «non è ciò che esiste all'inizio ma ciò che resta alla fine». A funzionare come *terminus a quo*, in definitiva, è ciò che «fu in grado di soddisfare le ricezioni e le aspettative» (ivi: 219). In questo senso,

se è possibile parlare di un mito fondamentale senza farlo passare per il mito originario, allora la sua condensazione e il suo consolidamento devono essere un processo diacronico: una specie di collaudo degli elementi di un mitologema che erano diventati irrinunciabili sia per poterlo identificare, sia per poter utilizzare la sua prestazione come immagine. Quanto più efficace è il processo di solidescenza, tanto più robusto è il suo risultato. (*ibidem*)

Con particolare riferimento, però, al *Prometeo* di Kafka, c'è un aspetto che merita di essere subito rimarcato. E cioè il fatto che quanto il testo kafkiano porta a rappresentazione è non soltanto una nuova e differente versione (una tra le tante possibili) di quello specifico mitologema che è, appunto, la storia di Prometeo – le cui metamorfosi (da Esiodo a Kafka, da Eschilo a Gide) costituiscono, come sappiamo, il filo conduttore dell'indagine condotta da Blumenberg in *Arbeit am Mythos* – ma, più in generale, lo stesso modo d'essere e di funzionare del mito, e cioè il suo "statuto": i suoi presupposti, ma anche le forme e gli esiti del suo operare (le sue molteplici implicazioni, insomma, sul piano sia pratico che cognitivo). In questa prospettiva, se è vero che il *Prometeo* di Kafka può essere vantaggiosamente ripensato come un costrutto all'interno del quale il momento "meta-rappresentativo" e il momento "interrogativo" sono indissolubilmente congiunti, è anche vero che un ruolo decisivo, nella reciproca

articolazione di tali istanze, è giocato innanzitutto dal re-iterato intervento, acutamente evidenziato da Blumenberg, di una dimensione propriamente "ironica" (o, s'è detto, "parodica"). Al fine, però, di ricostruire i diversi passaggi nei quali si articola lo svolgimento del discorso blumenberghiano, e con l'obiettivo in particolare di mettere a fuoco i differenti livelli di attivazione di un tale "meccanismo ironico", è opportuno riportare per intero il racconto di Kafka in questione:

Di Prometeo – scrive Kafka – riferiscono quattro leggende. Secondo la prima, avendo egli tradito gli dèi per gli uomini, fu incatenato al Caucaso, e gli dèi mandarono delle aquile a divorargli il fegato che gli ricresceva di continuo. La seconda dice che Prometeo, per il tormento di quelle continue beccate, si puntellò così forte alla roccia che finì per far tutt'uno con essa. Secondo la terza, con l'andare dei millenni il suo tradimento venne dimenticato, lo dimenticarono gli dèi, le aquile, lui stesso. Secondo la quarta ci si stancò di quell'uomo ormai senza senso. Si stancarono gli dèi, si stancarono le aquile, si chiuse stanca la ferita. Restarono quelle inspiegabili rocce. – La leggenda si sforza di spiegare l'inspiegabile. Poiché deriva da un fondo di verità [*Wahrheitsgrund*], non può che sfociare nell'inspiegabile. (Kafka [2002]: 56-57)

Nel dare dunque corso alla sua esplorazione del *Prometeo* di Kafka, Blumenberg ci invita a riflettere sulla circostanza che, qui, il meccanismo ironico si innesca in corrispondenza di almeno *due livelli*, da noi segnalati (tra parentesi quadre) all'interno del passo che stiamo ora per citare. Scrive, infatti, Blumenberg:

Kafka fa del pluralismo delle interpretazioni, come simulazione dello storicismo e della sua relativizzazione di "come è realmente stato", la forma ironica della "rettifica" [questo, dunque, il *primo livello* di attivazione dell'ironia evidenziato da Blumenberg]. Le ritrattazioni sembrano semplicemente coesistere su uno stesso piano, l'una accanto all'altra, come se fossero proposte alla scelta del lettore, come se egli dovesse saggiare la sua affinità con la variante che di volta in volta gli viene presentata. Ma a sua volta l'ironia della pluralità depone il relativismo,

¹ Cfr. Blumenberg (1986).

lo trascende con l'evidenza della completezza [questo, invece, il *secondo livello* di attivazione dell'ironia rilevato da Blumenberg]: cosa si potrebbe dire ancora, aggiungere a queste "versioni"? (Blumenberg [1979]: 758)

Si tratta, allora, di capire a quale nozione di "ironia" sia particolarmente fruttuoso fare appello nel tentativo di gettare luce non soltanto sull'analisi offerta da Blumenberg ma anche sullo stesso racconto kafkiano. A questo riguardo, mette conto ricordare che all'idea blumenberghiana di "mito" pertiene un paradosso di fondo. E cioè: la messa in atto di quella che, con una formula peraltro desunta dalla stessa grammatica kafkiana, si potrebbe definire una "distruzione che edifica"². Qui, infatti, ad affacciarsi è l'idea secondo la quale uno dei tratti salienti del mito è la sua capacità di produrre senso proprio a motivo del suo accadere in quanto costruito *disposizionalmente aperto* all'incompiutezza del divenire. Il mito, cioè, in quanto forma che esiste solo nella modalità del suo *annullamento progressivo*: solo nella modalità del suo disarticolarsi fino a dileguare, per poi riapparire in un «nuovo stato di aggregazione» (ivi: 190)³.

Da questo punto di vista, a poter funzionare come strumento ermeneutico in qualche modo privilegiato, ai fini della presente trattazione, è la nozione di "ironia" messa a tema da Friedrich Schlegel. Lo stesso Blumenberg, tra l'altro, sembra suggerire una simile ipotesi, allorché, in un passo contenuto nella parte conclusiva del suo *Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos*, pronuncia appunto il nome di Schlegel. Il che, non a caso, avviene in un contesto dove a essere in questione è proprio l'idea di un mito il cui «potere di significazione» risiede, essenzialmente, nella sua disponibilità a essere "incluso" in sem-

pre nuove "configurazioni". «Ci sono mitologemi – osserva, infatti, Blumenberg – per i quali si possono usare le affermazioni che Friedrich Schlegel fa sul *Wilhelm Meister* di Goethe: essi "interessano lo spirito all'infinito"». E Blumenberg aggiunge: «Così il Rinascimento fa proprio il tema di Prometeo, un tema che non solo Nietzsche, Gide e Kafka cercheranno di portare a termine. Già nel 1731 Jakob Brucker, nelle sue *Kurtzen Fragen aus der Philosophischen Historie*, introducendo una pedante ricerca sulla storia di Prometeo, scrive: "su quale sia però il suo senso ci sono infinite e molte dispute"» (Blumenberg [1971]: 144).

Ora, secondo la lettura che ne offre Schlegel, uno dei tratti distintivi dell'ironia è – come sappiamo – il suo tenore irriducibilmente paradossale⁴, e cioè la sua capacità di tenere insieme gli opposti. In questa prospettiva, che nell'ironia "tutto" debba essere "scherzo" e, *al contempo*, tutto debba essere "serietà" significa che, nel suo dispiegamento, il momento dell'affermazione e quello della negazione, l'adesione cioè all'oggetto (da un lato) e (dall'altro lato) la capacità di prenderne le distanze, diventano i due poli di una tensione necessariamente irrisolta. Con particolare riferimento infatti a quell'esempio paradigmatico di ironia che è l'atteggiamento socratico, Schlegel scrive che una tale ironia «contiene e suscita un sentimento dell'indissolubile opposizione dell'incondizionato e del condizionato, dell'impossibilità e della necessità di una perfetta comunicazione» (Schlegel [1797]: 38-39). Nell'adozione, allora, di questa postura ambivalente, creazione e annullamento sono polarità che si presuppongono reciprocamente. E la conseguenza di questa co-implicazione è che il senso generato dall'ironia non si lascia mai inchiodare al piano della datità: si sottrae a ogni determinazione reificante.

Stiamo, insomma, parlando di un senso la cui costruzione è vincolata alla sempre rinnovata frequentazione dello *spazio di gioco* che si attiva tra l'istanza del "dire" e quella del "disdire": al continuo affiorare della distanza che, insieme, separa e con-

² In un aforisma contenuto nei *Quaderni in ottavo*, Kafka parla dell'unione di «argomentazione» e «incantesimo» (o di «logica» e «magia») nei termini di un «*quid tertium*», definendolo appunto come un «incantesimo vivente», o come una «distruzione del mondo che, invece di distruggere, edifica» (Kafka [2002]: 81).

³ Cfr. Cometa (1999), in part. 164-165.

⁴ «Ironia», scrive infatti Schlegel nel fr. 48 del *Lycaenum*, «è la forma del paradosso» (Schlegel [1797]: 27).

giunge l'arbitrarietà (o la libertà) del "porre" e la necessità del revocare ciò che via via è stato "posto". Se è vero dunque che l'ironia si nutre di una paradossale coappartenenza di creazione e annullamento, allora è proprio lo schema espresso da una tale ritmica, il *doppio movimento* che la scandisce, a funzionare come una risorsa euristico-esplorativa particolarmente feconda rispetto alla possibilità di leggere il *Prometeo* di Kafka nei termini di un meccanismo non soltanto "ironicamente" strutturato, ma anche fortemente connotato – s'è detto – in senso meta-rappresentativo e interrogativo.

2. DAL "PLURALISMO DELLE INTERPRETAZIONI" ALLA "DEPOSIZIONE DEL RELATIVISMO": I PRIMI DUE LIVELLI DI ATTIVAZIONE DEL MECCANISMO IRONICO

Alla luce di quanto s'è detto, è possibile tornare a riflettere sulla lettura che Blumenberg propone del *Prometeo* di Kafka, e in particolare sulla connessione che, al suo interno, viene a stabilirsi tra: a) l'idea di un mito che, intransitivamente, "mette in scena" se stesso; b) l'idea di un mito che, autoriflessivamente, "interroga se stesso"; e c) l'idea di un mito che elegge se stesso a materiale da plasmare – o sul quale "eseguire" un lavoro –, facendo appello alle risorse critico-esplorative dell'ironia: al suo esplicarsi come esercizio di un "dire disdicendo". Ora, se noi consideriamo lo sviluppo dell'argomentazione condotta da Blumenberg, ci accorgiamo che, ai primi due livelli di attivazione dell'ironia, quelli cioè esplicitamente segnalati dallo stesso Blumenberg con riferimento alla struttura del *Prometeo* di Kafka, se ne aggiunge addirittura un terzo. Ma il punto è che questo "terzo livello" – questa *ulteriore* modalità di estrinsecazione del meccanismo ironico – non semplicemente si affianca agli altri due, ma in qualche interviene, sia pure in una forma cifrata e allusiva, come il marcatore di una esigenza di comprensione ancora inappagata. Il che, evidentemente, induce il pensiero a "rimettersi in cammino".

Per quanto concerne la prima configurazione assunta dal meccanismo ironico, c'è da dire

che quest'ultima si traduce nel revocare la stessa plausibilità e fondatezza di un procedere, nel rapporto con la storia della ricezione del mito, *per via di "rettifiche"*. Se infatti ci attestiamo a questo livello, dobbiamo riconoscere che al «pluralismo delle interpretazioni» corrisponde l'ammissione dell'impossibilità di sostituire l'ipotesi filologicamente "meno adatta", o francamente "errata", con quella che invece merita di essere "accolta". In questo caso, ciò che sembra imporsi è un relativismo per il quale tutto si giustappone, e ogni ipotesi può essere sostituita, con pari diritto, da ogni altra ipotesi. Ma se ogni differenza, nel confronto tra le diverse varianti (ossia: tra le diverse possibilità di ricezione), finisce per sfumare e per farsi irrilevante, allora tutto diventa non soltanto equivalente, ma anche ugualmente insignificante. Di qui, allora, il venire in primo piano di un'idea di mito che si esplica come pura diacronia, come mera successività, secondo lo schema: "prima *x* e poi *y*". Il che, evidentemente, esclude ogni possibilità di gerarchizzazione: ogni possibilità, cioè, di raccogliere il molteplice nell'unità di un senso che possa funzionare come "*nomos*" (come "misura" implicitamente presupposta da quella stessa pluralità, di per sé caotica e casuale, di varianti). Se ne può dunque dedurre che, in questo caso, l'ironia esibita dal racconto kafkiano consiste nel "disdire" ogni pretesa, avanzata dal mito, di porsi come sintesi dell'eterogeneo e quindi, in ultima analisi, come luogo deputato alla redenzione dell'accidentale, o alla idealizzazione dell'empirico⁵.

Ma è proprio qui che il meccanismo ironico torna – sorprendentemente – a far valere le sue risorse euristico-esplorative. Il che avviene nel momento in cui si assiste alla "deposizione" del "relativismo" generato dalla prima fase di attivazione del movimento ironico. La seconda configurazione assunta da un tale movimento consiste, dunque, nel disdire quello stesso relativismo che,

⁵ E che sia appunto una "redenzione dell'accidentale" l'esito al quale mette capo un siffatto modo di intendere il mito è testimoniato, in modo paradigmatico, dall'idea aristotelica di *mythos*: dal suo funzionare, nella forma-tragedia, come *systasis tôn pragmatōn*. In merito, cfr. Carchia (1999): 127-130.

a sua volta, già si poneva come smentita dell'idea di "rettifica". Scrive, infatti, Blumenberg: «Quando Kafka comincia dicendo che quattro leggende ci informano (*berichten*) su Prometeo, queste non sono interscambiabili a piacere, ma costituiscono una sequenza che mostra il processo, nella sua forma, in direzione della fine. Le interpretazioni non stanno una accanto all'altra, ma una sorpassa l'altra. Non a caso esse si concludono con la parola "terminare"» (Blumenberg [1979]: 758). In questo caso, allora, l'ironia consiste nel *contraddire* l'idea di un mito concepito come pura successività: come giustapposizione paratattica di elementi reciprocamente irrelati (tali, cioè, da *non* rinviare ad alcuna "unità di senso" implicitamente presupposta dal loro avere-luogo).

Quello che Kafka ci presenta infatti è uno scenario che, in ultima istanza, ha la forza di riassorbire al suo interno, e «sotto il semplice titolo di tradimento degli dèi a vantaggio degli uomini», «tutto quanto è accaduto prima». Posti dunque al cospetto di questo riassorbimento del "prima" nella dimensione del "dopo" – dove il "dopo" è costituito dalla determinatezza dell'ultimo, e apparentemente definitivo, "stato di aggregazione" esibito dal mito –, si può soltanto ammettere che «la ricezione ha consumato interamente la storia, *come se questa non fosse mai esistita*» (ivi: 760, c.vo mio). Ciò che conta, ormai, è solo l'incontrovertibile «evidenza» della «roccia»: l'inoltrpassabile dattità di quella sua «densità compatta» (ivi: 761) con la quale Prometeo – così racconta Kafka – finisce per diventare «una cosa sola» (ivi: 759). Il fatto allora che, a questo livello, ogni «bisogno» di ulteriore «giustificazione» si estingua può essere interpretato nel senso che, attraverso l'evocazione della piena fusione di Prometeo con l'«inspiegabile montagna rocciosa», la rappresentazione ha ormai pronunciato l'ultima parola: la parola definitiva. E a sancire una tale conclusività sarebbe proprio il prevalere, già nella «seconda versione» riferita da Kafka, della «pura insensibilità della natura». Con ciò si sta infatti indicando quella condizione di «impassibilità assoluta» che è poi confermata, nella «terza versione» del mito, dal trionfo della dimenticanza – giacché «non identità come

autoamnesia è la rappresentazione pura dell'irraggiungibilità da ogni persecuzione» –, come pure, infine, dalla sua «quarta versione», dove la sostituzione dell'«oblio» con la «stanchezza» è ancora, e comunque, l'espressione del fatto che *ciò che resta* è soltanto la «pietra» (*ibidem*).

In questo modo, ciò che il *Prometeo* di Kafka mette in scena è il pieno inserimento dello "storico" nel "non storico": la completa integrazione della "cultura", della sua mobilità e della sua incompiutezza, nella morta fissità della "natura", nella sua atemporalità. «Kafka – osserva, in proposito, Blumenberg – fa "sparire" la "azione" nella natura, nella sua forma immobile, indistruttibile e non storica per antonomasia, la montagna rocciosa» (ivi: 760). A delinearci, così, è un quadro all'interno del quale l'unico possibile senso espresso dal mito sembra identificarsi con quello incarnato dalla densità opaca dell'inorganico: dalla cieca inerzia del suo tornare ad affermarsi, secondo una necessità irrevocabile, come la sola istanza davvero dominante. Lo snodo narrativo in questione è noto: nel momento in cui gli dèi e le stesse aquile "si stancano", e allorché anche la "ferita" di Prometeo, "stanca", finisce per chiudersi, ciò che resta appunto è soltanto la "pietra", «perché essa è fondamento e quindi – osserva Blumenberg – non ha bisogno di fondamento» (ivi: 759). Ciò che propriamente la qualifica, insomma, è la sua «inoppugnabilità» (*ibidem*). Sotto questo profilo, a funzionare come *significato supremo* è l'idea del «ritorno di un unico, vano e come imbarazzato movimento della natura verso la propria pietrificazione, verso il gesto ieratico del definitivo rifiuto» (ivi: 760).

Tutto questo, allora, sembra mettere fuori gioco ogni ulteriore, possibile intervento dell'immaginazione, della sua capacità cioè di generare nuovi scenari di senso: nuove modalità di grammaticalizzazione dell'esperienza. Che «nulla», infatti, debba «essere più avvertibile della libertà formale di variare il mitologema», e quindi «della manipolabilità dell'argomento» (ivi: 760-761), significa che "nulla deve essere più avvertibile" di quell'attività creativa e costruttiva che – secondo Blumenberg – è alla base del "lavoro" compiuto dal mito. E a confermarlo è il fatto che, a questo pun-

to, a essere «concepibile sarebbe ancora soltanto il rovesciamento temporale», e cioè quell'ipotetico capovolgimento della situazione che consisterebbe nell'immaginare un Prometeo che «esce di nuovo dalla roccia», e che «si presenta di nuovo ai suoi aguzzini» (ivi: 761). Ma, fa notare a riguardo Blumenberg, «la malinconia escatologica soffusa sul testo non consente di affidarsi neppure per un istante a questa licenza dell'immaginazione». E Blumenberg aggiunge: «Perché il mondo dovrebbe continuare a sussistere, se non c'è più nulla da dire?» (*ibidem*). Un interrogativo, questo, che in qualche modo ripete, riproponendola a distanza di poche pagine, la domanda sollevata dallo stesso Blumenberg nelle battute di esordio della sezione di *Arbeit am Mythos* dedicata a Kafka. Nel dare infatti l'avvio alla sua analisi, Blumenberg scrive: «Le "rettifiche" che Kafka apporta, nel 1918, al mitologema di Prometeo, fanno parte dell'escatologia di questo mito. È per questo motivo che il lettore sgomento di questo breve testo, che non riempie neppure una pagina, si chiede e deve chiedersi: cosa si potrebbe ancora fare, adesso?» (ivi: 757).

Con riferimento, allora, a questo secondo livello di estrinsecazione dell'ironia, si può dire che esso consiste nel revocare la possibilità di intendere il mito come permanente disponibilità al "gioco" della variazione, e quindi come indefinita apertura al nuovo: come l'esercizio, insomma, di una prassi "pensosa" e liberamente "divagante"⁶. E questo perché a farsi preponderante, adesso, è la consapevolezza che, al di là di ogni strategia metaforico-fabulizzante messa in atto dal vivente⁷ – al di là di ogni suo tentativo di conferire un senso al non-senso della realtà –, alla fine, «solo l'inorganico dura oltre la storia» (ivi: 760). Con la doverosa precisazione, però, che una tale sfera dell'inorganico, se per un verso assurge al ruolo di «fondamento», per altro verso è qualcosa che appartiene comunque all'ordine dell'«inspiegabile», essendo l'espressione di uno «strato originario» (ivi: 759): uno "strato" per il quale, «ad ogni modo», «non c'è

più nessuno per esigere la spiegazione» (ivi: 760). A questo punto, allora, sembra davvero che *non ci sia più nulla da dire*. Sia pure in una forma negativa, infatti, e cioè appunto nella forma di una rappresentazione "malinconicamente escatologica", il senso – in quanto *sensu finale* – è stato raggiunto. E a farsi incarnazione di questo senso è proprio quella rappresentazione che mette in scena – così, almeno, sembrerebbe – l'impossibilità di *dire ancora*, o di *dire altro*. Quella rappresentazione, insomma, nella quale si può leggere il "mito della fine di tutti i miti" (o, almeno, di "un" mito).

Sembra dunque valere per il *Prometeo* di Kafka, e sempre con riferimento alla profilatura che stiamo ora considerando, quanto Blumenberg scrive a proposito del "concetto limite" del "lavoro sul mito". Un tale "concetto limite", osserva Blumenberg, «sarebbe quello del portare a termine il mito, del tentare l'estrema deformazione, quella che permette appena o non permette più di riconoscere la configurazione originale». Ma il punto è che, «per la teoria della ricezione», una simile "deformazione" sarebbe «la finzione di un mito terminale», e cioè «di un mito che esaurisce il potenziale della forma» (ivi: 331). Nel farsi dunque immagine della possibilità di estinguere il «potenziale della forma», l'ultima "deformazione" subita dal mitologema di Prometeo finisce per dissolvere la stessa *processualità* del mito, la sua insopprimibile temporalità, nella dimensione del "sistema", nella sua *spazialità*⁸.

In particolare, se il racconto kafkiano sembra autorizzare una leggibilità del mito in termini di "sistema" è perché, al suo interno, le differenti versioni rammemorate da Kafka non semplicemente si pongono "l'una accanto all'altra" (secondo lo schema: "prima *x* e poi *y*"), tanto da apparire «interscambiabili a piacere», ma vengono piuttosto a configurarsi come i momenti di una «sequenza» che risulta escatologicamente orientata «in direzione della fine» (ivi: 758). Non solo, ma a contrassegnare una tale «sequenza» è anche il fatto che, nel suo dipanarsi, ogni elemento via via evocato viene "sorpasato", e "sorpasato" *moti-*

⁶ Su questo, cfr. Desideri (1999); Borsari (1999).

⁷ Sul nesso "mito-metafora" in Blumenberg, cfr. Villwock (1985); Jamme (1991).

⁸ Cfr. Garroni (2003).

vatamente – in ragione, cioè, della relazione che lo unisce a *ciò in vista di cui* l'intera sequenza si sviluppa –, dall'elemento che lo segue. Sotto questo profilo, il tenore "sistematico" dello scenario costruito da Kafka consiste nel suo presentarsi come una totalità le cui componenti si qualificano non soltanto per la loro coesistenza simultanea, ma anche per la loro reciproca integrazione: per il loro essere reciprocamente solidali in virtù della funzione che ciascuna di esse viene ad assolvere nell'ambito di quell'"intero" che appunto le ricomprende in sé, e che quindi è in grado di "darne ragione".

Si dà "sistema", dunque, proprio perché le diverse componenti della «sequenza» immaginata da Kafka vengono *tenute insieme* nell'unità di un ordine che appare governato, e in modo inflessibile, da un principio di necessità. Qui, allora, a risultare dominante non è più lo schema per il quale "prima *x* e poi *y*", ma piuttosto lo schema per il quale "se *x*, allora *y*": lo schema della *subordinazione motivante*. È quanto testimonia, appunto, l'immagine della "roccia". Se la "roccia", infatti, ha la capacità di inglobare tutto, allora tutto ciò che è stato detto "prima" – ma, più in generale, tutto ciò che *potrebbe* essere detto intorno al mitologema in oggetto – finisce per apparire come qualcosa che acquista un senso, e un senso presuntivamente conclusivo, solo in funzione di quell'*unica* immagine che, ora, sembra legittimata a illuminare, sia pure di una luce "nera" e sconcertante, l'intera vicenda. Nella revoca, insomma, di ogni postura relativistica, il mito finisce per assumere le sembianze di una struttura onni-inclusiva, tale cioè da integrare – neutralizzandola preventivamente – ogni differenza: ogni ulteriore, ipotetica variazione⁹. Non solo, ma che una tale struttura tragga la sua fondatezza dalla «forza coercitiva della realtà», che non si tratti cioè di una mera proiezione soggettivistica, è dimostrato sia dalla «concordanza» di coloro che appunto «informano» (*berichten*) sulle quattro varianti del mito, sia dalla circostanza che quelle versioni, per quanto possano «diver-

gere», «intendono» comunque tutte, e «innegabilmente», la «stessa cosa» (*ibidem*).

3. IL TERZO VOLTO DELL'IRONIA: IL MITO COME «TENTATIVO DI SPIEGARE L'INSPIEGABILE»

Ebbene, se il racconto kafkiano si concludesse così, e cioè con la mera constatazione dell'impossibilità di oltrepassare la muta compattezza della "roccia", se il suo esito dunque fosse costituito dalla semplice ratifica dell'impossibilità di "dire altro", allora si potrebbe davvero affermare che il "lavoro del mito" è giunto a compimento. In questo caso, infatti, il risultato sarebbe il prodursi di una rappresentazione che mette fuori gioco ogni possibile rimando a un "oltre": ogni possibilità di ri-aprire, rigenerandolo, l'orizzonte del senso. Se le cose stessero in questi termini, insomma, il lavoro sul mito conoscerebbe «il *shabbath* della constatazione retrospettiva che il dio dei miti è morto» (ivi: 757). Ma il punto è che così non è. E a testimoniare, in modo flagrante, è quell'ulteriore e sorprendente "stacco interpretativo" con il quale Blumenberg procede nella sua perlustrazione del *potenziale di efficacia* espresso dal racconto kafkiano. Osserva, infatti, Blumenberg:

La rettifica kafkiana del mito chiude con due frasi che retrospettivamente allargano l'inizio, in quanto trasformano la mera constatazione del fatto delle quattro leggende nell'espressione di uno sforzo che viene esplicitamente detto esplicativo, e la cui difficoltà viene determinata come spiegazione dell'inspiegabile: "La leggenda tenta di spiegare l'inspiegabile. Siccome proviene da un fondo di verità [*Wahrheitsgrund*], deve terminare nell'inspiegabile". (Ivi: 759-760)

Se è vero, dunque, che la "fine" del racconto ha la virtù di "allargare retrospettivamente" l'"inizio" – se la "constatazione" cioè dell'impossibilità di "dire altro", o di "dire ancora", si converte in uno *sforzo esplicativo* (uno sforzo che, come tale, è sempre virtualmente da rinnovare) –, allora è esattamente a questa altezza che noi possiamo

⁹ Di una «*meaningfully realized structure*» parla, ad esempio, Menke (1998): 117.

mo rintracciare il terzo livello di dispiegamento dell'ironia implicito nel *Prometeo* di Kafka. In questo caso, infatti, l'ironia consiste nel disdire l'idea di un mito che tende a presentarsi come una sequenza ordinata, e quindi – s'è detto – come un "sistema": come una totalità di rapporti all'interno della quale tutto trae la sua intelligibilità dal conseguimento di *un* senso che aspira a valere come *il* senso, come il significato supremo finalmente raggiunto (sia pure nella forma, malinconicamente antifrastica, del non-senso: l'inspiegabilità della "montagna rocciosa"). A farsi, dunque, marcatore di questo terzo livello di attivazione dell'ironia è non soltanto l'affermazione secondo la quale il mito "tenta di spiegare l'inspiegabile", ma anche la collocazione di una tale affermazione alla fine del racconto, e non invece all'inizio. Se quella stessa battuta infatti fosse pronunciata all'inizio, allora l'intero racconto finirebbe per subire una torsione in un senso che si potrebbe definire "logico-inferenziale". Quelle parole, insomma, potrebbero essere lette come una sorta di "postulato", rispetto al quale tutto ciò che "segue" costituirebbe l'esito di una deduzione: un insieme di contenuti ricavabili *analiticamente* dal piano delle premesse.

Qui, invece, non è l'inizio a "dare senso" a ciò che ne scaturisce. Al di là infatti di ogni logica deduttiva o dimostrativa, quello tratteggiato da Kafka è un quadro all'interno del quale la "fine" ha la virtù di ri-mettere in discussione l'"inizio". Ha la virtù, cioè, di conferirgli una nuova e inattesa intelligibilità. E questo, al punto di impedire all'inizio di collocarsi nella posizione di "fondamento", di assurgere dunque al rango di "struttura archetipica" (come se questa fosse un sostrato immutabilmente soggiacente al fondo del divenire). Si potrebbe anzi dire che, qui, il "prima" (ossia: il "fondo di verità") viene a manifestazione come un *effetto retroflesso* del lavoro compiuto dal "dopo"¹⁰, e cioè da quella molteplicità di "segni" (le "quattro varianti" del mitologema di Prometeo) per il cui tramite il racconto kafkiano ha saputo esibire – affidando la sua evocazione alla forma implicitamente interrogativa, e insieme ironicamente into-

nata, di un autentico congegno meta-rappresentativo – la stessa modalità di funzionamento di *ogni* mito: il paradosso immanente al suo statuto.

Certo, il "tentativo" di cui parla Kafka è chiaramente segnato dalla circolarità. E questo perché si va pur sempre *dall'inspiegabile all'inspiegabile*: da un "fondo di verità" inteso come orizzonte di provenienza del mito a un "fondo di verità" inteso, invece, come limite immanente a ogni configurazione particolare prodotta dall'attività mitopoietica. Resta però il fatto che, alla fine, e cioè nel momento in cui ci si avvede che è *pur sempre* dell'inspiegabile che si sta parlando, non si può dire che il risultato sia la mera ripetizione dell'identico, e cioè il fatale riapparire di uno scenario che semplicemente ritorna *come se nulla fosse avvenuto*. Se è vero infatti che c'è sempre e ancora "qualcosa da dire" è perché, ogni volta, l'incontro con la nostra finitezza, l'ammissione dunque del *non-essere-per-noi* del mondo, si impone alla nostra attenzione come qualcosa che "ci tocca". Come qualcosa cioè che, nel "renderci affetti", nel coinvolgerci quindi *in prima persona*, ci obbliga a una risposta che sia, auspicabilmente, "sensata" – a meno di rinunciare a ogni e qualsiasi tentativo di dare un ordine al caos –, ma insieme anche "rispettosa" di quell'inaggrabile *vincolo di immanenza* che ci lega al mondo¹¹. Un vincolo, questo, dalla cui rimozione conseguirebbe, invece, la pietrificazione dell'esperienza nella chiusura monologica di un "sistema" arbitrariamente sovrainposto alla contingenza del nostro essere-nella-vita, alla sua incompiutezza.

Nel suo darsi allora come una forma sempre "in via di elaborazione", come una prassi cioè che si nutre di deviazioni e digressioni (*Umwege*)¹², il mito è la continua attestazione del nostro *non poter non ritrovarci*, di volta in volta, nella condizione di dover "dare un nome al caos del senza nome"¹³. E cioè: nella condizione di dover ridise-

¹¹ In merito, si rimanda alla decisiva messa a fuoco della nozione di "meccanismo estetico" contenuta in Desideri (2018).

¹² Cfr. Blumenberg (1987): 114-116.

¹³ Cfr. Blumenberg (1979): 59-86.

¹⁰ Cfr. Sini (2009), in part. 41-62.

gnare, proprio a motivo della nostra frizione con l'alterità del reale – con la resistenza che quest'ultima oppone a ogni tentativo di “darne ragione” – i confini dell'esperienza. È quanto mostra, nella storia culturale dell'uomo, la pluralità delle “ri-occupazioni” o dei “ri-posizionamenti” (*Um-Besetzungen*) esibiti dal mito, e cioè il cammino irriducibilmente tortuoso tracciato dal suo divenire sempre *altro* rispetto alla determinatezza di ogni configurazione particolare via via chiamata, storicamente, a dare corpo al “lavoro del mito”. Questo allora significa che il mito – ogni mito – non soltanto implica il suo tornare ad affiorare, nel corso della storia, attraverso una indefinita molteplicità di varianti, ma finisce addirittura per risolversi nell'intreccio mobile di quelle sue diverse possibilità di variazione. Il mito, dunque, è – e non semplicemente comporta – la storia della sua ricezione¹⁴.

Tenendo conto di questi elementi, si è allora indotti a riconoscere che la *circolarità* esibita dal racconto kafkiano non è affatto improduttiva. Non si tratta, cioè, di una rappresentazione nella cui chiusura tautologica, o nella cui autoreferenzialità, il pensiero finisca per essere “imprigionato”. Qui, non a caso, la stessa figura del circolo, lungi dal tradursi in una assolutizzazione del dato, si converte in un'occasione di trascendimento. E questo perché a essere chiamata in causa è un'attività che si pone, e in modo esplicito, sotto il segno della *tentatività*. Se è vero dunque che il racconto, nella sua parte conclusiva, genera l'evidenza di un “sistema” – l'«evidenza di una densità compatta, come quella che la roccia possiede» (ivi: 761) –, è anche vero che una tale “evidenza” si produce pur sempre nel contesto di uno «*sforzo* [...] esplicativo» (ivi: 759, cors. mio): come l'effetto, cioè, di uno slancio orientato verso il comprendere. Questa particolare enfasi che viene allora posta sull'idea di “tentativo” costituisce il segnale di una autentica *conversione dello sguardo*: di un suo volgersi dal piano dell'“in sé” (il presunto “oggetto” della rappresentazione mitica) al piano del “per noi” (l'in-

dice modale al quale è intonato il nostro fare esperienza delle cose: la “qualità” del nostro essere-nella-vita). Ogni volta, infatti, a “*vedere*” l'inspiegabile “*come*” inspiegabile è comunque una mente – e una mente sempre *embodied* – che si qualifica per la sua capacità di tornare riflessivamente su di sé: per la sua capacità di “contemplare se stessa”, e dunque di conoscersi, nell'esercizio di quell'attitudine ludico-simulativa e metaforizzante nella quale si può cogliere la radice (universalmente umana) di ogni fabulizzazione dell'esperienza.

In questo senso, è come se il *Prometeo* di Kafka mettesse in scena, rivelandola a se stessa, la “scenografia di sfondo”¹⁵ liminarmente presupposta da ogni attività mitopoietica. E a farsene immagine, ancora una volta, è proprio la muta compattezza della “montagna rocciosa”. È nell'incontro con la sua inspiegabilità, nella qualità che connota la nostra relazione con il suo mostrarsi, che si può legittimamente ravvisare il luogo genetico di ogni costruzione mitica. Se è vero, infatti, che il mito nasce come “esonero” (*Entlastung*) dall'“assolutismo della realtà”, dalla percezione cioè del carattere non-padroneggiabile del mondo, allora è proprio di questo, e cioè della *Stimmung* alla quale è intonata la relazione tra la nostra vita mentale e il non-essere-per-noi del mondo, che il racconto kafkiano si fa rappresentazione. Rappresentazione, dunque, della nostra capacità di “sentirci” *nell'atto stesso di sentire* l'inappropriabilità del reale: la sua inquietante estraneità. Ma rappresentazione anche, e per ciò stesso, della nostra capacità di “sentire” la sensatezza che virtualmente si dischiude, sempre e di nuovo, per il favore del nostro *prenderne le distanze*. Per il favore, cioè, della nostra capacità di opporre allo “strapotere” del reale, quale strategia emotivamente intelligente di depotenziamento del *Terror* (o dell'*Angst*), quel rimedio – adattivamente irrinunciabile – che è costituito dal “proiettare immagini”, ossia dal “raccontare storie”¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cfr., su questo, le illuminanti riflessioni di Garroni (2004).

¹⁶ Cfr. Blumenberg (1979): 30. In merito, cfr. Bodei (1999), che legge il mito come «reazione» al «mutismo impressionante della natura» e Carchia (1999), che lo interpreta piuttosto come «spazio della laboriosità uma-

¹⁴ Per una ricca e stimolante discussione di questo motivo, cfr. Vitiello (1998): 15-20.

Quello costruito da Kafka, allora, è un congegno nel quale la stessa mitizzazione della "fine" di un determinato mito – lo stesso precipitare *in immagine* della presunta consumazione del suo "potenziale di efficacia" – si fa esibizione della capacità che il vivente ha di sentire la *dynamis*, l'ineffabile forza di trascendimento, che è virtualmente custodita nella data di ogni sua costruzione rappresentativa (inclusa, dunque, quella specifica rappresentazione che, pure, sembra certificare, escatologicamente, l'impossibilità di produrre nuove rappresentazioni). Da questo punto di vista, l'inspiegabile del quale ci si avvede *dopo* aver tentato di dargli un senso – dopo essersi, cioè, coraggiosamente impegnati nella fatica del comprendere – non è affatto qualcosa di semplicemente coincidente con l'inspiegabile così come questo si rendeva esperibile *prima* della messa in atto di un simile sforzo. Ogni volta, infatti, l'incontro con l'inspiegabile costringe il vivente a farsi carico della necessità di ri-articolare, in modi e forme favorevolmente significativi, quel rapporto tra processualità e sistematicità – ossia tra "successività" (il tempo) e "simultaneità" (lo spazio) – del quale il *Prometeo* di Kafka, con il doppio movimento scandito dalla ritmica ironia del suo "dire disdicendo", costituisce l'esibizione esemplare.

Nel parlare dunque di un "fondo di verità" del mito, Kafka ci sta invitando a riflettere sulla natura insopprimibilmente paradossale di quella *pre-condizione di senso* sul cui sfondo si staglia ogni nostro tentativo di farci immagini del senza-nome, o del senza-volto. Se un tale "fondo di verità" finisce per occupare, qui, la posizione dell'incondizionato (in quanto *prius* che eccede ogni possibilità di verifica e/o di smentita), allora la forza veritativa del mito (di ogni mito) consiste nel suo farsi espressione di un senso che è da intendersi non già come possesso stabile e definitivo, ma piuttosto come *infinito differimento*. Volendo tradurre la cosa nei termini della grammatica kafkiana, si potrebbe dire che l'incondizionato è quell'*assenza* che noi possiamo "sentire",

e con ciò stesso "pensare", solo indulgiando nell'esercizio di una scrittura non già "comparativa", bensì "allusiva". Scrive, in proposito, Kafka: «Per tutto ciò che trascende il mondo sensibile, noi non possiamo servirci del linguaggio che in forma puramente allusiva, mai anche solo approssimativamente comparativa, dato che esso, come si conviene al mondo dei sensi, non tratta che del possesso e dei suoi rapporti» (Kafka [2002]: 50).

Che l'"inspiegabile" dunque – in quanto *Wahrheitsgrund* – costituisca, al contempo, la condizione interna e il limite immanente di ogni mito significa, innanzitutto, questo. E cioè che il tentativo di portare a rappresentazione (per quanto è possibile) la stessa inoggettivabile eccedenza di una simile condizione implica sempre la disponibilità, da parte del vivente, a confrontarsi con quell'invito ad "*andare al di là*" (*Gehe hinüber*) che potentemente risuona nella costruzione, insieme temeraria e inderogabile, di ogni "racconto": di ogni *Gleichnis*. Non è un caso, allora, che sia precisamente questo il termine – traducibile altrettanto bene, nella lingua italiana, con le espressioni "allegoria", "parabola", "metafora", o "similitudine"¹⁷ – che compare nel titolo di uno scritto di Kafka (*Von den Gleichnissen*), peraltro fondamentale, il cui fulcro tematico è costituito appunto dal motivo testè indicato, e cioè dalla connessione che inscindibilmente lega l'idea di "inspiegabilità" e quella di "allusività". Scrive, infatti, Kafka:

Quando il saggio dice: '*Vai di là*' [*Gehe hinüber*], non intende che si debba passare dall'altra parte della via [...] ma intende qualche "*di là*" favoloso [*irgendein sagenhaftes Drüben*], qualcosa che non conosciamo, che nemmeno lui saprebbe indicare meglio e che pertanto qui non ci può giovare affatto. In fondo tutte queste similitudini dicono soltanto che l'Inconcepibile è inconcepibile [...]. (Kafka [1970]: 508, c.vi miei)

Il tratto propriamente mitico delle "parabole" kafkiane¹⁸ deve essere ravvisato, dunque, nel loro

na» (come espressione del tentativo di trasformare il «limite» in «risorsa», e quindi – in definitiva – come conversione della «*Penia*» in «*Pòros*»).

¹⁷ Cfr. Masini [2010]: 146-160.

¹⁸ Sul carattere "parabolico" della scrittura kafkiana, e sul suo carattere paradossale, cfr. Benjamin (1955) e Adorno

costituirsì come il luogo-non luogo di un'oscillazione infinita, o di un *interminabile esitare*. E questo perché a caratterizzarle è il loro farsi incontro come l'immagine di una permanente sospensione tra la presenza del sensibile e l'assenza dell'intelligibile: tra la bellezza visibile del significante (ma una bellezza esperita come colpa e come condanna: una bellezza "gorgonica") e la verità non-visibile di un significato che resta inattingibile¹⁹. All'interno delle parabole kafkiane, infatti, è lo stesso annientamento del senso, la sua non-redimibile catastrofe, a funzionare come condizione di quella sua vertiginosa proliferazione che si dispiega, pur sempre, come effetto della disseminazione del segno. Stiamo dunque parlando di una proliferazione che si affida al tenore *malinconicamente* "allegorico" del segno²⁰: alla capacità che il segno ha di produrre, sì, sempre nuovi significati, ma significati destinati a essere incessantemente negati dal loro collocarsi, ancora una volta, in posizione di significante (dal loro mostrarsi, insomma, come traccia che rinvia ad altre tracce: come un'apparenza produttiva di ulteriori apparenze).

Se è vero dunque che il "fondo di verità" menzionato da Kafka nel *Prometeo* occupa – come s'è detto – la posizione dell'incondizionato, allora è anche vero che la rappresentabilità di quest'ultimo (la sua pensabilità e, insieme, la sua dicibilità) è qualcosa che si istituisce, paradossalmente, per il favore stesso del nostro *differirne*. Per il favore stesso, cioè, della distanza che ci separa dal nascosto. Ed è appunto dell'incolmabilità di quella distanza che il *Prometeo* di Kafka si fa, in modo esemplare, testimonianza. Testimonianza, quindi, dell'impossibilità di risolvere senza residui l'indeterminatezza del "fondo di verità" (l'opacità che gli pertiene) nella determinatezza delle sue diverse, possibili rappresentazioni (nella loro trasparenza). Ma testimonianza anche, e simultaneamente, della necessità di persistere nel tentativo di dare comunque una forma, per quanto precaria e contingente, allo stesso "impedimento" – o allo stesso inevitabi-

(1969).

¹⁹ In proposito, cfr. Baioni (1984): 79-113.

²⁰ Cfr. Masini (1977), (2010) e Desideri (1980).

le "fallimento" – che connota ogni nostro conferimento di senso all'esperienza²¹.

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²¹ Sul nesso "arte-vita" in Kafka, si rinvia alle preziose osservazioni di Di Giacomo (1999).

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The Grand Style. Encountering elderly influencers

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Abstract. The number of elderly influencers on Instagram is increasing. When analyzing a sample of corresponding posts, it is noticeable that fashion, especially fancy or vintage fashion, plays a central role. By choosing extraordinary looks, elderly influencers, whose age is by no means concealed, communicate self-determination and independence from the opinions of others – both also in connection with life experience. Their followers consider them as *cool* and empowering: this way, they can positively influence society's perception of elderly people, take away younger recipients' fear of aging, and act as role models. However, a noticeable divide emerges, as the elderly influencers are apparently well-educated and presumably also wealthy and enjoy good health. In social comparison, many of those of the same age would probably perform poorly. Therefore, it can be concluded that elderly influencer may be beneficial to their recipients and to society as a whole, but that addressing the social conditions that enable old people to live a fulfilled life is largely ignored.

Keywords: granfluencer, influencer, social media, aging, old people.

INTRODUCTION

The internet is not just a place for young folks, but also «older adults use the Internet for a broad range of purposes including interpersonal communication, errands, and leisure» (Leukel et al. [2020]: 255) and it has been assumed that the percentage of older users will significantly increase in the near future (United Nations [2017]).

However, especially social media such as Instagram are still primarily used by young people: only 14% of Instagram's users are above 45 (Statista [2021a]) and only 2.2% are above 65. Thus, when talking about elderly people on social media, it still refers to a small, but growing group: elderly people are picking up on social media (Statista [2021b]) – not only as recipients, but also as producers of media content: «Selfie is gaining popularity among the senior citizen» (Zhang et al. [2020]: 146) and «elderly influencers have seen

a significant rise in popularity on Instagram» (Mediakix [2020]). Nevertheless, they have hardly been dealt with in social science.

This article addresses the research question of how elderly influencers appropriate the medium *Instagram* and how they build a positive social identity in a medium that focuses heavily on external aspects and youth (Bell [2016]: 30). For this purpose, a sample of different posts will be analyzed.

KEY TERMS

The following section will lay the foundation for the study by identifying key terms for the present context.

ELDERLY INFLUENCERS

To approach “elderly influencers” the term “influencer” has to be considered first. By its literal meaning, an influencer is someone who does or wants to exert some kind of influence on others by changing respectively reinforcing their perceptions, opinions, behaviors etc. Influencers are defined as persons who show «some combination of desirable attributes» (Bakshy et al. [2011]: 65), or, more in detail, as «everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces» (Abidin [2016]). The aspect of monetizing the social media engagement that is also mentioned by Crystal Abidin may not be of greater importance in this context, as stated by several interviewees and apparent in very few cooperation partners.

When considering the difference between usual stars and influencers, the concept of «microcelebrity», coined by Theresa Senft in 2008 fits very well (Senft [2008]): unlike other celebrities, «popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them» (Ibid.: 26). Microcelebrities are «famous to

a niche group of people» (Marwick [2008]: 114), a status reached «by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition or by being ascribed fame by others due to one’s accomplishments» (Ibid.: 114). In order to build affective relationships with the recipients, conveying authenticity is of particular importance (Marwick [2013]) – even if it is ultimately a matter of «staged authenticity», which is authentic again insofar as it does not conceal its stagedness (Jerrentrup [2020]).

Specifying a certain number of followers that would turn a user into a microcelebrity is difficult, especially since in order to increase the number, followers can also be purchased. In addition, the practices underlying the phenomenon may be similar no matter if the person in question is reaching or influencing a certain number of followers or not (Marwick [2019]: 162; for the problem of identifying influential users see Segev et al. [2018]). Accordingly, it is useful to choose the criterion of a public, i.e. unrestrictedly visible accounts, and the use of hashtags to attract new followers, instead of a certain number of followers.

As for the term «elderly», the exact age range is also difficult to define. Some statistics or publications use 65 as the age at which one is considered a «senior», while others refer to 70 or older (for a discussion, see Orimo et al. [2006]). Most elderly influencers do not communicate their exact age but eventually use hashtags like #over70. In any case, it is clear that the influencers considered in the sample do not want to disguise their age, but use it as a means to build and maintain their followership.

In journalistic sources, the phenomenon of elderly influencers has been named «gran(d)fluencers», (more often without “d”) and refers to «folks 70 years old and up that have amassed substantial followings on social media with the help of decades-younger fans» (AP [2021]). However, the term “gran(d)fluencer”, even though many use it themselves as hashtag #granfluencer/#grandfluencer, is controversial from an emic perspective: the composition of «grandmother or -father» and «influencer» suggests that the people in question are «grandpar-

ents» and thus has certain familial connotations and defines the elderly influencers through other people, through their descendants. Therefore, the well-known influencer «iconaccidental» wrote to me when I asked her about her life as a «gran(d)fluencer»: «Not all of us are grandmothers and we are not all the same simply because we have grey hair», just as «saramaijewels», another famous influencer, told me «we aren't all grandparents». Both of them were featured in a popular article by Harvey (2019) titled «the rise of the grandfluencer». However, in the context of wording, it is also important to consider the particular linguistic and cultural background: my mother tongue is German and the term “grand” in German does not suggest a family sequence, but rather, based on the French “grand,” something very elite as in “grand hotel” or in “grande dame,” a woman who sets standards and is seen in connection with elegance and wealth.

Yet, the segregative aspect of the term “gran(d)fluencer” can be viewed critically: people are separated according to age groups. Of course, it is not the purpose of this article to draw clear lines, to sort people into categories, and to reinforce stereotypes. Nevertheless, aging is a fact and «the study of older adults and the aging process has become a socially significant topic in the [...] communication sciences across cultures» (Giles et al. [2010]). One can, of course, appreciate elderly influencers simply for their sense of style or for their likeable self-presentation. Yet, many comments, as well as numerous journalistic articles show that their age plays a significant role in the perception of elderly influencers.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The term “Instagram” has come up several times already, but still, a few characteristics of the medium should be briefly mentioned to illustrate the background against which influencers are active: Instagram is one of the most important social media nowadays. Following a classic definition, social media are seen as «highly interactive

platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content» (Kietzmann et al. [2011]: 241). According to Kietzmann et al., social media a.o. help to show presence, to share content, build and keep relationships, form groups, and communicate identity (Ibid.: 243). Social media users interact with each other through their photographs, usernames, and other information that they provide about themselves (Zhao et al. [2008]), but also through their likes and comments. Harry Dyer, in a chapter titled «Defining social media...it's complicated», describes how pervasive social media are, especially in the lives of many younger people, and the importance they play in identity formation (Dyer [2020]: 28). Contemporary work often focuses precisely on this connection between social media and identity (e.g. Gündüz [2017]; Vincent [2021]), which is also described as a discursive process (Jakaza [2020]: 3).

However, not all social media function the same way. Different from other platforms like Facebook or Twitter, Instagram is based on pictures: it is a space for aesthetic visual communication (Leaver et al. [2020]: 40). Text has to be laid out if one wants to upload it. Furthermore, as Instagram is mostly used on cell phones, one has to consider the spatial dimensions that are possible for pictures. The maximum size Instagram offers for a cell phone held upright is slightly squarer than the 2x3 format typical for cameras, which content creators have to take into account. In addition, Instagram offers infinite scrolling, so that a large number of different inputs is presented to the user in the shortest possible time. For the person posting, it means that his or her content has to stand out in order to be noticed. When it comes to identity, Instagram does not emphasize that accounts should be based on real identities, as Facebook does, for example (Leaver et al. [2020]: 16).

As already mentioned, only 2.2% of Instagram's users are above 65 (Statista [2021]). So, Instagram seems to be catching on with younger target groups in particular, even though the situation may be changing especially due to its competitor TikTok.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Identity is needed to situate an individual in the social world and includes diachronic and synchronic aspects. Individuals strive for positive self-views and want to be seen positively by others (Gecas [1982]). By choice or determined by biology or descent, each individual belongs to a range of different social categories like age group, class, gender, subculture(s), religious groups etc.

A very influential theory in the context of identity is the Social Identity Theory that was formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Based on the assumption that individuals strive for positive self-evaluation and that part of this is social identity, this theory deals with social comparison. In the case of negative comparison results, various strategies take hold such as individual mobility – i.e. leaving the group, which is impossible for an age group, for example –, social competition, or social creativity, i.e. modifying or changing the comparison dimension or the interpretation of the result. Sabine Trepte and Nicole Krämer (2007) have shown that the Social Identity Theory can successfully be expanded for research in media effects.

However, other approaches have been highlighted as well and increasingly received attention, among them Social Categorization Theory (Turner [1999]) that simplifies cognition creating categories. In our context, the concept of narrative identity is particularly interesting: it analyzes «the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others» (Mc Adams et al. [2006]: 4). This can be linked to «grassroots fashion storytelling» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 43), which has become a new, powerful voice in the realm of fashion. Especially its democratizing potential has been highlighted (Tomova [2017]: 2ff.; Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 43; Duffy [2013]) because bloggers and influencers do not have to conform to the stereotypical model measurements and, in addition to presenting their looks, their own opinions, experiences, and life stories often come into play. Of course, this democratizing potential can also be critically questioned, since presumably the

majority of bloggers and influencers, especially in the fashion sector, look more attractive than average and the use of makeup, filters, etc. plays a major role – and thus the orientation towards beauty conventions. This is consistent with the fact that «the more physically attractive an individual is, the more positive the person is perceived, the more favorably the person is responded to» (Patzner [1985]: 1), a fact explained by attribution theory, learning theory, and consistency theory. When it comes to beauty, youthfulness is a particularly important factor (Goldman and Waymer [2014]: 5), which is also conditioned and promoted by the industry: «The inattention to this consumer segment has resulted not only in lost revenues for business and lost consumption and service opportunities for the elderly but also a lack of narratives regarding body and beauty at a certain age, covering women of this age with a veil of invisibility» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 46).

Looking at photographs of Influencers posted on Instagram, positive identity is conveyed in a rhetorical way primarily through visual attributes and activities with which they present themselves (Kuhlhüser [2018]). These attributes and activities ultimately stand for values that are regarded as more or less positive and important depending on the cultural context, the social group, and the individual perception. In addition to the aspect of youthfulness, these can include, for example, coolness, modernity, cleverness, sociability, nonconformity, and so on. It should be noted, of course, that only what can be communicated primarily visually will make for an effective presentation on Instagram. Although there are also hashtags and captions, the picture is ultimately the focus on Instagram and thus the main means of communication.

However, the situation arises for elderly people that they are often perceived as physically, i.e. visually less attractive (Goldman and Waymer [2014]: 5), and furthermore, their living circumstances as rather negative: «In mainstream discourse [...] an interpretive framework has emerged that effectively rules out the possibility of people living positively and well in old age. With regard to both individual (personal) and collec-



Figure 1. Saramaijewels shows an extraordinary clothing style, uploaded on 13.12.2021 on Instagram. © Advancedstyle.

tive (societal) spheres, negative images of old age dominate public debate» (Grebe [2014]: 22). This can be seen as the «most prevalent type of ageism: prejudice against older persons» (Nelson [2016]: 337), which is institutionalized in America and other so-called “Western” societies (Ibid.). As addressed above, this article aims to address the question of how elderly people build a positive social identity in a medium that focuses heavily on physical aspects and youth (Bell [2016]: 30).

METHOD: SAMPLE AND CATEGORIZATION

The analysis is based on a sample of 200 photographs, the first 100 in each case proposed by Instagram under the hashtags #granfluencer and #over70 on Jan. 6th, 2022 – the prior inspired by Harvey’s article (2019) and the latter by the analysis on fashion influencers by Farinosi and Fortunati (2020). The sample includes pictures of more or less well-known people who have used

the hashtag, as well as, to a lesser extent, from accounts that collect and share related photos or posts, presumably with the consent of those depicted. The images suggested according to the algorithm are not all very recent, but date back to around mid-2020. Since the largest accounts, i.e. those with the most followers, were not selected as the basis here, the commercial aspect – what is the relationship between companies and influencers, what benefits arise for the latter – recedes into the background. Due to the design of the sample, some pictures originate from the same accounts, however, this affects less than one-fifth of the posts. Furthermore, it should be noted that the sample exclusively consists of publicly posted photos, so that no ethical dilemma arises with regard to the violation of privacy.

In order to achieve a sample that is as unaffected as possible by the previous preferences of an existing Instagram account, a new account was created. However, the location of the survey could have played a role: the sample was collected in Germany close to the metropolitan area of Cologne, Bonn, and Frankfurt. It is therefore possible that an algorithm has selected images that correspond to a so-called Western European taste.

With the help of an «ethnographic content analysis» (Altheide [1987]) following emergent instead of a priori coding (see Stemler [2000]: 2), the photographs were sorted into different categories so that «patterns of meaning» (Joffe [2011]: 209) could be identified based on their image content and design. In accordance with ethnological content analysis, the categories were not prefabricated, but emerged in reflexive work with the material (Altheide [1987]: 68). In the process, several categories, some of which overlap, were identified.

Several informal interviews were also conducted with elderly influencers. However, they offered less insight than hoped for: the standard answer to the question why they are active as influencers was, for example, «I want to inspire». A comprehensive participant observation of an influencer would probably be an informative method and option for further research. In order to give older

influencers a voice, however, I have supplemented the categories with exemplary captions or quotes from the interviews.

- With nearly 90%, a large category revolves around style (Fig. 1). Photos presenting strikingly styled individuals are tagged with hashtags like #fashiongrandma, #ageisjustanumber, and often, this category also shows skills in image composition and editing. Sophie Van de Vyver with her account Sophisticatedbox focuses mainly on clothing and accessories, sometimes giving detailed tips on styling and shooting, sometimes posting fashion photographs with more general statements such as «Be proud of who you are, wear your perfect MAY fit with pride! It's not because you are 50plus that you have to hide. Dare to wear colors, to feel perfect at any age» (11th of May 2022).

Some influencers use hashtags like #sorrynotsorry or #radical and communicate rebellion in their posts. The unusual and age-atypical stylings – clothes, jewelry and tattoos – communicate the independence of the elderly influencers from the opinion of others. This independence is considered desirable and «cool» (Lauer [2018]: 57). An example is the statement of the influencer Helen (baddiewinkle) known for her «rebel vibes» and «screw being age-appropriate-attitude» (Harvey [2019]): «I think [people] saw a great-grandmother that didn't care what anybody thought about her». On second glance, however, it is obvious that the medium Instagram is, of course, about what people think – perhaps not the majority, but an established circle of like-minded people and fans who celebrate that very attitude.

- In 31% of the photos, you can find either the elderly influencer with family members or friends, sometimes giving details about their successful life stories, e.g. the couple May and Burkhard in style_is_ageless (18.04.2022), or old photographs of the influencer and his or her family, as occasionally posted by Sandy Rutenberg (mammarock). Occasionally, pictures of only younger family members such as the grandchildren are uploaded. Among the

hashtags used there are #familytime, #grandparents or #youngandold. Although younger influencers also like to show themselves with friends or family, the intergenerational aspect is much rarer. With such photos, elderly individuals show that they are integrated and live on the pulse of time. Furthermore, followers may also play a role, who are apparently often rather young people (Harvey [2019]).

- Nostalgic charm is communicated in about 36% of the photos, usually in connection with fashion and props. Typical visual elements are the bow tie on the collar, old-fashioned blouses or cardigans, suspenders or similar. Ingemar Albertsson (Vintagemannen), for example, who started to use the hashtag #granfluencer intensively, shows a photo of himself with white and hat, suit and bow tie on old-fashioned park bench with two Dalmatians.

In this context, sustainability and the assumption of responsibility, as well as role model function may also come into play. In an interview, Ingemar Albertsson (Vintagemannen) states: «I want to inspire people to buy second hand instead of new junk clothes and fashion brands». Nostalgic or vintage themes may be presented by people of higher age with more authenticity – one tends to believe that they know the feeling of that time. However, this can actually refer to the 1950s, 60s and 70s at most, but they were not alive in the 1920s or even earlier. Nevertheless, the flair of different past eras is played with.

- The advantages of age, such as professional success, possibly accompanied by a self-determined life, and life experience may not be easy to represent on a pictorial level. The account style_is_ageless chose a headline to communicate this aspect: «Sharing ageless wisdom». A more visual option is shown by Saramaijewels (06.01.2022) with a picture of a camping trailer, accompanied by the text: «Missing camp life and all these beings», by which she means a self-determined life – the «missing» obviously refers to the season, which makes camping difficult. In the combination of photo and text, success, a self-determined life, and life experi-

ence is addressed in about 24%, such as in the form of advice, «life hacks» (AP [2021]) or instructive stories from their own lives. Sara-maijewels also wants to give an age-positive message using the hashtag #mywrinklesare-mystripes (Harvey [2019]). This can be used to illustrate the reframing of age as an asset or the light-footed, self-confident, and cool approach to age,

- In 14% of the images, the focus is on activities that are often related to creativity, such as sewing, crafts, gardening, but also reading. These activities are not age-related, but they implicate that elderly influencers are living fulfilling lives (van der Meer [2008]: 1), as Eva Wikner put it «I also want to show how fun WHOLE life is» (eva_wikner 01.05.2022). Sometimes, such activities also seem to be primarily to make fashion photos more authentic.
- Some individuals, about 5%, present themselves in the context of subcultures based on music styles or other activities that have existed for a longer time, using hashtags like #oldrocker or #punksnotdead. This primarily applies to hippie, punk, metal and rock music, for example. By the end of the seventies, Dick Hebdige has presented punk as a youth music (Hebdige [1979]: 87), however, even though there are still young fans, a considerable part has grown quite old by now. As analyzed by Bennett, their (sub)culture still plays an important role for older fans, but they may use more «subtle derivations» of the original, visually striking punk styles (Bennett [2006]: 225), as they have internalized being punk, «becoming in effect a “part” of the person, thus removing the need for the display of commitment to punk» (Ibid.: 233). Yet, on Instagram, a very visual medium, the individual's inclinations will be understood by his or her looks and are therefore carried to the outside.
- While wellness and sports, as well as nutrition, often play a central role for influencers (Sánchez Albert [2021]: 13) and one might expect that older people have to take care of their bodies all the more, this topic was

only found in 4% of the photos, two of them were rather wellness photos. In Swe's account (theurbanhippieswe) the headline says: «Photos about aging with energy and style [...] Vegetarian», however his photographs are rather about his clothing style than about sports or food. An exception is the well-known granfluencer Irvin Randle (irvinrandle), who says of himself, «I exercise five days of the week [...] I feel better now than I did at 27» (Harvey [2019]). Every now and then, he posts sport-related photographs such as himself on a skateboard (27.09.2021) or with a sports car (5.12.2020). Otherwise, the focus on sports, nutrition, maintaining or exercising the body does not seem to play a significant role.

- Some photos can also be categorized as humorous. The well-known influencer Kimiko Nishimoto (kimiko_nishimoto), for example, specializes in humorous self-portraits. The aforementioned Helen (baddiewinkle), whose account is titled «stealing your man since 1928», also repeatedly uploads funny-looking photos with extreme makeup and exhaled poses; in the text, a media-reflective attitude is sometimes evident, e.g., «Yup... Way Too Sexi For Mah Own Good» (01.10.2021) or «Love/Hate Relationship W Instagram» (29.03.2022), each to a photo with a chick-like pose. However, with many pictures in particularly bizarre fashion it is difficult to judge whether they should be understood as humorous or not, or whether humor is in the foreground or not. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to give a percentage here, but it tends to be in the lower single digits. The situation is different if you look at the captions, which contain a humorous component somewhat more frequently, e.g. «The serious business of getting ready to go out on Friday night» (ruth.yunker, 07/16/2021).

Overall, it is striking that noticeable digital rejuvenations have been observed rather rarely. This may also be due to the fact that apps for beautification of selfies are often not designed for elderly people (Zhan et al. [2020]) – but could

also have to do with a certain self-image of the elderly influencers.

In line with the analysis of Farinosi and Fortunati, elderly influencers appear particularly genuine and authentic, demonstrating «their courage to clear the third-age stereotypes with elegance, irony, and a touch of cheek [...] they seem to scream to the world that they exist. They do it with boldness, delicacy, and intelligence» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 52).

Based on the social identity theory, elderly influencers use different dimensions of comparison than younger ones. While very young people – both recipients and influencers – often focus on appearance respectively beauty (Djafarova and Matson [2021]: 131), and, in general, the topics *food, travel, fashion, fitness, technology, and entertainment* are most popular (Suhr [2018]), here, experience and family play a greater role. Elderly people can also present nostalgic or vintage themes in a particularly credible way and thus deal with their age in a (self-)ironic way, for example, when they wear outfits from eras that are long gone, such as the 1920s. Particularly often, unusual fashion is shown. Wearing these clothes communicates that the people concerned do not care about the opinion of others (Grüning [2017]) and could thus be understood as an epitome of *coolness*. In this sense, coolness as a desirable quality is also a socio-cultural resource (Grebe [2014]: 22). This also shows a parallel to younger influencers, for whom coolness in this sense is also significant. Yet, the attitude communicated – one does not care about the opinion of others – can also possibly be embodied particularly authentically by the higher age and the life experience associated with it. At the same time, wearing unusual fashions is probably considered even more unusual at an older age: in the case of subcultures, for example, Bennett (2006) observed that older members were usually less likely to wear a subculture's style, but rather internalized the subculture without particularly externalizing it.

In some respects, elderly influencers are reminiscent of influencers from the field of body positivity. Here, we find influencers who deviate from

the ideal of beauty in various respects, for example through excess weight, scars, strong body modifications, etc. and attempt to reframe beauty (Marcus [2016]). However, different from the social groups analyzed by Marcus, elderly influencers do not form a community intended to provide support and to compliment users' appearances, as most followers of elderly influencers do not belong to the same age-group.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As demonstrated through this research, elderly influencers manage to overcome «the cultural limits that have characterized the fashion sphere in an era based on the myth of eternal youth» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 45). By doing so, they help old people to become visible for mainstream society (Agulló-Tomás, Zorilla Munoz [2020]: 163) and may also push the industry to be more inclusive of elderly target groups and move away from the typical, unrealistic ideal of beauty.

Elderly influencers appropriate the medium *Instagram* in a distinctive way and set particular emphases: although we are in an image-centric medium, the condition of one's own body apparently is not the focus for most elderly influencers. Instead, the main attention is paid to the embedding the body – in social situations, in special settings, but also in special clothing. This communicates the ability to lead a self-determined life, which is shaped independently of the opinion of others. The mere fact of presenting photos of oneself in a medium where youthful perfection is the order of the day can stand for this independence and self-confidence that comes with it. This is further enhanced by unusual fashions that the elderly influencers very often present. Thus, they fit the definition of *cool* given by Lauer (2018: 57): being a bit different from others and, paradoxically, not wanting to please, as well as not worrying about being cool is considered the epitome of cool. This also matches the criteria «originality» and «sub-cultural appeal» captured by Sundar et al. (2014) with regard to a measurable conceptualization of

«cool». So, one can conclude that the way they use Instagram leads not only to more visibility, but also to a cooler and thus more desirable, better image of elderly people.

The existence of elderly influencers may not only be positive in terms of psychological well-being for themselves and their peers, but younger Instagram users can also benefit from it by perceiving them as role models for self-confident and active aging (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 46). Accordingly, the posts are often commented on by younger followers between 25 and 34 (Wolff [2019]) with terms such as «inspirational» or «empowering». Elderly influencers «are challenging negative ages stereotypes and propose both visually and rhetorically an image of older women capable of recovering freedom from outdated social roles» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 55). Wolff pointedly states that elderly influencers can be viewed «as a symbol of “anti-anti-aging”» (2019), that they have managed to constitute a positive social identity through stressing specific dimensions in the process of social comparison, e.g. through communicating the «complexity of their narratives» (AP [2021]) and their life experiences which ultimately made them «cool».

So, can we confirm that elderly influencers are «extremely positive and beneficial» for both older and younger recipients and, «also for society as a whole» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 55)? It is, however, noticeable that age-related problems, such as poorer health, limited mobility or the loss of partners and friends, but also discrimination, e.g. regarding job opportunities, are almost not dealt with at all. Possibly, the elderly influencers paint an unrealistic picture that only partially reflects the reality of life for old people or is only oriented toward a small and privileged group – both in terms of internet skills, but also health, money, educational background, and living arrangement (Leukel et al. [2020]: 255). So, there is a divide that goes beyond the pure digital divide. This is reminiscent of the accusation often levelled at younger influencers, namely that they present a whitewashed world (Becker [2021]), which ultimately leads to their recipients always

falling short in social comparison and possibly feeling inadequate about themselves and their own lives. Thus, there are two aspects at odds here: on the one hand, elderly influencers convey a positive image of age and can serve as encouraging role models for young and old recipients. On the other hand, their portrayal may also be – if not retouched in the strict sense – then at least quite selectively designed, which can lead to Instagram users of their own age group feeling relatively deprived, even though the influence that the elderly influencers actually exert on their audience would still have to be investigated. Yet, it is obvious that social disadvantages associated with older age are largely ignored. But if old people become more visible and society as a whole learns that old people can lead self-determined and fulfilling lives, it would be of great importance that society as a whole also learns what social conditions must be in place so that this can benefit many old people and not just a privileged group.

In addition, I would like to note, in accordance with the statements of the elderly influencers I interviewed, that they should not be defined by their age alone – their personal style and communicated personality, combined with different values they stand for, can also make them fascinating for their followers. Sometimes, age is just a number.

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Fetish of sneakers and youth lifestyle simulation representation in Indonesia

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Abstract. One of the prestige of young people's identity today is through fashion. Fashion has even become a "religion" that binds the identity of the individual who wears it. The Sneaker, a form of fashion, also has a big role; even now, it has become a commodity and prestige with a fetish nuance. Therefore, this study aims to identify how the sneaker fetish becomes a space for simulating the lives of young people in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study also examines the problem of the representation of youth-lifestyle simulations in Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative case study approach to play on Jean Baudrillard's approach to simulacra and hyperreality, which also discusses David Chaney's approach to fashion. Data collection was obtained from audience studies by examining tagging on social media, Instagram, from July 2022 to October 2022. The results of the study show that the sneaker trend does not only act as a complement to appearances, more than that, but it can also display the personal identity of the wearer. A sneaker community also facilitates the lifestyle of young people towards sneakers. Finally, the community shifted the concept of young people towards sneaker consumption to be more consumptive than before. On the other hand, young people do not realize that what they have done is a hyperreality that tries to identify itself with the best possible image and continues to shape it through massive consumption activities. This is where the sneaker concept shifts from a "community" to a "commodity".

Keywords: fetish, representation, simulation, sneaker, youth-lifestyle.

INTRODUCTION

As part of society, young people have different cultural characteristics in their respective regions. Furthermore, each culture has specific social characteristics. So when a group of young people migrate from one cultural environment to another, they experience social processes that affect the pattern of adaptation and the formation of their new identity¹. Culture in a new area as a goal provides a

¹ New groups, new definitions of life stories, and meanings of identity are forces that change cultural expressions and social behaviour towards them as

new framework for traditions because it also provides a formulation and standard for measuring values for the life of a group of people. Including how the trend of young people towards the sneaker phenomenon became a lifestyle.

In Indonesia, culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols (Daddesio [2013]: 9). It is an inherited system of conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which humans communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life (Roudometof [2016]: 113; Svasek [2012]: 39). The relationship between sneakers and young people's lives to become a culture has regional boundaries. The three negotiate as a group, where each cultural agent looks for the meaning of the Indonesian society's symbols. The symbols and meanings used by a group of young people result from the mutual agreement in a group or community. Sneakers as a symbol that is a behavioural guide for all members of the youth community in a society (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman [2008]: 188). Through these prerequisites, the sneaker trend is finally formed as one of the cultural identities in scope.

Symbols and behaviour of a society can also be explained by analyzing the context in which the construction of the symbol was constructed (Daddesio [2013]: 11). Therefore, the sign or symbol is no longer a condensation of meaning but depends on the multi-meaning of the social group it refers to. Meanwhile, cultural reproduction occurs when immigrants affirm their cultural identity, such as the culture of origin. The process aims to assert its existence in Indonesian social life, which requires adaptation to groups with different cultural backgrounds².

At the same time, the sneaker has reproduced itself as a cultural agent in a new trend that explains the contemporary change (Noland

[2009]: 77). Therefore the area of culture is no longer important in the process of giving meaning to one's personal life when an individual move from one place to another which makes his cultural area change. Thus, the original identity of young people (which in the context of this research is Indonesia) originates and grows in the end into history and life stories that they cannot leave because it will turn into their life guide in his new trend area. This dynamic process will occur continuously along with the ongoing interaction between general or social characteristics until it becomes a fetish symptom.

The symptom of the sneaker fetish refers to the theory of cultural construction, which is an important basis for explaining sneaker adaptation as fashion to construct the identity of young Indonesians (Bide [2021]: 5). The fetish symptom of sneakers appears because of a new group of different people (Skeates [2016]: 11). This grouping is a process of adaptation of newcomers, which means forming new social relationships. Subsequently, the sneaker worn by young people was redefined as a new stage of life took shape. This stage may have very different meanings for a person because their social environment is different from the environment they were in before. Finally, there is a process of giving new meaning to someone and guiding him to redefine his identity and cultural origin through the use of sneakers.

Cultural practices will always experience a process of reproduction, reproduction and even commercialization that go hand in hand with the gradual development of modernity. Furthermore, the transmission process depends on the individuals who play a role in the cultural arena. Therefore, referring to one of the prestige of young people's identities today is fashion. Fashion has even become a "religion" that binds the identity of the individual who wears it. So, the sneaker, a form of fashion, also has a big role; even now, it has become a commodity and prestige with a fetish nuance. Therefore, this study aims to identify how the sneaker fetish becomes a space for simulating the lives of young people in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study also examines the problem of

immigrants (Pudaruth [2017]).

² Cultural reproduction in the context of the sneaker trend for young people is a meeting of several different cultures that influence each other, resulting in a new culture containing elements of these cultures (Adom [2019]; Brady et al. [2018]).

the representation of youth-lifestyle simulations in Indonesia.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative audience studies approach to Jean Baudrillard's approach to simulacra and hyperreality (Baudrillard [2018]: 22; Baudrillard & Johnston [2007]: 31), which also discusses David Chaney's approach to fashion (Chaney [2019]: 12; Gartman & Chaney [2003]:98). Data collection was obtained from audience studies by examining tagging on social media, Instagram, from July 2022 to October 2022.

This research emphasizes the approach's interactivity, demassification, and asynchronous aspects. The presence of an interactive virtual community through the development of web 2.0 has become an enabler factor for young sneaker fans to communicate interactively. The capabilities of this new communication system facilitate young people to communicate almost as in a face-to-face conversation. The level of internet interactivity is close to the level of interpersonal communication so that participants can communicate more accurately, effectively, and satisfactorily. Therefore, by conducting a critical study of the phenomenon of the virtual sneaker community, we can provide a perspective on how massive the sneaker trend is in Indonesia. Furthermore, with demassification, a specific message can be exchanged individually between the young fetish sneaker. Demassification also means that control or control of mass communication systems usually shifts from producers to consumers, which indicates the emergence of community transitions to commodities (Altinay & Williams [2019]: 90). Then, asynchronous gives the characteristics that fetish sneaker and youth lifestyle simulation can send and receive messages at times desired by each agent, which distinguishes it from old media, which are synchronous, which requires communication to occur at the same time by both parties, such as conversation by telephone or face to face

communication represented through the use of sneakers. Furthermore, the analysis is carried out with Jean Baudrillard's approach to simulacra and hyperreality, which also discusses David Chaney's approach to fashion.

DISCUSSION

FASHION AND CULTURE DIALOGUE: THE BEGINNING OF FETISH SNEAKERS SYMPTOMS IN INDONESIA

Sneakers and fashion are interrelated and complementary. The sneaker, originally used as a complement to the needs and footwear, has now developed as a supporter of one's appearance and identity. Social interaction between sneaker users creates new thinking about the meaning of fashion as a social identity and leads to fetish symptoms³. Lookism is when someone wants to be seen at the same time without any dominance. Thus, young people see sneakers as a fashion to increase their status and to be noticed by others. And lookism as an early symptom of a fetish against cultural products.

Before, some young people using sneakers were known to have an ordinary appearance. However, after using sneakers and joining the sneaker community, he changed his appearance and fashion to become more trendy to have an advantageous position in his social arena (Bauer et al. [1999]: 107). Symptoms of sneaker fetishes are increasingly visible when sneaker, as a cultural entity, stimulates their users always to display a luxurious fashion style⁴. Usually, a sneaker fetish person also uses a variety of expensive branded clothes, which makes fashion not only a complement and support for everyday life.

³ Sneakers become a symbolic entity when young people want to be someone who is not too dominant in society but still pays attention to their appearance and always develops their fashion style (Brace-Govan & de Burgh-Woodman [2008]).

⁴ The meaning of sneakers for their social identity is as a self-image and obtaining the social status desired by young people (see Furnham & Bachtiar [2008]; Peirson-Smith [2013]).

The sneaker fetish causes a hyperreality of the sneaker's meaning. Not only as a fashion but also as an identity displayed by its users. The sneaker is a favourite and creates a sense of comfort for its users. In addition, it can help raise the social status of the assessment held by the public regarding sneakers as goods from well-known brands. Young people who always look trendy and fashionable in front of the public, supported by various fashion brands, can create their social identity. When identity is created through a sneaker fetish, a hyper-reality world or a world that transcends reality (hyper-reality) is created. Hyperreality is a reality that is artificial or superficial, created through the help of simulation technology and imaging engineering, which takes over the natural world of reality (Baudrillard & Lane [2000]: 223); then it models of reality which have no reference to reality⁵.

Hyperreality defines sneakers as a world of constructing social identity. Moreover, their lifestyle is very important. The meaning of sneakers in the scope of hyperreality is not only as fashion but also as a form of self-image in front of others which aims to be seen, observed and hopes to be an example for the viewer (Holt et al. [2013]: 184). Identity is the main reason young people form their social identity through sneakers and gain a legitimate position in the Indonesian sneaker world as "old kids". "The old kids" is a term for members who have been in the sneaker world for a long time and are usually filled by people who are already active in the forum for forming the sneaker community in Indonesia. The same thing happened to the meaning of sneakers among young people in Indonesia, where they tried to present their identity as good as possible, as high as possible, in front of other members.

Hyperreality defines sneakers as a world that constructs social identity. They are willing to make secondary and even tertiary needs into primary

needs while their primary needs are left aside. Fetish is increasingly visible even though it is ironic, namely when the hedon phenomenon through sneakers is inversely proportional to the original life, which is still improvised, and various primary needs are not fulfilled (Kelly [2018]: 189). In addition, fetishes can be seen in construction through social media by portraying themselves on Instagram social media accounts with posts about very "branded" clothing styles (Al-Gailani [2009]: 72). Of course, with recent photos, photo filter edits and the composition of the items worn are of added value.

FASHION THROUGH SNEAKERS: YOUTH IDENTITY, YOUTH LIFESTYLE IDENTITY

According to the environment in which the self is located, identity in the social realm does have different functions, but this identity is special and can change at certain times. Identity itself is a key element of subjective reality (Segre Reinach [2012]: xxi). Like all subjective reality, it has a dialectical relationship with society; and social processes form identity. Once it is formed, it will be preserved, modified, or even transformed by social relations. The social structure determines the social processes involved in forming and maintaining identity through sneakers. On the other hand, personal identity and social structure respond to certain social structures, maintain them, modify them or remodel them (Brady et al. [2018]: 44). Depending on the environment in which the self is located, identity in the social sphere has different functions. However, identity is always special and will change over time. Identity itself is a key element of subjective reality. It comes from understanding being part of a social group with various norms, values and emotional ties that process within the group (Green & Feldman-Barrett [2022]: 8). This is a collective identity and does not require all social group members to know each other and have close personal relationships⁶.

⁵ Hyperreality has no reference or reference to reality but refers to itself (self-reference) as a «trendsetter» or «one of the carriers of the sneaker trend» (Holt et al. [2013]; Johansson [2017]).

⁶ It can be concluded that the social identity of young people through the sneaker fetish is part of a person's

The culture in a society determines the way of communicating and the behaviour of the individuals who are members. Young people always interpret their actions and attitudes based on their cultural values, both as individuals and as members of a sneaker group (Bruggeman [2017]; Hwang [2017]). Their expression and behaviour in satisfaction are influenced by cultural variables practised in the form of rules or norms. Therefore, culture is a major determinant in many community decision-making even though there are contradictory interactions between Indonesian urban society's global and local nature. Contradictory interactions make the psychological orientation of young people towards sneakers influenced by the role of the conventional environment, which is contrary to the principle of independent modern individuals (Batchelor et al. [2020]: 65). This combination is the core of the practice of socializing traditional values in Indonesian urban society, which is a form of public acceptance of their dependence on modernity, tradition, and individual groups. Although sneakers as a form of modernity will continue to demand to development of old values into new values, the assimilation between the two will form subtle differences between the various types of modernity in each conventional habit (Liu [2022]: 10).

Moreover, the sneaker is included in modernization which is often driven by purely economic interests, which is predicted only to become a homogenization process because, in the end, it will eliminate cultural diversity, which in the end only makes the sneaker community or young people a soulless economic entity. In this paper, reproduction is considered a cultural phenomenon. In the current era of cultural globalization, the process of cultural reproduction in the form of art to literature is centred on the community or the collective (Kavanagh et al. [2021]: 9; Sraml

self-concept that comes from his knowledge of certain social groups, along with the internalization of participation, concern, emotions, values and pride of a member being part of the group and certain society (see Bagoly-Simó [2015]; Denny [2021]; Huang et al. [2018]; Wood [2017]).

Gonzalez & Gulbrandsen [2022]: 4). So, to explain the cultural phenomena contained in sneakers, use the perspective of cultural reproduction to understand the existing symptoms. This is what is now being done by young people in responding to sneakers, namely reinterpreting lifestyle or fashion to their identity.

Identity is an ambiguous idea, where there is a difference between identity and character that is difficult to distinguish, which in the context of this research is the sneaker trend as a lifestyle and a symptom of a fetish. Identity is also a code that defines youth membership in various communities, and consists of many symbols interpreted simultaneously in a community group (Bourdieu [1999]: 388). Identity is a concept about who we are and what we perceive as a person. At the same time, identity is a form of self-understanding and self-labelling (Bonnett [2017]: 38). The definition of identity has a broad meaning. Identity is dynamic and diverse; from this character, identity is not static but changes according to the function and life experience of an individual as a human being. Therefore there is a specific definition of cultural identity.

Humans cannot live only in one identity because they need other identities, especially cultural ones that cannot be considered more important than other identities⁷. Therefore, when we want to understand or even determine a person's cultural identity, we can not only judge it from the physiological or biological characteristics of the person. Nevertheless, we also need to examine the factors that influence it in terms of thought and detail the psychological aspects. Society is divided into different groups, and each considers itself representative of a particular culture, which in the context of this research is sneakers as a youth lifestyle (Bainbridge et al. [2018]: 41). Sneakers as a youth lifestyle within the scope of cultural identity will determine whether individuals belong to

⁷ As mentioned that cultural identity is a person's sense of belonging or subordination to a particular culture (see Airriess et al. [2012]; Hobsbawm & Ranger [2012]; Svasek [2012]).

internal groups or external groups, depending on how the application of their cultural identity is manifested regularly or not.

The identity of sneaker culture as a youth lifestyle formed in social life will affect the self-perception of every young person as a member of society. Their cultural identity strongly influences how they see themselves and their behaviour. Sneaker as a youth lifestyle within the scope of identity includes the following three cultural contexts: individual, community, and public. Thus, the sneaker's identity as a youth lifestyle is the main link between youth and society. Communication is the link that makes this relationship happen, which is formed through different stages. Sneaker as a youth lifestyle develops through a process that includes several stages, namely (1) conscious and unintentional cultural identity, which occurs due to the process of interaction in everyday life; (2) The search for cultural identity, namely the process of exploring, questioning, and proving identity. The community can do this with cultural identity or other parties. When we want to find identity from other cultures, this process is what we often do; (3) The acquired cultural identity is a form of identity, which is characterized by a clear belief in one's self-acceptance through cultural internalization, thus forming that person's identity; (4) Conformity: internalization, namely the process of identity formation from internalization helps to make our norms equal (in accordance) with the dominant norms, or can change the norms that we have assimilated into mainstream culture. At this stage, people often see themselves through the lens of mainstream culture rather than the culture of origin; (5) Resistance and separatism, this process of identity formation usually takes place in the lives of minority groups of a nation, race or even religion. The behaviour of this society is to completely reject the dominant cultural norms; (6) Integration, namely the formation of culture, is carried out through a process of cultural integration. The process of a person or group of people developing a new identity as a result of the integration of various cultures in the sneaker community spread across Indonesia.

YOUTH LIFESTYLE SIMULATION REPRESENTATION THROUGH VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

A community is a collection of social groups consisting of individuals who come from different backgrounds, have a place to live, are interested in sharing the same things, and care about one another. Their relationship is usually strong because they share the same values and interests. Currently, the human community includes two types of life, namely real life and virtual community life, which arise due to the impact of social media, which forms changes in the interaction pattern between people. This is because community boundaries can not only be understood as real entities or those that exist in a certain area but can also be formed in non-real or virtual areas (Chen [2011]: 6; Yang & Chen [2014]: 5). In the context of this research, the virtual community appears as an arena for the contestation and communication of sneaker fetishes.

Virtual or cyber communities in the context of the sneaker as a youth lifestyle can be grouped from community members with the same profession or interest. There are five community types (Shen et al. [2010]: 12): (1) General community is a community that is intended in general. It aims to allow its members to communicate with anyone on any topic in various ways; (2) Practice community, namely, the community facilitates its members to conduct online group discussions and share knowledge among its members; (3) Interest community is a community that specifically discusses a common interest or interest among its members; (4) Affinity community is a community based on the similarity of the identity of its members or a certain community group; (5) Sponsored community is the type of community built by an institution with a certain orientation. On the other hand, there are some fundamental differences between the concept of a traditional community and this virtual sneaker community. A virtual sneaker community refers to using the Internet as the primary means of communication and not holding physical in-person meetings. One form of

communication expression in this virtual sneaker community is to use virtual communication features to replace gestural communication.

As well as the largest sneaker community in Indonesia, the Urban Sneaker Society (USS), is one of the largest sneaker events in Southeast Asia. This event presents over 150 sneaker and streetwear labels from Indonesia and abroad. In addition, USS is also often enlivened by the launch of several new products. The sneaker event, which has been going on since 2017, is also complemented by other activities, such as talk shows, Basketball Court by DBL, Skate Park by Converse, and hip-hop music. In 2020, USS became the first event to carry the concept of online virtual multiplayer in Southeast Asia. In this virtual concept, visitors who attend can create their custom avatars and interact with other visitors through the chat box column. Communities like this are often used to further strengthen the relationship, especially for those who cannot interact directly with the real world due to regional limitations⁸. The existence of common interests, thoughts or ideas in their minds brings them to join this cyber community, where they do not need to know each other with members of a virtual community personally. In addition, the community in the virtual world also provides various ways for its members to communicate, collaborate and trade.

As a representation of the sneaker fetish in a youth lifestyle, the virtual sneaker community is a cultural arena in which young people are in turmoil to find their personal and cultural identity because most members are between 18-30 years old. Two phases often cause turmoil within themselves, especially about who and what their goals are (Koh et al. [2003]: 50). Namely before the age of 20 years and when they are about to enter 25

years, often called the quarter-life crisis, which finally questions the context of the “sneaker” in their lives. Young people who are going through these times together with their joining the virtual sneaker community make them a place to share, get friends for discussion related to things that make them confused, especially about cultural identity and also find a group of friends whom they face the same problem so that in this disquieting condition they find comfort because of the individuals who accompany them in the process (Lin [2009]: 200).

In general, identity can be defined as a set of meanings given to individuals, groups, and society. So the identity of young people as sneaker fetishes does not always exist outside of cultural representation or adaptation because identity is a construction of society and culture itself. Identity is closely related to the interaction between individuals and the larger social structure (society), in which young people play a role in the virtual sneaker community to find meaning for themselves. Therefore, sneakers, as a symbol of identity, can be a guide and control for the behaviour of every member of the virtual sneaker community. Sneakers can have multiple identities according to their different roles in social interactions. Therefore, as a cultural agent, the sneaker can be in several positions out of many possible appropriate roles that an entity can play.

CONCLUSION

Fashion is one way for modern society to display social identity. Sneakers nowadays do not only serve as a complement to appearance. More than that, they can display the personal identity of the wearer. The lifestyle of young people when they join the sneakers community has changed to become more consumptive than before. Because they already had enough insight about sneakers, from the type of shoes, where to buy and what shoes were trending at the time, until the sneaker fetish sign appeared. However, young people do not realize that what he has done is a hyperreal-

⁸ Fetish sneaker youth lifestyle is represented in a virtual community as a social aggregate in the form of the Internet, where each individual who joins it brings a topic of discussion that can be discussed in the long term and involves the feelings or thoughts of its members with the relationships formed in the virtual realm (Koh et al. [2003]; Nancy [2004]; Shen et al. [2010]; Sridhar Balasubramanian [2001]).

ity that tries to identify itself with the best possible image and continues to shape it through massive consumption activities. Everything that young people do is seen as an activity to achieve the identity they want.

Regarding identity, young people also expect increased social status in their unique environment. Especially for urban communities, sneakers embodied in community life have an important role. Because the sneaker fetish in the community interacts with the value of urban modernity that represents and reconstructs the economy, the economy will reconstruct and represent the sneaker trend culture for young people. The collective identity of the sneaker community will become the identity pattern of each community, where relations between communities grow into a stereotype that forms the common values and attitudes within the wider sneaker fetish.

Young people tend to build dynamic relationships of personal relationships in a social bond based on a shared identity. He seems to simplify self-identity by eliminating individual factors in the identification process. Furthermore, it makes it easier for people to predict their identity as part of a sneaker community full of commodity behaviour. This pattern develops in each individual in their community environment and forms a common collective identity. This is where the sneaker concept shifts from a “community” to a “commodity”. Fetish sneakers and the youth lifestyle represented through the sneaker community become an alternative space young people use to work and gather from a commodity perspective. The reason refers to its members’ dependence on branded sneakers and their very high economic value. Especially when entering the new millennium, the sneaker community can provide experiences to its audience on multi-platform.

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Understanding drawing in all its forms: a journey through the recent aesthetic commitment to the public, social and political

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Abstract. Drawing could be considered the oldest known art form. However, art and its understanding has come to evolve so much that it has derived a multitude of forms that are almost unclassifiable today. The aesthetic discourses of the public, social and political have also been prejudiced and their true essence has been altered. In the present research work, we explore a series of artists who work with art as a language and tool for change and improvement of public life in general. We analyse the messages they address, the aesthetics and material form they use, the methodologies they practice or the social changes they cause. In this regard, through a selection of contemporary projects, we can identify more effective representative artistic characteristics that are consistent with our current world. In conclusion, we emphasize that the practice of public art is more significant and necessary than it seems.

Keywords: aesthetics, mapping, social commitment, politics, public art.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Iranian-born American artist, Siah Armajani (Chillida [2000]: 73), public art is not about oneself, but about others; it is not about personal tastes, but about the needs of others. He defends the idea around the civic sense that all current contemporary aesthetics should harbour; «it is not about the existing gap between culture and the public, but it seeks to make art public and the artist to be a citizen again» (Chillida [2000]: 73). The history of recent art is full of artists who have been able to capture in their works a strong and powerful social and political activism towards the society of their time. Similarly, Bourriaud ([2009]: 22) argues that «contemporary creators already lay the foundations for a radical art». Acting radically means taking root in our contexts with heterogeneous formats, transplanting our behaviours to exchange instead of imposing, denying the official powers and existing structures in

virtue of defining our own identity (Bourriaud [2009]: 22). As Karl Marx (Marx, Engels [1932]: 667) points out around Feuerbach, the human essence is the set of its public relations.

In the present research work we try to offer a catalogue of possible solutions through the mapping of a series of contemporary art practices that try to act as actors directly committed to the issues of our daily environment. It is an aesthetic and committed exploration of the public in order to achieve, to a greater or lesser extent, a certain kind of social change. Nevertheless, we do not intend to cover the entire wide range of possibilities of what has already been done on this type of art, but rather to observe the panorama in a generic meaning. The goal is to identify certain distinctive features that help us build new strategies or models that increase their effectiveness, humbly inviting the acceptance or recognition of different perspectives or paradigms in the world of contemporary art.

1. THE STIPULATED

From an elaborate sample of current artistic discourses fully involved in the public sphere through their concern for various social problems, we develop our research, following the trail of our study carried out in recent years. As we have already stated, and due to the vast field of productions made around this sort of art, we reiterate that our main objective is not based on its millimetric exploration, but on a generic although deep-enough observation of the panorama to identify a series of constituent characteristics that help us glimpse new strategies or aesthetic paradigms today. In this concern, we focus on a compilation of artists and works of reference and recognized international prestige that are particularly influential, the same criteria used by Mark Tribe and Reena Jana (Tribe, Jana [2009]: 7) in their book *New Media Art*. Nonetheless, in addition, we also base our selection on representative projects of recent years based on their exceptional sophistication and political and social commitment.



Figure 1. Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower seeds* (2010), installation at the Tate Modern in London (United Kingdom). Source: Loz Flowers, available on <URL: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/blahflowers/5075468439/>>

We begin by alluding to one of the most controversial artists, considered internationally as a protester or even anti-system, especially in his native China, Ai Weiwei. His works and thoughts arouse such catalysis that he has even been imprisoned. In *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), the artist enfold the entire floor area of the Tate Modern Museum's Turbine Hall in London, covering a thousand square meters, with one hundred million pipes (sunflower seeds) replicated by hand in porcelain and painted one by one later by hand (Rábago [2010]) (figure 1).

The manufacturing process of these pieces lasted two years and was carried out by around 1,600 Chinese workers from the Jingdezhen region, popular during centuries for its production of imperial ceramics (Vozmediano [2010]). In the installation, the visual and experimental impact of the viewer is overwhelming, especially when the thickness of all the mass of seeds reaches about ten centimetres and weighs near 150 tons (Vozmediano [2010]). The work plays with the effect that the sunflower itself has with the sun, always looking for it, as if each of those seeds represented the Chinese people who impassively contemplate and obey the firm and superior mandate of their ruler.

Somehow, Ai tries to send a message of attention to his people and the political system that



Figure 2. Renzo Martens, opening of *The Repatriation of the White Cube* (2017), in Lusanga (Democratic Republic of Congo). Source: Bozar, available on <URL: https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/white-cube-renzo-martens#event-page__infos>

represents them, inviting them to reflect on whether the roles they adopt are the most appropriate. On the other hand, by presenting the present work in London, he globalizes his content by expanding it to the international community. He does not only address China, but also the world. We must point out that the artist works at all times in coordination with the people participating in his projects, debating ideas and open to change through collective construction; whether they are workers, collaborators, friends or strangers. In addition, he is a faithful and unconditional asset of digital social networks, which he uses to share and offer his thoughts, opinions, and, even on occasion, to preserve his own physical integrity.

The Repatriation of the White Cube (2017) is a project led by Dutch artist Renzo Martens that takes place in the city of Lusanga, Democratic Republic of Congo (figure 2). The main objective of the initiative is to provide art and culture to the entire neighbourhood with the desire to improve the place in a constructive way, contributing to the economic sustainability of its citizens. It is the public construction of an art centre built in the likeness of the most common galleries or white cubes used for the same purpose.

The centre acts as a central axis for reflection and debate around a culture of self-management that focuses the main economic activity of these

neighbours on the plantations they carry out in the countryside. He questions the mechanisms of power and the resources obtained from the agriculture to convert them into a fair system when entering sales negotiations with its intermediaries, consequently avoiding the exploitation of these workers (Regli [2019]: 51). We must keep in mind that this is one of the poorest parts of the planet, a place where farmers earn about one U.S. dollar a day, which is why the artist is involved by introducing an art centre to revalue its jungle (Jeffries [2014]). Correspondingly, the people in turn become artists, executing pieces that they later market, such as chocolate sculptures (Pangburn [2017]). All the construct is included within the capital activities of the *Institute for Human Activities*, which was started by Martens himself and is dedicated to investigating and correcting economic inequality through critical approaches to art (Regli [2019]: 55). In short, through the present work, Martens involves all local people, while they also make on their own a horizontal and democratic production based on collaborative and cooperative interdisciplinarity of equals, whose expansion is palpable through the construction of a new ecological and economic model based on art and networked both physically and digitally.

The Spaniard Santiago Sierra is another controversial artist, especially because of the way in which he can use people in his creations, paying them minimum salaries while they work the maximum allowed, and he does so precisely to criticize labour exploitation, among other issues. In addition to said labour exploitation versus fair remuneration, the limits of collaborative participation between people and political criticism are the themes that underpin the public work of the artist. Projects such as *Muro de una galería arrancado, inclinado a 60 grados del suelo y sostenido por 5 personas* (2000) or *100 personas escondidas* (2003) emphasize the existing borders between excess and moderation of «the perverse mechanisms of wealth production that govern the lives of the average Westerner» (Albarrán Diego [2011]: 284). Similarly, the artist argues: «talking about prices, I think prices is a way of buying people, it's a way of

telling people “ok, now we are in good relations, so, peace between you and me”. And also it has something perverse [...], it’s like to say “shut up”» (Sierra [2012]: 14’30” - 15’17”).

In most cases, Sierra hires people to carry out absurd and sometimes cruel tasks (Debroise, Medina [2006]: 436), for example having their hair cut, having a line tattooed on their back, or being cloistered in an empty room with just a small hole to receive food. Therefore, much of the production that Sierra develops experimenting with people, always in an exposed way, is based on the clear paradox of public, political, and social vindication against job insecurity and the abuses of power of our current and contradictory socially approved capitalist system. In other words, he needs the almost obligatory collaboration of other people in terms of materializing his ideas, taking the opportunity to denounce what he himself practices, ironically, as we have already pointed out.

The same feature is what happens in the performance entitled *El trabajo es la Dictadura* (2013), carried out in Madrid by hiring thirty unemployed people to do a simple task, writing by hand again and again the phrase «work is the dictatorship» over a thousand blank books to fill them. For the preparation of the piece, Sierra disclosed a job offer through digital social networks specialized in job search. In return, the people hired received the minimum interprofessional salary (Juristo [2013]), stipulated by the National Employment Service in Spain. Here is also a clear example of the use of new technologies through online dissemination, which became viral very quickly due to its provocative initiative, but which in turn makes a dent in the feelings of citizens, providing value to the work and weaving immediate connections between those who devise it, those who work on it and those who participate by visiting it and disclosing it on their Internet accounts. For Sierra, the digital condition is fundamental in his praxis, since what usually remains in the generality of his work is the video-recording of his actions, which he later uses to publish it on the Internet, managing to internationally extrapolate his message towards other homologous contexts, although from different countries.

The anonymous artist known by the nickname of Banksy has also garnered international fame through his controversial and provocative works, mostly working through graffiti murals scattered around the world. Among his themes, there are speeches that range from the abuse of power represented by the authorities on duty to the questioning of the justification of the different conflicts that take place at a global level. Accordingly, he uses a language that is very accessible to the public in general, which is why both his visibility and his popularity, are also increased, gaining followers everywhere.

2. THE CROSS-BORDER

Continuing with the controversy, Malaga-born Rogelio López Cuenca is also considered an agitator of consciences, but he does not always work alone. *Golden Visa* (2018) is a project carried out in collaboration with Elo Vega for the metro service of Barcelona. It consists of placing posters in different advertising spaces with the intention that any kind of public could observe them. The design of the posters tries to launch a reflection to the world on migration and racism, spreading the message to the multitude of international people who visit the subway of a city as cosmopolitan as Barcelona every day. The artist usually works in public spaces, understanding art as an action of constant dialogue between all possible people, getting them involved in one way or another in his constructions and, therefore, social transformations.

Artist Nuria Carrasco, in her artistic project *¡AHLAN!* (2013), stands in solidarity with the problems of the Saharawi people to denounce the violation of human rights that they suffer (figure 3). The name of the project is the literal Saharawi translation of the word “hello” and the work itself is a fake publication of a well-known gossip magazine by which it is inspired (Wert [2013]). The layout follows the reflection of said magazine, underlining the consumerism that this type of general interest magazines propagates and encourages



Figure 3. Nuria Carrasco, front page of the magazine for the project ¡AHLAN! (2013), private collection. Source: ACHTUNG!, available on <URL: <https://www.achtungmag.com/fake-magazines-ahlan-kalas-y-vowei-de-nuria-carrasco-en-13-espacioarte/>>

(Sichel [2020]), except replacing its contents with news of the Saharawi reality in the Tindouf refugee camps, in Algeria.

The most significant thing is that the project could not be carried out without the help and collaboration of all the people involved in the news it reports, managing to generate, in turn, an unusual expectation among the public. Likewise, Carrasco relies on the *Lánzanos* website to collect funds collectively through a digital crowdfunding campaign. The result arouses such success that not only does it get all the capital in a very short time, but it also serves as an advertising platform, being promoted in Spanish media of national scope such as newspapers, radios and televisions, a quite significant fact considering the little coverage of these events. The work, therefore, causes

the message of social awareness to reach larger and divergent audiences. In addition, in order to develop it, Carrasco spends a month in the home of a Saharawi family thanks to an artistic initiative organized every year by the *Association of Friendship with the Saharawi People of Seville – AAPSS* (Cutillas, Fernández [2013]), which offers real experiences to artists so that they can empathize with the problem of a universal nature, which we will develop later.

Another artist, and architect, is Santiago Cirugeda, working among other artists within his collective called *Recetas Urbanas*. From a socializing and participatory intention, their creations focus on the promotion and creation of alternative public spaces that are sustainable with the environment through an urban ecosystem with recycled materials. In the same way, for *Recetas Urbanas*, educational exchange and cooperation between citizens become essential, opening to the realization of joint works as equals, almost in co-authorship. In addition, for their purpose they also use a web portal, in order to share their projects, turning them into a kind of free urban recipe book, which gives name to both their collective and website (2020). «What I do is set up a network, which did not exist, of communication to empower us, to make us a little stronger», Cirugeda explains (Cirugeda [2009]: 4-5). In this regard, works such as *El Niu* (2008), *AAAbierta* (2006) and *La Escuela Crece* (2015), encourage exchange through non-formal education, investigation, development of an autonomous attitude and promotion of critical thinking in community.

La Escuela Crece consists of the construction of a series of modules to expand the spaces of the Higher School of Design in Madrid. Through the present work, the debate on the lack of basic resources of public institutions is contributed, since, for years, both families and teachers denounce the drop in public spending on budget items as essential as those related to education (Marino [2012]). According to Cirugeda (Cirugeda [2008]: 01'20" - 01'34"), everything is caused by the current «hypercapitalist» system in which we find ourselves. *Recetas Urbanas* makes its

knowledge and resources available to the public to transform a widespread concern into a viable and self-managed solution by a group of people who decide to organize and coordinate in an interdisciplinary manner. Each one contributes what they can for the good of the whole community. It is a different process of creating and building, where people are involved from the beginning both in the design of the idea and decision-making as well as in the final urban construction.

With this sort of intervention, *Recetas Urbanas* manages to find chimerical spaces that transgress what is stipulated and seek to awaken the citizenry through illegal, subversive strategies. In other words, they combine art and activism to become an *artivism* which, according to Groys (Groys [2014]: 1), is the ability to perform a double function through public art: as a means of political protest and as social activism. Thus, these alternative spaces of free, open, and non-formal education can become equally valid since they are increasingly having greater social demand (Abad Tejerina [2002]: 421). *Recetas Urbanas* reinforces its discourse even more, assuming, as Alonso-Sanz (Alonso-Sanz [2013]: 117) defends, that the exchange of visions and solutions in teamwork is always more enriching than the absolute and independent. On balance, all «creation is, in fact, a collective process. Other ideas that we take and to which we print our personal note making them different, stories already told that, mixed with others and with our imagination, we adapt and update» (Bravo Bueno [2005]: 21).

In contrast, in 2012, the Swiss artist Marianne Meyer held an open workshop where she invited the entire community interested in making hundreds of fabrics of different colours to cover one of the facades of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Austral University of Chile, in the city of Valdivia (Valverde Grau [2012]). The mural experience highlights the sustainability of the artisan fabric. A project worked collaboratively in community.

As Ai Weiwei, the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera has also been arrested on several occasions for proposing revolutionary artistic actions (Reyes

[2015]). In her work *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* (2002), Bruguera posits art as a kind of place to create collectively and develop human social potential and not simply to obtain or transmit simple information (Finkelppearl [2013]: 180). It opens the way to the interdisciplinary horizontality between the artist and the viewer, where anyone from any area or field has a place without discrimination. She herself expresses: «I'm trying to rethink what art is for. What is its function and what is the role of artists in society?» (Bruguera [2018]: 61).

Residente is the name of René Pérez Joglar, an activist musician born in Puerto Rico and internationally well-known. He uses his lyrics and videos to entertain and cause a thought-provoking effect on people. However, what originally characterizes him in our study is the way he makes his web page, as a public meeting place where each user can enter and register both his name and his location, creating a map of people connected to each other that, in some way, come together to claim a world without borders.

Another project that goes in the same direction is the one entitled *Doors* (2015), directed by the Canadian David Bondt and executed in the city of Lubbock, United States of America (pictures 4 and 5). It consists of the intervention of ten doors through ten communities of different people. Each of them intervenes a different door on both sides, symbolizing the inclusion or exclusion around the community itself. In addition, each community uses icons or shapes that represent their own common desires, problematics, successes, and challenges. Bondt manages to involve people from all walks of life, getting them to coexist later in a final exhibition where they all come together without distinction and on equal terms.

Another controversial artist is the Catalan Nuria Güell, who generates works of social reflection to try improving our environment, in most cases always working collectively and getting involved in other problematizations. In the same line of social concern is Al Omari, working on the issue of immigration pictorially portray-



Figures 4 (right) and 5 (left). David Bondt, one of the pieces for the project *Doors* (2015), private collection. Polychrome doors. Left: obverse of the door. Right: reverse of the door. Source: the artist, available on <URL: <https://davidbondt.com/david-bondt-gallery-doors.php>>

ing different world leaders as if they were Syrian refugees (Ruiz-Grossman [2017]). Some of these portrayed characters are the politicians Angela Merkel and Donald Trump. Through his pieces, the author launches a message of awareness that reaches global levels thanks to digital social networks, denouncing the extreme reality of immigrants who are forced to leave their homes due to geopolitical conflicts, in the present case the people Sirius.

Cornelia Sollfrank is an artist who works with New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT). In fact, she develops what is known as “hacktivism”, a union between *hacking* and *activism*, «a type of non-conventional political participation that seeks, through counter-information and subversive practices, to influence the social order, in order to promote a more democratic and open society» (Burgos Pino [2014]: 3). In her feminist project *Female Extension* (1997), in collaboration with various hackers, Sollfrank develops computer software that automatically

generates *net.art* works under the pseudonym of various female names with the intention of participating in a contest, thus achieving, that most of the participants are women. The decision of the jury recognized three winners, none of whom were women (Moss [2009]).

3. THE PERIPHERAL

Like all the creators already described, there are artistic groups that walk in the same direction and that usually work regularly in collaboration with non-profit activist organizations. *Huit Facettes*, from Senegal, is one of them. Likewise, we highlight *Superflex*, a Danish group founded in 1993 and made up of Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, whose practice «consists of working from the institution to destabilize it», questioning the system in which their «works of art are articulated through dynamics that problematize the idea of original, authorship and market relations» (Santiago [2013]). The Russian punk rock group *Pussy Riot* is another transgressive artistic collective that questions the status quo of governments with political proposals for subversive feminist action. In fact, some of its components were arrested in 2012 and sentenced to eighteen months in prison for vandalism after they broke into a Christian cathedral in Moscow to ask the Virgin Mary to become a feminist through a rather striking performance, the video of which gave the around the world thanks to Internet social networks (Hidalgo [2018]). As *Recetas Urbanas*, the artistic collective, *Assemble* works through the realization of architectural constructions. According to Guimón (2015), they carry out an architecture «not suitable for the élites», giving as an example a project carried out in collaboration with the residents of a degraded neighbourhood in Liverpool (United Kingdom) and whose execution earned them a *Turner Prize* in addition to opening the discussion about art.

Furthermore, the project *Luz nas vielas* (2012) catapulted the Spanish multidisciplinary artistic group *Boa Mistura*, born at the end of 2001,



Figure 6. Boa Mistura, fragment of one of the murals for the project *Luz nas vielas* (2012), in São Paulo (Brazil). Source: the artist, available on <URL: <https://www.boamistura.com/proyecto/luz-nas-vielas/>>

to fame. Its realization consists of painting on the walls of the houses that make up the different and narrow streets of one of the favelas of the city of São Paulo (Brazil) a series of positive words to send messages of joy, such as beauty, love, sweetness, firmness (figure 6), pride (Gordon [2012]). People of all kinds of ages who live in these favelas participate in the murals, achieving a harmonious collective public work that invites you to visit it live.

Apart from artists and groups, there are also digital platforms, discussion forums, institutional projects or aid programs that work for socially and politically committed public art. Among other digital platforms, we emphasize *Art of the MOOC* (2020), a web space where we can find artists, student works, and global actions, including other categories, all focused on emerging experimental education and social practice. As well, *Animating Democracy* (2020) and *Americans for the Arts* (2020) are two other platforms that offer and publish all kinds of civic engagement initiatives through art and culture, especially focusing on the United States.

Between the discussion forums, we point out the *Foro Arte Relacional* (VV.AA. [2020b]), where all kinds of artists and people interested in culture discuss and exchange positions on the role of art in society, articulating a space for dialogue both physical in Andalusia (Spain) as virtual. The same

purpose is pursued by the open and public online work network called *e-flux conversations* (VV.AA. [2020a]). Here was, for example, where the artistic group *Artists Against Evictions* published their manifesto (Artistsagainst [2017]).

As the institute founded by artist Martens, to which we have previously referred, we find other sort of institutional projects concerned on the same topics. Among others, Kester (Kester [2011]: 14) focuses on *Park Fiction* from Germany, *Ala Plástica* from Argentina, and *Dialogue* from India. In addition, we highlight the *Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts*, established by the Minneapolis Institute of Art with the idea of awakening and promoting empathy through the visual arts and thus building a fair and harmonious society (Cascone [2017]). We should also mention the project *Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts* of Myanmar. More and more educational institutions of different kinds are committed to organizing workshops and courses based on these projects.

Finally, aid programs, scholarships or artistic residences that support a type of art that is responsible for the environment and social response are increasingly abundant, such as the residence of artists that took place between 2009 and 2012 in the current Site of Memory and Museum *La Perla* of Córdoba (Argentina). This place is a former clandestine detention, torture, and extermination centre during the Argentine military dictatorship and has now been transformed into a museum. The residency was organized by the artists Graciela de Oliveira and Soledad Sánchez Goldar through the *Demolición/Construcción* project. Nevertheless, the *Art for Change la Caixa Aid Program* stands out, whose purpose is to support artistic projects aimed at the participation of vulnerable groups in neighbourhoods or people with needs in the same environment, thus favouring processes of social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance acquired by the artistic productions that are framed in the new current con-

text of the public becomes a fundamental engine of vindication capable of changing society in favour of an improvement based on moral values of justice and universal sustainability. The fight against the serious problems of the world unquestionably requires the attention of solidarity devices that aim to strengthen the relationship with «the most disadvantaged on the planet» (Sobrados León [2015]: 825-826). Therefore, public art practices can vigorously contribute to social improvement through awareness and training of citizens willing to change everything that does not work around them, always with the motivation of managing to coexist with values of the commons as important as solidarity, peace, respect, tolerance, equality and sustainability.

We can state that contemporary art practices in recent years have once again acquired a growing trend in terms of protest and denunciation production rates, positioning themselves as a strong instrument of awareness and transformation in the digital culture in which we meet. The new form of attitude and critical thinking is what lies behind a compendium of works that call for a determined, sensible, reasoned and autonomous rebellion, necessary to mediate before the financial and governmental powers that prevail today in our systems of life, to sometimes immoral and unfair extents. However, the trend is still a minority and has only just begun, showing that there is still much more to be done in terms of effectiveness or success in the results obtained. We cannot forget that most of art today is not related to causing changes in the minds of people, but it is only produced in order to generate divergent or random reactions among the public. In other words, works that are «pure merchandise», objects that are born from the hands of artists and become products for a buying and selling business «that is not in the least interested in the reflection and questioning» that it must have any work of art (Barbancho [2016]).

We claim, therefore, a public aesthetic that is then postulated as another kind of discipline with which to acquire knowledge. Let's say, then, that this kind of art could also serve as a guide

for society in an effective way, launching committed messages of solidarity and alarm against crimes and social injustices. In conclusion, public art practices that act as responsible agents with the contemporary, with new solutions for social change in direct relation to our environment and international socio-political context in a real way.

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Aesthetic appeal and utility of Vedic mathematics: An introduction

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Abstract. Mathematics and aesthetics are closely intertwined. Not only mathematical concepts, relationships and theorems can be aesthetically pleasing, but we also often find harmony between their results and the patterns of the world around us, and we like that. Yet, apart from rare exceptions, the beauty of mathematics, particularly in education, is mostly unrecognized: this science rarely meets the favour of students. Vedic mathematics is an approach which encapsulates the enjoyment and power of this knowledge, not only in the sphere of thought process, but also in its practical utility. It highlights and develops the aesthetic dimension of learning in a very immediate sense. The aim of this article is to introduce the method – what it is and how it works – to give comparative examples of techniques and their efficacy, and to emphasize the aesthetic value it conveys.

Keywords: vedic mathematics, Bharati Krishna Tirtha, aesthetic education, unity, relation.

Mathematics and aesthetics are closely intertwined (Sinclair, Pimm, Higginson [2010]; Breitenbach, Rizza [2018]; Ivanova, French [2020]). Not only mathematical concepts, relationships and theorems can, within themselves, be aesthetically pleasing, but often we also find mathematical results and connections arising through mental reasoning in harmony with the order and patterns found in the world around us, and we like that. Yet, apart from rare exceptions, the beauty of doing mathematics is mostly unrecognised: this science rarely meets the favour of students. Reason is often inherent in the teaching of the discipline which presents it as a pure mechanism, a perfect and complete construction, to which one must submit and in which it is difficult to see the possibility of choice and play, discovery and art: «By concentrating on *what*, and leaving out *why*, mathematics is reduced to an empty shell» and there is no chance for having and developing an individual «mathematical taste» [Lockhart [2009]].

Vedic mathematics is an approach which encapsulates the enjoyment and power of mathematics, not only in the sphere of thought

process, but also in its practical utility. It highlights and develops the aesthetic dimension of learning in a very immediate sense enabling even non-professionals to perceive themselves as protagonists in a continuous and creative process of problem-solving. Its characteristics are applicable to primary and high school students, to undergraduate students of STEM subjects and to professions requiring a high degree of mathematical content such as in computer coding, finance, insurance, engineering, scientific research, and the like. The aim of this article is to introduce Vedic mathematics – what it is and how it works – to give comparative examples of techniques and their efficacy, and to emphasise the aesthetic experience it provides, in particular from a pedagogical point of view.

1. ON THE ORIGIN

Sri Bharati Krishna Tirtha (1884-1960) was born in Tinnevely, near Chennai, in Southwest India. Throughout his school and university career he stood out for his memory and brilliant talent in various disciplines: Sanskrit, Philosophy, Mathematics, English, History and Science. In 1911 he retired from teaching to devote himself to spiritual research and advanced study of Vedanta philosophy following the Shankaracarya¹ of Sringeri, in Mysore. This included in-depth studies of ancient Indian mathematics from various published and unpublished resources. In 1925 he himself obtained the position of Shankaracarya, continuing to deepen and teach *Advaita*, a Sanskrit word which simply means «not two» and indicates the essence of ancient Vedic teachings: the philosophy of unity. Before he died, he left an introductory illustrative manuscript to Vedic mathematics which was published posthumously five years later (Bharati Krishna Tirtha [1965]).

At that time, in London, the School of Eco-

nomics – now called School of Philosophy and Economic Science – became deeply involved in learning and understanding *Advaita* and its practical application, and this included Bharati Krishna Tirtha's volume. With reference to mathematics, the Vedic approach draws on both the conscious experience of mathematical activity as well as the objects of mathematical concepts. The effect of this is to reveal the humanising element so that, for example, the experience of calculation is just as important as the result of calculation. This gives a unifying quality to both the objects and the conscious activity, but at the same time it constitutes an overturning of the common Western habits and way of thinking.

Groups of adult teachers and researchers spent many sessions learning the Vedic approach with the aim of understanding and utilising the system. A season of interest and research commenced with Jeremy Pickles, Andrew Nicholas and Kenneth Williams (who runs the online Vedic Maths Academy) and a little later, James Glover (now Chairman of the Institute for the Advancement of Vedic Mathematics). Through exacting study of the Shankaracarya's book, together with studying *Advaita* philosophy and, most importantly, practising and reflecting on the techniques, those involved began to understand the scope and potency of the approach.

They pointed out that not only does it provide highly efficient and flexible methods, both numerical and algebraic, but also sets out a substratum for mathematical thinking: this underlying way of thinking was expressed by Bharati Krishna Tirtha through a relatively small number of aphorisms or word formulae called *sutras*. They then started promoting its diffusion through manuals (Kenneth [2003], [2005]; Glover [2004-2005]) and joint research projects (Nicholas, Williams, Pickles [2003]; Glover [2016]; IAVM [2017], [2018], [2019]). But above all they concluded that the sutraic approach provides a new paradigm for mathematics; not by asserting new definitions or principles of mathematical objects and their relationships but one that threads together the thought processes involved in mathematical activ-

¹ This is the highest religious rank in Hindu culture, and it belongs to a lineage of philosophers, who, starting with the forefather – Shankara (8th c. CE) – have distinguished themselves in reading and teaching sacred texts, thus earning special status and many followers.

ity: one which humanises the subject recognising its aesthetic nature and which gives a unifying and inspiring orientation².

The next sections will proceed to give an initial proof of this, highlighting the centrality of the principle of unity within the methods and at the same time its valorization of multiplicity as reflection and fiction of 1: evidenced through a dynamic relationship between one and many, of which the human being is the main actor. To do so, simple arithmetic examples will be used both to show the effectiveness and distinctiveness of the approach from the very early interactions with numbers and because for most students it is precisely the first access to mathematics that is likely to determine a positive or negative attitude for the continuation of its in-depth study.

The choice of this specific focus responds to the possibility of extending aesthetic research connected to science. As Margherita Arcangeli and Jérôme Dokic pointed out, not only the objects and the products of scientific enquiry may instantiate aesthetic values, but also «the scientific practice (such as constructing and evaluating theories, and designing experiments) may be guided by aesthetic experiences and judgements» (Arcangeli, Dokic [2020]: 104). However, as can be seen from the content of the parenthesis, current research does not devote specific thought or give as much value to the learning process or non-professional activity. The objective of the paper is also to bring attention to them as well and to show how the Vedic approach promotes an aesthetic engagement of the subject.

2. UNITY (AND FLEXIBILITY) OF PROCESS

Vedic mathematics proposes that the human psyche operates through particular patterns of

² I would like to thank James Glover and Swati Dave from IAVM (<https://instavm.org/>) for having provided me with first-hand information on the history of Vedic mathematics, for having extensively discussed with me many of the topics here touched upon, and for having granted me permission to use two images whose rights are property of the Institute (see the next section).

thought processes and that these are not random but due to a natural mental structure. Just as the human body has natural features common to all humans, such as five fingers on each hand, so too does the mind have characteristic ways of thinking common to everyone. Furthermore, these patterns of thought processes are limited in number. The inspiration of Bharati Krishna Tirtha was to identify these processes and express the essence of each in succinct word-formulae (aphorisms) called *sutras*. In Indian philosophy a *sutra* encapsulates a general or specific principle or a rule or method in as few words as possible. The Sanskrit word itself means «thread» (from we which we have the word *suture*), but specifically a «thread of knowledge».

There are sixteen main *sutras* or aphorisms and a similar number of sub-*sutras* in Vedic mathematics. Bharati Krishna Tirtha expressed them in Sanskrit – in order to encapsulate their full meaning – and also gave useful translations in English: «The *Sutras* are easy to understand, easy to apply and easy to remember; and the whole work can be truthfully summarised in one word “mental”» (Bharati Krishna Tirtha [1965]: XXXVI). The limited number of mental processes, or channels of working, is akin to the restricted number of notes in music. The octave has seven notes and yet the number of possible compositions is endless. So too, many of the *sutras* have a countless number of applications.

For example, the *sutra Transpose and Adjust* expresses a mental process experienced in many diverse topics – including arithmetic, algebra,

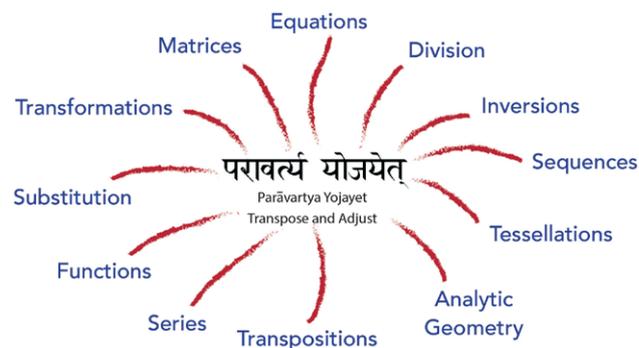


Figure 1

geometry, calculus (Bharati Krishna Tirtha [1965]: XXXV) – as illustrated in the Figure 1.

The following examples illustrate similar mental activity which can be expressed through this sutra:

$$\frac{3}{5} \div \frac{2}{3} = \frac{3}{5} \times \frac{3}{2} = \frac{9}{10}$$

The second fraction is transposed and the sign \div is replaced with \times . A similar process is involved when we find the equation of a perpendicular line. Given one line with equation $4x - 3y = 8$, the perpendicular which passes through the point $(5,1)$, has equation, $3x - 4y = 19$. The x and y coefficients are transposed and the sign between is reversed. Another example occurs when finding the inverse of a square matrix:

Given $\mathbf{A} = \begin{pmatrix} 3 & 5 \\ 2 & 4 \end{pmatrix}$
 then $\mathbf{A}^{-1} = \frac{1}{2} \begin{pmatrix} 4 & -5 \\ -2 & 3 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 2 & -\frac{5}{2} \\ -1 & \frac{3}{2} \end{pmatrix}$

Here, the elements of the leading diagonal are transposed and the elements of the sub-diagonal have their sign changed.

Now, although the mathematical objects and relationships in each of these examples are different, each involves a transposition and some adjustment. There are numerous other instances in mathematics involving unrelated objects but where similar transpositions occur. Since, in each case, the underlying mental process involved is the same they become linked through recognition of the aphorism or sutra (Glover [2018]; Williams [2021]): exactly as happens with the thread of a necklace with which the pearls are strung together and connected to each other. And not only is this aesthetically pleasing but also induces an acceleration of learning and enhances long term memory.

If we then turn the starting focus upside down – from the process to the problem – we notice another characteristic of the Vedic approach: it accepts that any solvable mathematical question can be worked in a number of ways. For exam-

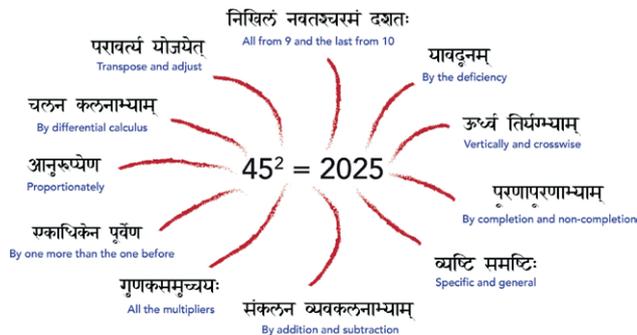


Figure 2

ple, when facing a simple number problem, such as 45^2 , the system invites us to stop and look and not immediately jump into using a *blanket* method since there may well be easier or more enjoyable paths available: the knowledge of the Vedic techniques allows the users to choose whichever method they prefer. This is illustrated in the Figure 2, which mentions the sutras involved in each of the possible methods.

One simple technique applies to squaring numbers ending in 5. The sutra involved is *By one more than the one before*. The method takes the penultimate digit, 4, and multiplies it by one more than itself, $4 \times 5 = 20$. This gives the first two digits of the answer. Final two digits are simply the square of 5, 25. The full answer is then 2025. Another technique uses the principle of the difference of two squares, $a^2 - b^2 = (a + b)(a - b)$, which comes under the sutra *By addition and subtraction*. In this case, $45^2 - 5^2 = (45 + 5)(45 - 5) = 50 \times 4 = 2000$, from which, $45^2 = 2000 + 5^2 = 2025$. With choice of method comes not only the respect and promotion of the subject’s attitudes and preferences, but also the development of strategic thinking:

It is sometimes asked, of what benefit are all these different methods? In respect of education, these methods show that there is more than one way “to skin a cat”. Students who learn different techniques understand that different strategies can be used to solve a problem. This is of great use for training in problem solving. In the world of industry and commerce problem-solvers are highly employable. (Glover [2019]: 25)

3. UTILISING UNITY

Another striking feature of Vedic mathematics is how it utilises unity – main theme of Advaita (Glover [2018]) – in arithmetic to make calculations simpler and easier. In terms of pure number, unity is expressed as the number one but also as 10, 100, or any power of ten, since these are just 1 with zeros standing close by. Here is a simple example in calculating 7×8 .

$$\begin{array}{r} 7 - 3 \\ \times 8 - 2 \\ \hline \end{array} \qquad \begin{array}{r} 7 - 3 \\ \times 8 - 2 \\ \hline / 6 \end{array} \qquad \begin{array}{r} 7 - 3 \\ \times 8 - 2 \\ \hline 5 / 6 \end{array}$$

Both numbers are close to 10 and their deficiencies are 3 and 2, respectively. 3 and 2 give the relationship to the unity of 10. The right-hand digit is found by multiplying the two deficiencies, $3 \times 2 = 6$. The tens digit is found by cross-subtracting, either $7 - 2$ or $8 - 3 = 5$.

This method can be extended to larger powers of 10, for example 888×997 . The column method we are familiar with is rather lengthy and prescribes multiplying one digit at the time, producing partial products, and then adding all products together into the final result.

$$\begin{array}{r} 888 \times \\ 997 = \\ \hline 6216 \\ 79920 \\ 799200 \\ \hline 885336 \end{array}$$

The Vedic method works on the closest base unit, e.g. 1000 – a *reflection* of 1 – computing by excess or by deficiency in relation to it and applying the sutra *All from 9 and the last from 10* – which allows to easily and quickly find the deficiency from a power of ten³. In the example

³ In short, given any whole number multiple of 10 (i.e. one of the first *fictions* of 1), it is possible to easily cal-

above, the deficiency of 888 is, $9 - 8 = 1$, $9 - 8 = 1$ and the last from 10 $(10 - 8) = 2$, giving 112. For 997 the deficiency is 003. The product of the deficiencies is $112 \times 3 = 336$. For the left-hand part of the answer, subtract $888 - 003$ or $997 - 112$, both giving 885.

$$\begin{array}{r} 888 - 112 \\ \times 997 - 003 \\ \hline \end{array} \qquad \begin{array}{r} 888 - 112 \\ \times 997 - 003 \\ \hline / 336 \end{array} \qquad \begin{array}{r} 888 - 112 \\ \times 997 - 003 \\ \hline 885 / 336 \end{array}$$

This moving from and going back to the unit, «pretending» (Glover [2018]: 182) that a number is also other than what it appears at first sight, is a common refrain in Vedic mathematics. This principle can in fact be extended far beyond the power of 10, by looking case by case for single entities or whole numbers – another form of recognition and expression of the unity – which can simplify and speed up the calculation.

In order to better understand this point, we can take another multiplication, for instance 298×3 . The method traditionally taught in school is:

$$\begin{array}{r} 298 \\ \times 3 \\ \hline 8,924 \end{array}$$

Working from right to left, multiplications of 8, 9 and 2 are required, together with carry digits. The Vedic approach is first to look at the numbers involved and then see that it is close to 300×3 . 298 is less by 2. Following this, the answer must be $900 - 6 = 894$. Although some students will naturally see this without any help, the Vedic approach teaches this systematically. At the utilitarian level this common urge leads to efficiency and therefore greater productivity. From a philosophical point of view, we can see at play one of the aesthetic factors inherent in scientific practice: *simplicity*. As Catherine Z. Elgin wrote, although

culate the result of any number subtracted from it, by finding the difference to 9 for each digit, except the last one, for which the complementary to 10 is calculated. For instance: $10000 - 2895 = 7105$.

it is «complicated» to say and define, this criterion functions as «gatekeeper» for the acceptability of a theory – and, we may add, also for the preference of one calculation process over another – because it facilitates «intelligibility or tractability» (Elgin [2020]: 29).

With Vedic mathematics, as illustrated above, there may well be a number of possible and simple strategies that can be used to solve a problem but the skill and the art is to find the method involving the least personal effort and the highest satisfaction: the best «processing fluency at the psychological level» (Arcangeli, Dokic [2020]: 117). In order to better understand how that is possible, it is useful to dig deeper into the aesthetic experience underpinning it.

4. AESTHETIC APPEAL AND EXPERIENCE

«Don't think, but look!» (Wittgenstein [1953]: § 66). The motto included in the *Philosophical Investigations* is loudly echoed by the invitation to «look at the number» which the Vedic mathematics students hear from the first lesson onwards. In fact, included as one of the sutras is the curious statement, *By mere observation*, inviting the student to look first. Its immediate effect is to pin our eyes wide open looking or waiting for something extraordinary to appear. Similar to what happens while staring at *autostereograms*, those bidimensional images usually made of countless colourful dots which are designed to simulate a 3D optical illusion.

In the case of Vedic mathematics, this practice allows the lightening up of an open and alive field of *relations*. Thanks to the teacher's introductory mediation and exemplification, one's intuition is kindled and one's imagination is fired up: breaking up numbers and putting them back together; tracing similarities and enhancing correspondences. One example? Let's take the number 9. One could claim, and grasp, that 9 is 9 – once more the unity and identity principle at play – but one could also claim that 9 is 3×3 , $4 + 5$ or $10 - 1$, and so on, to infinity. We then realise that being is said in many

ways (Aristotle: M 2 b 15-17), and that, according to the type of problem we face, we take one of its expressions into account rather than the other. We have the opportunity – without necessarily already knowing or having to delve into the classic philosophical problem inherent the intension and extension of a concept – to *pretend* and *turn to act* that one number is other than what it at first seems to be or to appear. It is a basic and creative experience that gradually goes on to expand and deepen.

This explains and clears out one of the most widespread misunderstandings concerning Vedic mathematics, which wants it to have something to do with a handbook of tricks. As he answers the question of whether it is about science or magic, Bharati Krishna Tirtha writes: «It is both. It is magic until you understand it; and it is mathematics thereafter» (Bharati Krishna Tirtha [1965]: XVII). Among the greatest cultural differences separating Eurocentric mathematicians and classical period Indian mathematicians is the fact that the latter solve calculations and algorithms intuitively without needing to provide other justification other than that they work. Nevertheless, the Shankaracarya provides a full exposition of the algebraic structure of the method. A simple example is connected to the already mentioned number 9.

Let's say we divide 1.023.101 by 9. The Vedic method suggests a progressive addition of digits as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} &1 \\ &1 + 0 = 1 \\ &1 + 2 = 3 \\ &3 + 3 = 6 \\ &6 + 1 = 7 \\ &7 + 0 = 7 \\ &7 + 1 = 8 \end{aligned}$$

The answer is 113677 with a remainder of 8. This is easy to grasp when a simpler case is taken, such as $34 \div 9$. Here the result is 3 with a remainder of 7 because 9 is one unit less than 10. For each 10 in the tens column, there will then be a 9 with a remainder of 1. For three tens there will

therefore be 3 amounts of 9 and a remainder of 3 which adds to the original 4 units in the dividend. The algebra version of this is $x^5 + x^4 + 3x^3 + 6x^2 + 7x + 7 \div (x - 1)$ where x is replaced by 10 as in the previous paragraph.

Going back though to the invitation to look at the number, and attempting to dig deeper into the aesthetic experience emerging from said invitation, one more example might bring us to the next level: 16×14 . In school, we usually learn to perform the operation in columns, regardless of the numbers at play. But what happens if we look at them? We might realise that they are both two-digit numbers; they share the same ten; and their units are complementary; but also that they are both just one unit away (in excess and in defect) from 15; they can be expressed as 2^4 and 7×2 ; and what's more, that if halved they allow a quick multiplication between 8 and 7. Depending on which of these – and other possible – relations and correlations catch our attention, based on the path we decide to go on, there are different ways to get the same result. Here we spell out 5 of them with their respective sutras:

1. *By one more than the previous one:* $16 \times 14 = 1 \times 2 / 6 \times 4^4$
2. *All from 9 and the last from 10 together with Proportionately:* $16 \times 14 = 16 + 4 / 6 \times 4 = 20 / 24 = 224^5$
3. *Vertically and crosswise:* $16 \times 14 = 1 / 10 / 24 = 224^6$
4. *Proportionately:* $16/2 \times 14/2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8 \times 7 \times 2 \times 2 = 224^7$

⁴ As we multiply two two-digit numbers, with the same ten and complementary units, the method invites to multiply the ten digit by the following one and the units by one another.

⁵ In this case one works on the 10 base, adding to one number the excedence of the other to the base ($16+4$ or $14+6$) and then multiplying the units.

⁶ The aphorism invites to multiply vertically the tens by tens and units by units, then finding the products of the diagonals and adding them.

⁷ In this case one reduces both numbers to smaller ones which are easier to multiply and then multiplies the result proportionally by 2.

5. *By addition and subtraction:* $16 \times 14 = (15 + 1)(15 - 1) = 15^2 - 1^2 = 225 - 1 = 224^8$

To a novice eye this synoptic presentation might seem a jumble of digits and illogical words. As soon as guidance is provided though in the deciphering of the underlying processes, one may be overtaken by amazement and fascination for how many and how varied are the approaches until now dwelling beneath the threshold of consciousness. It is as if we forgot for one second the goal, and we allowed ourselves the pleasure to find, trace, follow one path, while still finding at the same time new ones. This first impression may be then followed by others. Some might, for instance, claim that one method is faster or easier than another. Someone might still raise the objection that column calculations are the most economical, inasmuch as only one rule needs to be remembered and teacher verification is easy. One might, after all, variedly express the need to limit the endless number of possibilities and ask science to mediate and guarantee the value of a still-image, to take on the function of determining a state-of-affairs on a reference plane with a shared system of coordinates, «on condition of renouncing infinite movements and speeds and of carrying out a limitation of speed first of all» (Deleuze, Guattari [1991]).

But is this the only thing that *counts* in maths? And what does the Vedic method *recount* in this respect? In the above mentioned simple multiplication, what emerges is most of all the *unity* coupled with the *multiplicity* of the number: the opening of a horizon; the refraction of a ray of light into a spectrum of colours; a dynamicity of relations within an underlying whole, which is to be constantly retrieved and revived. Furthermore, by recourse to a simile, here human beings are given the opportunity to act as interpreters of digits and performers of processes. In other words, an

⁸ In this case, by remarking that both numbers are close to 15, one works by addition and subtraction. It should also be noted that the power of 15 is easy to calculate thanks to the *By one more than the previous one* sutra.

opportunity is here found for the aesthetic ability to interact with a script, to dig up some potentialities and meanings and not others, to choose each time what to bring on the stage. Within this continuous interplay between background and foreground, each choice – even the one deemed wrong or simply more complex and less immediate – has its *raison d'être* in the present moment (Glover [2015]: 113). Each choice also opens up the possibility of new paths and transformations.

Going back to 16x14, the exquisitely aesthetic features of Vedic mathematics are immediately clear. All 5 sutras are correct. Then why do we choose one path over the other? As the English essayist Joseph Addison writes: «Nature delights in the most plain and simple diet» (Addison [1711]: 255, no. 195). The same re-emerging idea expressing the principle of least action which, although of ancient Greek origin, has been taken up in the 17th century by both Newton and Fermat. Based on this principle, it is assumed that behind each choice more than one equally valid and justifiable hypothesis exists – as it is precisely the case with the above presented multiplication – that is to say, several ways to re-compose multiplicity into unity and at the same time unfold the unity itself. Difference would only ensue from a higher or lower degree of simplicity and inevitability pertaining to one path rather than to the other. However, if we consider the above presented calculation, we realise that all 5 sutras – or combinations of sutras – satisfy the principle.

What moves then the scale in one direction rather than the other? One might be ignoring the other options – as happens in old-fashion teaching methods – or one might follow nature's tendency towards *least action*, as historically and subjectively determined. Preference can however also spring out of surprising and satisfying unpredictability, or on the contrary from the comforting feeling of safety found in a familiar path; and it can also be connected to personal taste and special idiosyncrasies of hard-to-account-for origins, possibly deriving from pleasure and displeasure in learning settings, educational relations, and current life experiences (Sinclair [2001]; Hankey, Shastri [2017]; Livingston [2017]).

What is clear is that Vedic mathematics legitimises and unifies all these different possibilities. Milena Ivanova wrote: «When we construct theories that conform to the principles of unity and simplicity, we are following ideals reflective of our cognitive makeup» (Ivanova [2020]: 98). Vedic methods *reflect* how our thoughts work: in fact the sutras describe neither a set of principles nor an univocal and repetitive mechanical process, but they are rather connected to «the fountain-head and illimitable store-house of all knowledge» (Bharati Krishna Tirtha [1965]: XXXIII), to the human capacity to be a channel for its discovery, enjoyment and expression, beginning with the earliest and simplest interactions with numbers.

In this respect, as it bridges the gap between different cultures, disciplines and faculties, the Vedic method is a valuable *pedagogical tool* for developing creativity, flexibility, speed and strategic skills (Glover, Williams [2016]). In the face of increasingly rampant digital dementia (Spitzer [2012]), it not only trains mental calculation and with it many cognitive abilities, but it does so by promoting personal taste and the pleasure of discovery from the earliest to the most advanced levels of study: aesthetic factors that deserve to be made known and available as much to scholars as to students and professional.

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Note e recensioni

Ricardo Ibarlucía, *¿Para qué necesitamos las obras maestras? Escritos sobre arte y filosofía*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022, 168 pp., ISBN: 9789877193510

Una recente raccolta di saggi di Ricardo Ibarlucía, *¿Para qué necesitamos las obras maestras?*, ci induce ancora una volta a confrontarci con una delle nozioni più spinose che lega la riflessione estetica e la storia dell'arte, il capolavoro. Dopo la ricognizione del 2020 sull'estetica benjaminiana centrata sul surrealismo (*Belleza sin aura. Surrealismo y teoría del arte en Walter Benjamin*) che si rivelava essere un pretesto per sondare le dimensioni di autonomia e di eteronomia dell'arte novecentesca colta nei suoi processi di massificazione e tecnicizzazione, con questo nuovo testo Ibarlucía riprende alcune indicazioni benjaminiane circoscrivendole, apparentemente, a un tema più limitato. In realtà indagare l'esperienza estetica, sia attiva sia passiva, del capolavoro è una strategia neanche tanto mascherata di rimettere in discussione cliché acquisiti e ideologie consumate, eppure sempre attive nell'immaginario della fruizione estetica. Sviluppando il proprio discorso in cinque capitoli, di cui il primo rappresenta un esplicito palinsesto critico-teorico, Ibarlucía non è tanto impegnato a produrre una tassonomia riconoscitiva del capolavoro quanto a rintracciarne la capacità di riscrittura del reale. Non tanto quindi la sua apparenza estetica, quanto, almeno ci pare, la sua operatività antropologica. Forse in questo slittamento dall'estetico all'etico risiede il senso profondo dell'epigrafe del libro che ci indica la prospettiva da cui iniziare a leggere questi saggi: un'affermazione del critico musicale e musicologo argentino Federico Monjeau, scomparso nel gennaio del 2021, una frase come ha dichiarato lo stesso Ibarlucía in un'intervista rilasciata a "Télam" che è divenuta il suo motto e il suo lutto (*mi lema y mi luto*): «Acaso haya tantas formas de consuelo como obras de arte».

Partendo dal famoso ciclo fotografico di Robert Doisneau dedicato ai visitatori del Louvre nel 1945 davanti a *La Gioconda*, Ibarlucía sottolinea immediatamente quello che è l'assunto decisivo della sua lettura, ossia che «i capolavori ordiscono la trama della nostra

vita più di quanto tendiamo a credere» (p. 16). Dubitare come Amleto, amare come Giulietta e Romeo, immaginare l'inferno con gli occhi di Dante o Milton, pensare all'assurdo con Kafka, piangere come Anna Karenina o Emma Bovary non sono tanto, ma potrebbero anche esserlo, procedure di emulazione o adattamento a modelli culturali, quanto la prova del modo in cui «le forme simboliche dei capolavori strutturano l'orizzonte ultimo dentro quel sentire con cui interpretiamo il mondo e vi agiamo» (p. 17). La prospettiva non è quindi quella di verificare la normatività del capolavoro, un tema che fu esplicitato da Hume nel suo saggio sul gusto del 1757, ossia la capacità del capolavoro di rappresentare una sorta di riferimento estetico che non attesta un impossibile incondizionato consenso del gusto, ma una sua empirica condivisibilità costruita culturalmente: tutto questo trova una sua riproposta in due saggi, sintomaticamente dello stesso anno, il 1979: *What is a Masterpiece?* di Kenneth Clark e *Masterpieces. Chapters in the History of an Idea* di Walter Cahn. Nel farsi mediatore tra esperienza individuale e gusto collettivo, il capolavoro è qui interpretato non solo come la manifestazione di temi universali e l'esibizione di una confluenza di emozioni e vissuti in una singola idea (e/o forma), questa è la tesi di Clark che Ibarlucía recupera, ma anche come ciò che conduce, attraverso una serie di slittamenti tassonomici – per esempio in Cahn che segnala differenze a volte sostanziali, a volte più criptiche, tra “capolavoro classico” e “capolavoro assoluto” – a quell'istituzionalizzazione dell'esperienza estetica del capolavoro stesso che è il museo. Se questo processo è stato inevitabile nel consolidamento della secolarizzazione dell'arte nella sua forma di “bellezza artistica” e nel rapporto sempre più problematico, codificato dall'estetica classico-romantica, tra genio e capolavoro – e Ibarlucía ne rintraccia in più parti del libro le motivazioni più o meno ideologiche – portando alla feticizzazione attuale del capolavoro facilmente verificabile in esperienze collettive quali il turismo di massa e l'industria culturale, allora occorre spostare il focus. E Ibarlucía lo fa chiamando in causa la nozione di *Pathosformel* di Warburg. Ciò

indirizza il capolavoro dal suo statuto di esemplarità, il “classico”, a una condizione di problematica simbolizzazione: «i capolavori sono *media* privilegiati di comunicazione, dinamizzazione e attualizzazione di “formule empatiche”, intese come schemi di comportamenti estetici, che vincolano fortemente il rappresentato con un campo affettivo» (p. 22). Il capolavoro è quindi “esemplare”, ma mai normativo potremmo aggiungere, solo in quanto immette il soggetto in una dimensione passiva – lo spettatore contemplatore e l'opera come deposito di valori simbolici – e al contempo attiva – lo spettatore che è incessantemente spinto a una condizione di reinterpretazione del mondo attraverso l'opera. Questa sospensione che definisce il capolavoro a metà tra processo fenomenologico e attività ermeneutica è ribadita da Ibarlucía attraverso alcune indicazioni di Luis Juan Guerrero – filosofo argentino di cui lo stesso Ibarlucía negli ultimi anni ha riproposto alcuni testi di metà Novecento con attente edizioni critiche (*Estética operatoria en sus tres direcciones* nel 2008 e *Qué es la belleza y otros ensayos* nel 2017). Come è tematizzato nel suo testo del 1956, *Estética operatoria en sus tres direcciones*, Guerrero vede il rapporto dell'arte in un'accezione triplice: l'arte come “contemplazione”, ossia il dominio del fruitore; l'arte come “potenza”, l'ambito creativo dell'artista; e infine come contesto di *tareas artisticas*, di attività e proposte operative, suggestioni e domande che interessano un orizzonte storico, un orizzonte in cui questi “compiti artistici” sembrano definirsi più in termini etici che estetici. Quindi il capolavoro è colto da Ibarlucía non tanto nella già citata normatività (un'idea ad ogni modo non del tutto scartata come anche in Guerrero), ma in quelli che possiamo riconoscere come tre caratteri in azione: la paradigmaticità (l'apertura di un orizzonte estetico), la condivisione (la sua storicità), l'immaginazione (la riproblematizzazione dell'estetico all'interno della prassi vitale, per dirla con Marcuse). Ed è all'interno di questa cornice che Ibarlucía, seguendo le indicazioni di Goodman riguardo ai concetti di “esecuzione” (la produzione di un'opera) e “implementazione” (la sua operatività), mostra che il capolavoro non configura «una definizione dell'ar-

te, ma una riflessione circa il funzionamento estetico dell'oggetto» (p. 82).

Gli esempi scelti da Ibarlucía su cui testare questo impianto teorico sono quattro. Il primo è la *Madonna Sistina* di Raffaello. Qui il capolavoro diviene la manifestazione più esplicita del processo di secolarizzazione della bellezza in cui, come indica Benjamin, l'erosione del fondamento teologico dell'immagine non annulla la sua funzione culturale, ma al contrario la riformula in un dichiarato discorso di "consacrazione estetica". Ne è prova lo stesso dibattito che si apre intorno al dipinto di Raffaello tra classicisti e romantici che vedono nella Madonna da una parte una dea pagana e dall'altra una santa cristiana, una discussione che impegna autori quali Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe, Novalis per arrivare al Nietzsche di *Umano, troppo umano*. Una tensione che nel Novecento si risolverà in soluzioni opposte quali il rifiuto dell'opera museificata di Heidegger e la dialettica, esclusivamente moderna, tematizzata da Benjamin che connota il capolavoro nell'universo tecnicizzato tra valore culturale e valore espositivo.

E capolavoro problematicamente moderno è il secondo esempio offerto da Ibarlucía, *Le Grand Verre* di Duchamp, che consente una fenomenologia di alcune categorie dei meccanismi dell'oggetto artistico contemporaneo: il montaggio come principio mimetico, l'ibridazione delle forme espressive e al contempo la loro autonomia, la riconsiderazione complessiva della *techne* come raccordo tra arte e industria, lo spostamento da una ricezione ottica a una tattile, il superamento se non l'abbandono del gusto come riferimento dell'esperienza estetica e, infine, l'eroticizzazione della macchina che conduce a uno dei nodi più suggestivi delle avanguardie, la definizione di una psicologia dell'inanimato, per riprendere una formula del Buñuel più ortodossamente surrealista.

Concludono il testo due incursioni nell'ambito del capolavoro letterario, tra loro apparentemente opposte, ma in realtà relate da un'affinità quasi genetica: un'analisi della poesia di Celan, in particolare di due componimenti, *Wolfsbohne* e *Todesfuge*, e una frase di Jules Michelet del 1839 che, pubblicata nel 1929, diverrà nota grazie alla

citazione che ne farà Benjamin, «chaque époque rêve la suivante». In questi saggi finali, molto densi nelle loro prospettive di ricostruzione storico-filologica, ci sembra emergere con nettezza l'accezione etica che Ibarlucía accorda al capolavoro e che indica con la formula di "trascendenza estetica", ossia il fatto che «l'arte colloca, nel mondo reale, un ente immaginario la cui contemplazione ci redime, momentaneamente, dalla finitudine» (p. 28). Anche nel suo essere testimonianza del negativo più assoluto, il caso di Celan, l'arte non documenta un conforto accomodante che rende metabolizzabile ciò che non può esserlo, come ci ricorda Ibarlucía facendo riferimento alla famosa ingiunzione di Adorno di scrivere poesie dopo Auschwitz, ma ci mostra attraverso il capolavoro la sua dimensione penultima, che arrestandosi davanti alle domande ultime, tuttavia ce le presenta e ci impone non una risposta, ma il loro attraversamento, nella fatica del lutto e nella speranza di un motto. Probabilmente questo è il motivo per cui *abbiamo bisogno* dei capolavori, e qui, concludendo, ci permettiamo di rendere il quesito di Ricardo Ibarlucía un'affermazione.

(Andrea Mecacci)

Luigi Scaravelli, *Critica del capire*, a cura di M. Biscuso e A. Garofano, Napoli, Istituti Italiani per gli Studi Filosofici Press, 2022, 320 pp., ISBN: 978-88-7723-153-6.

Tra le tante opere dimenticate del '900 filosofico – e di quello italiano soprattutto – la *Critica del capire* di Luigi Scaravelli occupa un posto unico, d'onore. Pressoché ignorata alla sua prima edizione (1941: la sola recensione nel merito che ebbe fu quella di Enzo Paci del '46) e a stento considerata alla pubblicazione delle *Opere* di Scaravelli da parte di Mario Corsi (1968, vol. I, pp. 45-196), la *Critica del capire* è il testo meno noto ma indubbiamente più importante – perché teoreticamente più ardito – di quello che è forse l'unico scolaro del neoidealismo italiano che continua a esser let-

to anche al di fuori degli studi dedicati a questo movimento.

Grazie forse all'insistenza di altri autorevoli interpreti quali Marcucci e Garroni, non c'è ad oggi libro italiano su Kant nella cui bibliografia non figurino gli *Scritti kantiani* di Scaravelli contenuti nel voll. II delle *Opere*. Il *Saggio sulla categoria kantiana di realtà* (riedito da Corsi col titolo: *Kant e la fisica moderna*) e le *Osservazioni sulla "Critica del Giudizio"* sono a tutti gli effetti dei punti di riferimento nel dibattito. Mentre la *Critica del capire*, che pure avrebbe potuto giovare della notorietà del proprio autore, per uno strano gioco del caso è rimasta nell'ombra. La sua riedizione da parte di Massimiliano Biscuso e Ambrogio Garofano rappresenta in tal senso una straordinaria occasione per rimediare a una così grave assenza. Occasione tanto più notevole, in quanto non solo inaugura una nuova collana della casa editrice dell'Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, *Profili*, appositamente dedicata alla valorizzazione del patrimonio filosofico italiano. Ma corredata, più ancora, il testo edito da Scaravelli nel '41 con un'Introduzione dei curatori e un apparato di inediti più o meno coevi alla *Critica*, che aiutano a comprenderne la genesi, la problematica e le tensioni.

Se tra le cause che hanno contribuito allo scarso successo della *Critica del capire* ci sono infatti delle ragioni per così dire "oggettive", una di queste è senz'altro la difficoltà d'orientamento in un discorso che non si apre con l'enunciazione di una tesi chiara e definita. In senso proprio, nella *Critica del capire* Scaravelli non difende alcuna tesi. Affronta piuttosto un problema, quello della comprensione della "novità", che emerge soltanto nel Cap. III, interrogando le condizioni positive della libertà (pp. 128-131), e viene discusso addirittura solo nel Cap. V, ripiegando la pratica critico-analitica esercitata nei Capitoli precedenti su se stessa. Anche in questi casi ciò non avviene mai in maniera diretta – mai nei termini in cui aiutano a porlo gli inediti compresi a fine volume: come problema di una "logica della storia" o del rapporto, anzi, tra logica e storia (cfr. l'Introduzione, pp. 213-219). Bensì sempre per vie traverse, indirette: nel contesto di una serrata decostruzione di quei

principi dell'essere e del sapere (identità, giudizio, libertà, opposizione) che dovrebbero rendere intelligibile il primo e concreto il secondo.

Il risultato è una posizione "critica" in tutti i sensi del termine e anzitutto perché talmente radicale da mettere in questione sé stessa. La quale, per riassumere violentemente: *a.* muove dalla verifica dell'effettiva tenuta del discorso metafisico (di Aristotele, Kant e Hegel *in primis*). *b.* Mostra con ciò che non è possibile individuare un principio assoluto, perché è solo dalla relazione con gli altri che ognuno trae il suo senso: l'identità perché presuppone nella sua stessa posizione "A = A" una distinzione, uguale al giudizio, il giudizio perché presenta una distinzione solo assumendo a contenuto una spontaneità che gli sfugge – e così via. Ma, *c.*, tutto questo senza istituire una nuova logica, foss'anche sul modello della comunanza platonica dei generi, che pure è in effetti visibile in controluce per tutto il testo. Bensì: *d.* evidenziando l'impossibilità di mantenersi persino nel mero procedimento analitico, dato che anche quest'ultimo o si blocca per il suo stesso proseguire all'infinito nella scomposizione dell'omogeneo (esemplari sono in tal senso le pagine che Scaravelli dedica alla seconda Antinomia kantiana, che egli sostiene non avere consistenza perché la scomposizione che l'antitesi ritiene essere infinita non è altro che «la ripetizione identica dello spazio stesso»: «quel processo che va all'infinito nello spezzettarlo è proprio sempre l'identico spazio» [p. 187]). Oppure si arresta bruscamente a un elemento *preteso* ultimo su cui ribalza – in questo rimbalzo dando luogo a una teoria, a una *metafisica* da cui l'analisi dovrà riprendere, ma altrimenti (pp. 195, 188 s.). In ambo i casi, l'analisi è impedita. È *per principio* (e cioè: *logicamente*) *impossibile*. Sebbene ciò non tolga che sia *effettiva*: che *si dia* e continui a darsi, così come si dà la comprensione del "nuovo" e il fatto che, quando accade qualcosa, specie qualcosa di imprevisto, troviamo il modo di *capirlo*.

La conclusione della *Critica del capire* è riassumibile nello spazio segnato dalla prima e dall'ultima frase del Cap. V: che non c'è un modello meccanico del capire (p. 183), e che proprio la «nasosta presenza» (p. 206), anzi la sopravvivenza di

Kant ben oltre il '700 sta a ribadire che solo la purificazione dei principi rende possibile «capire il nuovo significato di ogni nuova parola» (p. 207).

Tutto ciò, ancora una volta, non indica una tesi. Come tutti i grandi testi teoretici e anzi fedele all'idea della filosofia che Scaravelli aveva espresso alla fine del saggio su Heidegger, vuole essere un esercizio di «esistenza interrogante», per «far allontanare tutto ciò che è, e in questa lontananza coglierlo nella sua verità» (*Opere*, vol. I, p. 314). Ha dei limiti, nondimeno, questo esercizio?

Se nella versione della *Critica del capire* edita da Scaravelli stesso è possibile individuarne vari, in primo luogo proprio quello suddetto, di introdurre il vero problema soltanto indirettamente e a metà analisi, l'edizione di Biscuso e Garofano ha l'enorme pregio di rimediare alla maggior parte di essi grazie al preziosissimo apparato di inediti che raccoglie nella Parte Seconda. Alcuni erano in effetti già noti al pubblico. Ma la collocazione in più numeri di rivista o nel vol. IV delle *Opere* edito da Corsi per Rubettino nel 1999 – *Il problema della scienza e il giudizio storico* – rendeva difficile e sicuramente non immediato il confronto.

Senza entrare nel merito dell'esame dei singoli principi, solo uno è forse, allora, il limite che il testo presenta, "strutturale" perché inerente alla storicità stessa della *Critica del capire*, che il lettore deve riuscire a superare in vista della posizione di principio di Scaravelli a essa sottesa.

Scaravelli stesso apriva il giovanile saggio su Heidegger segnalando che «sapere a quale scuola appartiene un filosofo è spesso uno dei più forti ostacoli a capirlo» (*Opere*, vol. I, p. 291). Nel caso di Heidegger, ciò serviva a sostenere che il maggiore ostacolo alla comprensione della "posizione speculativa" heideggeriana consiste nel suo schiacciamento sulla fenomenologia. Nel caso della *Critica del capire* è necessario ribadirlo invece per far uscire Scaravelli dal cono d'ombra del neoidealismo italiano e riconoscergli un'indipendenza che rende di fatto il suo pensiero irriducibile a quello di Croce e Gentile.

Molti dei brani che meritano un'attenta discussione – soprattutto le pagine su Hegel – sono evidentemente influenzati dalla "scuola" in cui Scaravelli si è formato.

Ma se richiedono di essere discussi è perché vanno al di là, perché eccedono la circonferenza del neoidealismo. La *Critica del capire* va letta con lo stesso metodo con cui Scaravelli stesso leggeva Kant, Spinoza, Hegel – e Croce e Gentile: in cerca del problema speculativo che infesta i loro discorsi. È un limite di Scaravelli? Più probabilmente è nostro, di noi, "lettori d'oggi", spesso poco avvezzi a quella purificazione che egli dimostra necessaria per capire.

(Antonio Branca)

Shan, Yafeng, ed. (2022), *New Directions in Metaphilosophy*, «Metaphilosophy», 53 (2-3). pp. 153-361, ISSN 0026-1068.

The special issue *New Directions in Metaphilosophy* in the journal «Metaphilosophy» (Wiley-Blackwell) is a collection of 12 articles, which have been previously presented at the same-titled online conference at the University of Kent in May 2021. Its aim is to address current metaphilosophical debates and suggest new methods. As Yafeng Shan states in the editor's introduction, the issue is only «the tip of the iceberg» (157). The issue consists of three sections – 1. Defending philosophy, 2. How to do philosophy, and 3. Doing philosophy.

The first part defends metaphysics, the value of philosophy, and theoretical philosophy against current approaches and objections. Timothy Williamson, in *Metametaphysics and semantics*, argues that a contemporary intensional semantics that assigns a truth value to a proposition in the framework of *possible worlds* shifts the focus from questions about the necessary nature and structure of reality to linguistic practices, which trivializes metaphysics. He suggests a theory "sentential guises" to solve this problem: diversity on the side of forms of expression leads to new cognitive relations to old truths.

In *Philosophy doesn't need a concept of progress*, Yafeng Shan suggests replacing the category of progress in philosophy by the category of

philosophical success. Philosophy should focus on achievements (success), not on *better* achievements (progress). Shan argues that success is a non-comparative category and not suitable to understand philosophy. Philosophers value dissent, older ideas, and individual results more than scientists do.

Chris Daly's *T-Philosophy* is a systematic response to Paul Horwich's criticisms of traditional and theoretical philosophy based on the later Wittgenstein. Daly offers a variety of counterarguments to the claims that theoretical philosophy is defective and makes little progress by disambiguating concepts, joining science in its ideal of simplicity, finding constraints to choose between competing theories, and taking philosophical theories to be true.

The second part of the special issue explores and discusses different methods and approaches to various (meta-)philosophical problems – naturalized metaphysics, ordinary language, digital philosophy of science, conceptual engineering, logic and practice, and poetry.

Jack Ritchie, in *On the continuity of metaphysics with science* shows that the methods of metaphysics cannot be fully equal to those of the empirical sciences, so there can be no metaphysical project that can be stated to be truly continuous with science. Metaphysicians should abandon the claim to describe the fundamental structure of reality and redefine the goals of metaphysics as a way of examining scientific theories or as a field of metaphors.

In defense of ordinary language philosophy is an attempt by Herman Cappelen and Matthew McKeever to rehabilitate the importance of ordinary language philosophy. Authors argue that ordinary language guides large parts of philosophy. Not only do ordinary language expressions serve as “anchors” for further investigations, philosophers also – unlike physicists or biologists – usually care about their use by the communication community.

In *Testing and discovery: Responding to challenges to digital philosophy of science* Charles H. Pence claims that digital methods can be a source of interesting features of the scientific process

since they can bring new ways of testing hypotheses. The problems these tools can bring can be partially removed via preregistration of hypotheses, methods, and the empirical results.

Eve Kitsik in *Attentional progress by conceptual engineering* states that conceptual engineering can be helpful to configure philosophers' collective patterns of attention by analyzing the concepts that philosophers use, and then to shape patterns of attention to better represent the environment. And some varieties of conceptual engineering can also help to select the attention-worthy objects for philosophical analysis and action.

Ben Martin suggests introducing a new area of research: *The philosophy of logical practice*. He argues that traditional accounts of logic are too idealized. Logic can be examined bottom-up as a research field. Analysis of case studies and the practice of experts provide further reaching questions and insights.

Jon Williamson, in *One philosopher's modus ponens is another's modus tollens*, analyses a possible threat for philosophy as a rational enterprise. Many philosophical arguments seem to be what he calls “pantomemes”, easy to resist by simply denying the conclusion of a *modus ponens*. He suggests appealing to normal informal standards of what is reasonable.

Karen Simecek in *Linking perspectives: A role for poetry in philosophical inquiry* argues that reading lyric poetry can play a substantive role in philosophy by helping the philosopher understand the perspectives, attitudes of minds, beliefs and thought processes of others. Arguments against the use of non-necessarily philosophical forms of thinking in philosophy relate to a narrow conception of philosophy that is criticized as limited and opposed to the author's notion of philosophy as a collective endeavor.

The third part contains two articles that address two topics that arise during the practice of philosophizing.

Amanda Bryant, in *Grounding interventionism* analyzes the prospects for an adequately formulated and well-founded analog of causal interventionism by reviewing several formulations of

it and its epistemic credentials. The requirements of causal interventionism and grounding interventionism are criticized as inadequate, appealing to intuition, and poorly effective.

Zack Garrett and Zachariah Wrublewski, in *Impossible worlds and the safety of philosophical beliefs*, examine modal conditions for knowledge. The safety condition “If S were to believe p via M, then p would be true” in context of possible worlds analysis faces several problems that can be solved by introduction of the category “impossible worlds”.

Does the issue what it says on the tin? The authors rather react to some of the ongoing discussions and challenges than invent and suggest new directions in metaphilosophy. Given the constant and growing interest in metaphilosophy and the fact that metaphilosophy is a young research field, the title of the issue could fit many other issues in the journal «Metaphilosophy» (5 issues per year since 1970), let alone all other recent publications. One should also consider the variety of research traditions, schools, and approaches – for instance, phenomenology, pragmatism, perspectivism, and historically inspired analyses – that actively contribute to contemporary metaphilosophical research. Besides, the practical, ethical dimensions of philosophical practice belong to the underwater part of Shan’s iceberg. The number of citations of Timothy Williamson’s works, the chosen topics and debates, and the possible worlds analyses show that the special issue partially stands in the wake of a larger re-assessment of methods of analytic philosophy. This, however, does neither reduce the theoretical importance nor question the novelty of suggested theses and arguments in context of global metaphilosophical debates. Highlighted can be Martin’s reasoning for the expert-oriented bottom-up reconstruction of logic, which can potentially widen our picture of this research field. Cappelen and McKeever convincingly show that ordinary language is and must be a part of philosophical practice. Elimination of unworthy concepts to redirect attention to important discussions, as addressed by Kitsik, is worth

being considered. Shan’s thesis that philosophers do not need the concept of progress will provoke its defenders (including us) to give several good counterarguments. It would be not a complete waste of time to compare Timothy Williamson’s de-trivialization attempt with a Kantian perspective on possible worlds. We find that these and other papers on the issue contain multiple promising ideas and solutions and are worth being read by anyone interested in contemporary metaphilosophical debates.

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(Michael Lewin, Polina Lewin)

